

Handling Conflicts of Interest in Peer Review - Guidance for NERC Reviewers and Panel Members

A conflict of interest occurs when an individual involved in the assessment of a proposal for funding has a personal, professional or organisational relationship with the applicants, affecting their ability to undertake their role in an objective and unbiased way. If you are asked to take part in NERC peer review, either to review a NERC proposal or be a member of a NERC moderating or assessment panel then you need to be aware of the [NERC policy on conflicts of interest for members of NERC boards, advisory groups and peer review panels](#).

The NERC policy defines a conflict of interest as being associated or involved in any way with:

- *An institution, department or individual that has submitted a funding proposal or would otherwise benefit from a decision and/or*
- *the development or implementation of proposals seeking NERC/UKRI funds or in the evaluation of research investments*

You will have connections and collaborations both formal and informal with a range of organisations and individuals. In order to help you interpret the broad definitions above, this advice aims to set clear expectations of the specific situations considered to represent a material conflict of interest, and when conflicts of interest need to be declared to NERC so that appropriate action can be taken. Definitions of the individuals that may be involved in a proposal (investigators, project partners etc) can be found in the [NERC Grants Handbook](#).

NERC will try to avoid asking you to review or introduce proposals where you have conflicts that can be identified from our own records, but many will not be obvious to us. The final responsibility for identifying and reporting conflicts of interest must therefore rest with the individual. Timing is very important as late notification is much more difficult to manage. A conflict for a panel member identified when the panel is being set up is straightforward to manage, the same conflict identified on the day of the meeting can create major problems, so please check the proposals assigned to you carefully as soon as you receive them.

What Constitutes a Conflict of Interest?

Due to the complexities of relationships between researchers it is challenging to provide definitive and exclusive definitions. Some cases will be clear cut, others will be less so and will require a judgement call. We expect researchers who work in the same field to know each other, and this doesn't bar you from commenting on their proposals. The test should be 'will a neutral observer have confidence in the impartiality of any advice provided' and in any case where there is significant doubt the relationship should be treated as a conflict. The NERC Executive have the final decision in any case where there is debate about whether a conflict of interest exists.

The following are examples of conflicts of interest considered material by NERC for a proposal you have been asked to review or introduce:

	Conflict	Action Required
1	You are a named investigator, staff member or project partner involved in the proposal or have signed a letter of support	NERC should identify these conflicts please tell us if an error has been made
2	<p>You have a formal affiliation to any Research Organisation or Project Partner organisation involved in the proposal.</p> <p>This generally means you are a current member of staff at the organisation. You also have a formal affiliation if you are a Professor Emeritus, or Visiting Professor, or have signed a contract of employment or receive personal remuneration in excess of £5,000 per annum from the organisation.</p> <p>For Fellowship proposals conflicts apply to both the organisation where the applicant is currently based and the organisation where the fellowship would be held.</p> <p>[Association with an organisation that has provided a letter of support but is not a Project Partner is not a conflict]</p>	<p>NERC should identify staff conflicts please tell us if an error has been made. Please inform us of other relationships e.g. visiting professor which may not be obvious to us.</p> <p>If you are moving to a new organisation please inform us as this will create new conflicts.</p>
3	You are directly involved in the work proposed and would benefit from it being funded and/or have assisted the applicants with their proposal for funding and/or have agreed to be a member of an advisory committee connected with the project.	Please inform us NERC may not have received complete information.
4	You have an existing business or professional partnership with any of the investigators or staff named in the proposal	Please inform us NERC does not hold this information.
5	You are a close relative - spouse, child, sibling or parent - of any of the investigators or staff named in the proposal.	Please inform us NERC does not hold this information.
6	You are a close personal friend of any of the investigators or staff named in the proposal and think that might affect your judgement or be seen as doing so by a neutral observer familiar with the relationship.	Please inform us NERC does not hold this information.
7	You are in close regular collaboration with any individuals	Please inform us

	named in the proposal, including investigators, research staff, collaborators, subcontractors and project partners, to an extent where you feel uncomfortable being involved in the discussion or you feel unable to give an unbiased opinion.	NERC does not hold this information.
8	On Fellowship proposals: you have been the applicant's supervisor within the last eight years.	Please inform us NERC does not hold this information.
9	You have had any involvement in the development of the proposal, at any stage of its preparation, including providing comments or advice to the applicants.	Please inform us NERC does not hold this information.

Managing conflicts

Reviewers - NERC aims to avoid selecting reviewers where a conflict of interest is clear or applicants have requested that specific reviewers are not used. This will include anyone with a personal or organisational association with the proposal identifiable from the information available to NERC. In the peer review of funding calls with a specific research scope NERC will also avoid selecting reviewers that have submitted a proposal to the same call. Anyone asked to provide a review should check to ensure they have no other material conflicts, if so they should decline the request citing 'conflict of interest' as their reason. Please contact NERC quickly for advice if you are unsure. Where a material conflict is identified after a review is submitted that review will be classed as unusable and excluded from the process.

Panels - Panel members are reminded to identify any material conflicts of interest, especially with proposals they have been asked to introduce, as early as possible in advance of the meeting. Where a conflict of interest is identified, panel members' meeting papers will be edited to remove relevant information regarding the conflicted proposal and the member will be asked to leave the meeting room when it is discussed. The meeting record will note all instances where a conflict of interest was identified and managed at a panel. For some panels, particularly where these are interview panels, the standard practice of members leaving the meeting for a conflicted proposal may not be practical. However they will never participate in the discussion of that proposal, or be permitted to influence the final ranking of a proposal where such a conflict exists. In the peer review of calls with a specific research scope NERC will avoid appointing anyone to a panel that is a named investigator on any proposal to be considered by that panel. For Discovery Science panels, where the research scope can be broad, NERC will only involve applicants in panels when their expertise is critical, the meeting procedures will prevent them being able to influence or receive immediate information on the score or ranking of their proposal.

NERC staff

NERC staff may also have connections with applicants that constitute a conflict of interest. Although their opportunity to influence outcomes is limited, in such circumstances staff will not be involved in reviewer selection or any decision stage for proposals where a material conflict exists.