

13th CALL FOR RESEARCH PROPOSALS (2026)

Information for applicants

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SMA Europe and the Call for Research Proposals

SMA Europe is a non-profit umbrella organisation of spinal muscular atrophy (SMA) patient organisations from across Europe. We work to bring effective treatments and optimal care to everyone living with SMA. Together, through greater understanding, we will create a better world for all those living with SMA.

The SMA Europe Call for Research Proposals is a recurring funding programme that supports high-quality scientific projects aimed at advancing understanding of SMA and outcomes for people living with SMA. The Call aims to strengthen a collaborative research ecosystem that responds to community-defined priorities, accelerates scientific insight, and contributes to building the scientific foundations necessary for meaningful clinical progress.

Proposals on scope

The SMA Europe Call for Research welcomes proposals that demonstrate strong scientific merit and a clear potential to improve the lives of people living with SMA, in the short and/or long term. Projects across all areas of SMA research are eligible for consideration.

For this Call, the funding organisations have identified the following research areas as being of particular interest:

- Regeneration of the motor system
- Systems biology and the multisystem impact of SMA, with a particular focus on metabolism

Applications outside these areas of interest remain fully eligible and will be evaluated equally based on their scientific quality, innovation, and potential impact. Alignment with these areas may be considered by the funding organisations as an additional factor when making funding decisions between proposals of comparable overall merit.

Types of grants and eligibility

Two types of research grants can be awarded:

- Operating Grants
- Postdoctoral Fellowships

To be eligible, each applicant must receive an online consent from their Scientific Director¹ before submitting the application. For multi-team projects, the applicant must obtain consent from each team leader and their respective Scientific Directors before the submission deadline.

Members of the same research group (e.g. principal investigator and postdoctoral fellow) may submit multiple applications (e.g. for an operating grant and a postdoctoral fellowship). However, a maximum of one grant per research group can be awarded.

¹The Scientific Director is the person responsible for the laboratory in which the project will be carried out. Depending on the structure of the institute or laboratory, the Scientific Director may be the Head of Department or Unit, or the Principal Investigator, if they lead their own laboratory.

While applications from all eligible researchers worldwide are welcome, in cases where applications are of equal scientific merit preference may be given to applicants based at institutions located within Europe.

Operating Grants

To be eligible to apply for an operating grant as a principal investigator, applicants must:

1. hold a doctoral degree (MD, PhD, or equivalent) by the application deadline; and
2. hold a permanent position or long-term contract (≥ 5 years) as a professional or faculty member at an educational, medical or research institution or at a biotech SME (small or medium enterprises), and be qualified to conduct and supervise an independent and original research programme; and
3. have access to the institutional resources necessary to conduct the proposed research project.

Each proposal must have one principal investigator. All additional team members and collaborators working on the project must be listed in the application.

For multi-team projects, the full application form must be completed by a single applicant, who will be the principal investigator in charge of the project. In case of funding, SMA Europe will contract and fund the institution of the principal investigator only, who will be responsible for distributing the grant according to the proposed budget.

Postdoctoral Fellowships

To be eligible to apply for a postdoctoral fellowship, an applicant must:

1. hold a doctoral degree (MD, PhD, or equivalent); and
2. be a member of a research team under the supervision of a senior investigator, who agrees to oversee the project and confirms access to the institutional resources necessary to conduct the proposed research.

Budget and project duration

The total budget available under this Call for Research is €436'000.

It is anticipated that three to four projects will be funded, with individual awards not exceeding €150,000.

The final number of projects funded and the total amount awarded will depend on the quality of the applications and their evaluation outcomes. SMA Europe reserves the right to fund fewer projects and/or award a lower total amount if an insufficient number of proposals meet the expected standards of excellence.

Duration

Proposed projects and fellowships should typically have a duration of two years. Any deviation from this duration must be justified in the application.

Funding will be awarded for an initial period of one year. Renewal for the second year will be contingent upon approval by the SMA Europe Scientific Advisory Board (SAB) of the annual project report, which must be submitted by month 13 of the project.

