

Healthy Ears, Limited Annoyance (HELA) Research Cooperative

Funding call #1 – Safe listening in music venues and events

Key details

Funder:	UKRI via the HELA Research Cooperative
Funding type:	Pilot projects / feasibility studies
Total funding:	£200,000 (across three funding calls)
Award range:	up to £40,000
Award duration:	6 months maximum
Publication date:	Monday, 25 May 2026
Networking event:	Monday, 15 June 2026
EOI deadline:	Monday, 22 June 2026
EOI feedback:	Monday, 29 June 2026
Research workshop:	Monday/Tuesday, 20/21 July 2026
Proposal deadline:	Monday, 14 September 2026
Outcomes announced:	Monday, 28 September 2026
Project start deadline:	Monday, 4 January 2027

1. Overview

Recent investigations by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Audio Engineering Society (AES) highlight a significant lack of unbiased scientific research in key areas related to the live event sector, such as engineering, acoustics, audience experience, environmental impact and the health and wellbeing of audiences, staff and neighbouring communities. The [Healthy Ears, Limited Annoyance Research Cooperative](#) (HELA Research Co-op, pronounced HELL-UH, a play on the Californian slang “hella,” meaning very), addresses this by facilitating research through the development of a lasting interdisciplinary research network.

Despite the continued growth of the sector, science and engineering-related aspects of the live event industry remain critically under-researched. This stems from the grassroots nature of the industry – the “show must go on”, with little tolerance for the slower, methodological process of academic research. Similarly, manufacturer-based research

is typically focused on product development. Academic research in the related areas is sparsely distributed across the world, with limited collaboration between relevant institutions. Furthermore, interventions to promote safe listening practices are rarely evidence-based and haven't involved key stakeholders in their development, resulting in limited effectiveness. It is therefore a central aim of the HELA Research Cooperative to facilitate the establishment of new and lasting collaborations between academia, industry and other key stakeholders. Such partnerships are intended to be pre-competitive, allowing for fundamental and exploratory research to be carried out that benefits all those who are involved.

To support this mission, three funding calls have been planned, each focused on fostering collaboration and innovation. The funding focuses on bringing together experts from various fields, ideally serving as a springboard for future larger-scale projects. Funding for pilot studies will be up to a maximum of £40,000 per project, with each project expected to be completed in a six-month period, enabling proof-of-concepts that support broader, longer-term goals. The three broadly themed funding calls will be on: (1) safe listening in music venues/events, (2) music-based noise annoyance in the community (3) other emerging topics.

This call aims to support innovative, multidisciplinary feasibility/pilot studies that address gaps in knowledge relating to safe listening at music venues and events (i.e. the protection of audience members' hearing health in environments in which high levels of amplified sound are an integral part of the experience). We particularly invite applications that address one or more of the following research priorities:

- Optimising methods and tools for the measurement, prediction and real-time monitoring of audience sound exposure (including long-term cumulative exposure)
- Improving understanding of the physiological and psychological effects of sound exposure on humans in live-music settings (including, for example, the effects of low-frequency sound exposure, differential effects of music vs. noise, the potential benefit of quiet rest periods and audience preferences for sound levels)
- Developments in room acoustics and/or sound system design that facilitate safe-listening environments
- Developing the evidence base around the effectiveness, acceptability, uptake and sound quality of personal hearing protection devices (including social and cultural dimensions and methods to overcome stigma)

- Developing and evaluating strategies for raising awareness and knowledge about hearing health amongst audience members, venue and event staff and other key stakeholders
- Identifying challenges and opportunities for promoting safe listening through the implementation of regulatory standards and guidelines

2. Application process

The application process has been designed to support the formation of new interdisciplinary collaborations without a significant administrative burden. The funding process is as follows.

Step 1 – Expression of interest

An expression of interest (EOI) is required to begin the funding process. This is a straightforward one-page form that asks for a general idea for a project, who will be involved and an indication of any gaps in the project team's membership. As HELA requires representation from academia and industry for all funded projects, as well as the project lead being based at a UK higher education institution, the EOI process will allow us to assist potential applicants complete their teams.

The submitted EOIs will be swiftly reviewed, providing feedback on whether the research idea is relevant to this funding call, with suggestions for potential team members to fill any gaps. This will also avoid teams spending significant time on project proposals that are unlikely to be funded.