Budget for Operating grants

The proposed budget for operating grants should not exceed €150'000. Any amount exceeding this limit must be clearly justified in the application.

Any eligible expense must be necessary for the implementation of the project and incurred exclusively during the project period. In the case of shared use with other research activities, only the proportion of the expense attributable to the proposed project may be charged.

The proposed budget might include costs for:

- **Personnel:** Salaries of research staff and research support personnel required for the implementation of the project, calculated on the basis of the actual full-time equivalent (FTE) effort dedicated to the project and in accordance with the institution's standard salary scales. Salaries of statutory employees/permanent academic staff, fellowship salaries (PhD and postdoctoral) and the salary of the principal investigator are not eligible.
- **Running costs/consumables:** including research supplies, consumables, small equipment and materials, specific software, experimental models, and publication costs.
- **Equipment:** purchase or rental of equipment specifically required for the project. General-purpose laboratory or institutional infrastructure and standard office/computing equipment are not eligible.
- **Core facilities / external services:** costs related to core facilities, specialised platforms, or external services not available within the host institution.
- **Travel:** Justified travel and accommodation costs necessary for the project, including participation in scientific meetings and conferences.

Budget for Postdoctoral Fellowships

The proposed budget must cover fellowship salary only. The fellowship may be supported up to a maximum of €150,000.

The requested amount must be justified based on the average salary scale for a postdoctoral fellowship in the applicant's country and institution. Applicants must provide the relevant salary grade and, where available, a reference to the corresponding institutional or national salary table.

If the average salary exceeds the maximum amount available through the grant, the supervisor and/or the host institution must commit to covering the remaining costs for the full duration of the project.

SMA Europe reserves the right to request supporting documentation during the review or contracting process.

Timeline

- The online application portal is accessible from **22 June 2026** on <https://sis.afm-telethon.fr>
- The application deadline is **30 September 2026 at 16:00 UTC+1**
- Internal check and screening: October 2026
- External reviews: November-December 2026
- Internal reviews: January-February 2027
- Final decision and notifications to applicants: March-April 2027
- Contracting with beneficiaries' institutes: April-July 2027

The project should start as soon as the research agreement between SMA Europe and the Grant beneficiary institution has been finalised.

Application procedure

Applications must be submitted through an online portal kindly provided by the SMA Europe member organisation AFM-Téléthon.

Applications must include both a scientific application section and a lay language application section. Both sections will be evaluated and will contribute to the overall assessment and final funding decision.

For detailed instructions on the application form, please refer to Appendix 1 and 2.

Incomplete applications will not be considered.

Evaluation and funding-decision process

The Call for Research is funded by SMA patient organisations, which make the final funding decisions among proposals considered scientifically fundable by the SMA Europe SAB, while also taking into account the opinions of the SMA Europe Community Research Panel.

Please note that the selection process is very competitive; as a result, some projects might not be funded despite positive reviews.

All applications and evaluations will be treated as strictly confidential. Access to full application and evaluation materials will be limited to individuals directly involved in the evaluation and administration process, including members of the SMA Europe SAB, the SMA Europe CEO and Research and Medical Manager, AFM-Téléthon's International Affairs Manager and relevant staff, as well as external reviewers assigned to specific applications. Access to the lay section of the applications will be granted to the Community Research Panel members.

Scientific evaluation

AFM-Téléthon's and SMA Europe's Scientific Direction will select experts in the field to carry out external reviews of submitted applications.

The SMA Europe SAB will examine the applications in light of the external experts' reviews and their own expertise. Each project will be peer reviewed according to the following criteria:

1. **Relevance and significance:** How is the proposed research relevant to improving the understanding of SMA, its causes, treatment, and/or prevention? Does the study address an important unmet need or scientific question? What is the potential short- or long-term impact of the project on healthcare and quality of life for people living with SMA?
2. **Project quality and scientific rigour:** Is there a sufficient body of high-quality fundamental, pre-clinical, or clinical research supporting the rationale for the proposed study? Are the scientific rationale, study design, methodology, and analytical approaches appropriate, rigorous, and adequate to the study objectives?
3. **Innovation:** Are the aims of the study original? Does the proposed study design represent advancement in the field? Does the project advance international cooperation in the field?

Particular consideration will be given to projects with the potential to deliver groundbreaking advances in SMA research and care, including high-risk/high-gain and transdisciplinary approaches that could significantly advance scientific and medical knowledge.
4. **Feasibility:** Is the proposed project realistically achievable within the planned timeframe and environment? Is the principal investigator well suited to carry out the proposed study? Is the scientific environment adequate? Is there evidence of institutional support? Have appropriate agreements with collaborators been established? Does the applicant acknowledge potential problem areas and consider alternative strategies?
5. **Reasonableness of the budget:** Is the budget reasonable in relation to the proposed research?

The SAB will provide funders and the SMA Europe Community Research Panel with recommendations on fundable proposals.

SMA community evaluation

The SMA Europe Community Research Panel, composed of expert patient advocates with expertise, background and strong interest in research, will assess the lay-language application section of the projects considered scientifically fundable by the SAB. The Community Research Panel will evaluate the projects' potential relevance, impact, and innovation for the SMA community, taking into account its priority and needs. The Community Research Panel will provide its opinions to the funders.

Decisions and notifications

Final funding decisions are made by the funding members of SMA Europe, taking into account the scientific evaluation and the SMA community evaluation.

Official notifications are sent by e-mail to the applicant only.

Comments and reviews are available upon request after the official notification is sent. Applicants who obtain financial support are required to state their acceptance or refusal of the award within one month following the reception of the official e-mail notification.

Contracting and grant administration

SMA Europe will hold contractual, financial, and administrative responsibility for awarded projects. As this programme is funded through contributions from the SMA community, the timely initiation of supported research is essential. Beneficiaries are therefore expected to engage proactively in the

execution of the research agreement, and the contracting process is expected to be completed within four months of the award notification. While it is recognised that timelines might vary between institutes and projects, SMA Europe reserves the right to withdraw the award in the event of significant or unjustified delays.

The first-year payment will be made promptly after the contract execution. The official starting date of successful projects is the effective date on the contract.

Communication and community-engagement

The beneficiaries will be requested to authorise SMA Europe, for the purpose of communications and community-engagement, to publish their name, general aims and lay summaries of their project, and the amount of the funding. For the same purpose, the beneficiary may be asked to prepare *ad hoc* materials (e.g., videos, slides, pictures).

By applying, the applicant agrees to the procedures detailed in this document.

Contacts

For further information, please contact the SMA Europe Research and Medical Manager, Federica Fontana: federica.fontana@sma-europe.eu.

Appendix 1: Instructions for submission

- Log in to <https://sis.afm-telethon.fr>
 - For new users: click on “Create an Account» and follow the instructions.

IMPORTANT NOTE: Do not create more than one account in the system. Please contact spcsafm@afm-telethon.fr if you need to change your email address in an existing account or if you encounter problems with your user account.

- To create your application, click on the blue button on the upper navigation bar “Apply for a new grant”, select the funding opportunity you wish to apply for and click on “Complete a request”.
- Please take your time to familiarise yourself with all the application sections before preparing your application.

Once you have created an application form, save the data in the different sections before signing out of the system. You can always retrieve your ongoing application in the section application space: “Grants”.