Step 2 – Research workshop + project pitches

All teams whose EOI was successful will be invited to a two-day research workshop (a.k.a. sandpit) to fully develop their ideas. The workshop will be a hybrid event, allowing in-person attendance (in Derby, UK) as well as online attendance. Travel, accommodation and sustenance expenses will be covered for all attendees, within reason, including those from Europe. Attendees from further afield may receive partial financial support, budget permitting

Unlike most research funding calls, this call does not include a full paper application review process. Instead, teams will put together a project pitch which will be delivered towards the end of the workshop. The intention is to fund all viable projects reaching this stage, with decisions in principle made before the conclusion of the workshop. It is, therefore, essential that most of (if not all) the project team members attend the workshop.

Step 3 – Formal application

Following the research workshop, the teams will have six weeks to complete a formal application. This application will be reviewed by the HELA Research Board to ensure that the project remains aligned to what was pitched at the research workshop and that the proposal conforms to UKRI funding principles. All projects reaching this stage are expected to be funded, unless the proposed project has significantly changed since the workshop pitch or cannot be achieved within the agreed funding limit.

Step 4 – Project delivery

Successful projects must commence no more than three months after the formal outcomes have been communicated. Teams will have up to six months from the project start date to complete the project. It is expected that each funded project will lead a HELA lunchtime webinar at the end of the project to disseminate their findings.

3. Eligibility

As the current HELA Research Cooperative funding comes from the UKRI's Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC), all projects must meet their eligibility requirements, as detailed [here](#).

The key requirements for each team are as follows:

- **Project leadership:** Project teams must be led by someone employed by an organisation eligible for UKRI funding (check [here](#) for further information). The project lead must take responsibility for directing the project and their employing institution must also agree to administer the project.
- **Academic involvement:** Academics can be included in the project team in additional roles, as detailed [here](#). Inclusion of early career academics is encouraged. PhD and postdoctoral researchers without a track record of leading independent research who wish to submit a proposal are encouraged to engage with a more senior academic at their institution who is eligible and willing to be the lead applicant on the project.
- **Industrial involvement:** Project teams must include at least one individual employed in industry. The understanding is that funded projects are not intended for members of industry to generate new protected intellectual property or products, but instead to push forward, or in some cases establish, work in a particular area that will positively serve the industry.
- **Stakeholder involvement:** All projects must identify at least three stakeholders who will be involved in the project by providing input and feedback, as necessary, throughout the process. These individuals aren't considered a formal team member, but are nonetheless essential in ensuring research projects, and their

related outputs, are meaningful and relevant to real-world needs. The HELA Research Cooperative's Outreach Group can assist teams in identifying relevant individuals to fill these roles. This aspect of the project isn't required at the proposal stage but will need to be considered before the start of a project.

Proposals are welcome from public, private, third sector and international partners, provided there is a UK-based academic as lead applicant. For international partners, there are two ways to participate:

- **Project co-lead (international):** Must be from an international higher education institution. The total budget for overseas collaborators can be up to 30% of the total requested budget. Overseas collaborators will be funded at 100% direct costs only; indirect costs and overheads are not eligible.
- **Project partner (international):** Can be higher education institutions, companies or other international organizations, with contribution options as follows:
 - In-kind contribution (time, resources, equipment). Travel can be funded directly (if justified).
 - Contribution as a subcontractor (consultancy work and/or other services). This must follow the lead UK institution's procurement rules.
 - It is possible for an organization to be both partner and subcontractor as long as this is clearly justified.

4. Resources

Projects should be costed as for a standard UKRI proposal. The costing should include 100% fEC and the request from the HELA Research Cooperative at 80% fEC. Resources can be requested for researcher and technician time, travel, subsistence, consumables, facilities and other costs directly incurred in delivering the research. All costs should be fully documented/invoiced and available for inspection if required. The administration of the scheme is undertaken solely by the HELA Research Cooperative with all administrative aspects of the application, assessment and award process managed by the University of Derby.

5. Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI)

The live event industry is arguably one of the most diverse sectors in the world, both in terms of the workforce (spanning musicians, engineers, security, promoters, managers, acousticians, etc.) and the audience. It is therefore crucial to ensure that projects supported by the HELA Research Cooperative are inclusive, encouraging a diverse set of viewpoints. This will help ensure projects positively impact the wider industry.

The HELA Research Cooperative is set up to support projects in achieving these goals through our Outreach Group which consists of individuals from across the globe who are passionate about live events and want to contribute to research activities. Depending on the focus of your project, we can identify relevant individuals to provide input and feedback to your team.

6. Key contact

Should you have any questions related to this funding call, or regarding the wider HELA Initiative, please feel free to reach out to Sarah Rees, the HELA Initiative administrator, at sarah@helainitiative.com, copying in support@helainitiative.com