- If you created an additional or a wrong type of application by mistake, you can delete it. Select the application number, click on the 3 vertical dots and delete the application.
- Please keep in mind that each applicant must receive an online consent from their Scientific Director before submitting the application. For multi-team projects, the applicant must obtain the consent of each team leader and their Scientific Director, before the submission deadline. The button “Send approval request”, available in the corresponding sections, triggers a solicitation by email. To submit the consent, the Scientific Director must log into their own user account and select the relevant application. The Scientific Director must also attach an updated version of their CV (in English, max. 4 pages) in their own portal (in “Application space”: “CV”).
- The CVs of all people responsible for the project (applicant, Scientific Director, other team leaders) must be submitted.
- For a multi-team project, each team should be added by using the “Add a team” button. For each team, it will need to be indicated one “Team Leader”. The Team Leader is the person who will be responsible for the funding aspects concerning their team, if funded.

Once the team/team leader has been added, complete the team by adding each team member involved. Then, click on the name of each team member to complete the requested information.

- Budget: Grant applications should be made in Euros.

APPLICATION FORM SECTIONS

- Abstract: Maximum 4000 characters, spaces included.

The abstract should include also a paragraph explaining the relevance and its potential impact of the proposed project to the SMA community.

- Description of the Project: Please upload a PDF document of maximum 15 pages and 8 MB. Formatting requirements: Arial 11 pt font; minimum 2 cm margins on all sides; applicant name and application number in the header of each page; and page numbering in the footer.

The description should cover:

- Specific aims (0.5 page maximum)

Briefly describe the overall short- and long-term goals the project is intended to accomplish and the hypotheses to be tested. State the aims in terms of measurable, time-phased objectives consistent with the long-term goals.

- Novelty/Innovation (0.5 page maximum)

Explain the originality and ambition of the project vis-à-vis competing projects and the national and international state of the art.

- Background (2 pages maximum)

Briefly describe the background to the present proposal, critically evaluate existing knowledge, and specifically identify the gaps that this project is intended to fill.

- Previous work/Preliminary results*

Describe preliminary work, studies, or other information that will form the backbone of the present application.

- Research project*

Outline the methodology and techniques to be used to accomplish the specific aims of the project. If applicable, describe any new methodology and its advantages over existing approaches. Discuss the expected results, potential difficulties and limitations of the proposal, and propose alternative approaches to achieve the aims within the grant period.

For projects involving any drug or molecule (at either the discovery or development stage), relevant information on intellectual property (e.g. filing number), licensing, R&D partnerships, and strategic alliances with private companies or academic institutions must be provided by the applicant.

**These two sections should not exceed 8 pages in total.*

- Expected impact for human pathology and therapy (0.5 page maximum)

Describe the expected impact and outcomes of the project.

- Project management (1 page maximum)

Describe the project according to a logical and realistic set of work packages. Provide a detailed timeline for their implementation.

- References

- Collaborators

- For Postdoctoral Fellowship applications, a motivation letter is required.

Appendix 2: Lay language application

The Community Research Panel will evaluate the lay language application and inform the Call funders of their recommendations.

Please write this form in accessible language and avoid unnecessary technical jargon.

Please structure your lay application as follows:

1. **Summary (max 300 words):** please provide a brief summary of the rationale and potential relevance of your project. If the application is successful, the summary provided here may be used and published by SMA Europe for communication purposes.
2. **Background (max 300 words):** What is currently known in this research area, and what questions remain unanswered?
3. **Research question (max 150 words):** What is the main research question addressed by this project, and why is it important?
4. **Objectives (max 200 words):** What are the main objectives of the project?
5. **Approach (max 150 words):** What is the overall research approach (for example, in which models or systems will the research be conducted)?
6. **Expected outcomes and impact (max 300 words):** What are the expected outcomes of the project, and what impact could they have?
7. **Next steps (max 150 words):** What would be your next steps following successful completion of this project?
8. **Relevance to the SMA community (max 250 words):** Why is this research important for people living with SMA? What would success of the project mean for the SMA community, and within what timeframe could the research potentially contribute to meaningful advances?
9. **Involvement and engagement with the SMA community (max 200 words):** Please describe any previous, ongoing, or planned interactions with people living with SMA and patient organisations, and if people living with SMA are involved in the project at any level.

The lay language application will need to be uploaded as a pdf (max 4 MB).