MODERATING PANEL GUIDANCE NOTES FOR THE CONSIDERATION OF DISCOVERY SCIENCE LARGE GRANT PROPOSALS

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1. Introduction

Discovery Science is the funding stream that supports excellent research in response to unsolicited ideas from research groups, consortia or individuals in any area relevant to NERC's remit. Discovery Science funding can cross remit boundaries between Research Councils and, where this is the case, a co-funding agreement will have been considered. NERC promotes unrestricted and innovative thinking; as such, proposed research can be pure, applied or policy-driven, technology-led and/or multi-disciplinary, but must seek to address—or provide the means to address—clearly defined science questions.

Large Grants are intended to support adventurous, large-scale and complex research tackling big science questions that cannot be addressed through other NERC funding opportunities. Research funded via this scheme is expected to have the potential to be world-leading. Proposals will often involve multidisciplinary approaches via inter- or intra-institutional collaboration, although this is not a requirement. Large Grants can address any area of science within the NERC remit, including NERC strategic priorities or new curiosity-driven research challenges.

2. Conflicts of Interest

NERC maintains a conflicts of interest policy, available at Annex A. We ask that you make yourself familiar with the policy and let us know as soon as possible if you have – or are unsure whether you have – any conflicts of interest with the proposals to be discussed that have not already been identified in the documentation. Please make these known to the panel secretary as soon as possible, particularly if you are an introducer or reader so that the proposal can be reassigned to an alternative panel member.

For any proposal where panel members have been identified to have a conflict of interest they will be required to leave the room whilst discussions are taking place. During the ranking process any panel member who is named as a PI or Co-I on a proposal will be required to leave the room whilst their proposal is ranked. Panel members may remain in the room for the remainder of the ranking but must not make any comments during discussions for proposals where they have a conflict of interest.

If there is doubt as to whether the member should be asked to leave, the Chair may discuss this with the rest of the panel and the NERC executive. The NERC executive have the final decision in any case where there is debate about whether a conflict of interest exists at all stages of the peer review process.
3. Panel Confidentiality

Research grant proposals are submitted to NERC in confidence and may contain confidential information and personal data belonging to the applicant. NERC undertakes to the applicants to keep proposals confidential and not to use or disclose them except as required for the peer review/funding decision process or as is required under the Data Protection Act 1998 or the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (or any other law or regulation to which NERC is or may become subject).

Panel members may not disclose the fact that any of the enclosed grant proposals have been submitted to NERC or any of the information contained in any of the proposals to any person outside the Panel or otherwise involved in the peer review/funding decision process. Nor may they disclose or use the information in the grant proposals for any purpose other than as part of NERC peer review/funding decision process.

The Panel’s comments on and scoring of these proposals will be recorded by NERC staff at the meeting at which they will be discussed. NERC will not use these minutes or scores, nor disclose them to any person or body except:

- as is necessary to record the decisions of the Panel and to inform any other person or body within NERC or any other body that may be co-funding the proposals as part of the funding decision process;
- to the applicant as part of NERC feedback to successful and unsuccessful applicants; or
- as may be required under the Data Protection Act 1998 or the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (or any other law or regulation to which NERC is or may become subject).

NERC will not attribute any comments that are disclosed under the Data Protection Act 1998 or the Freedom of Information Act 2000 to any individual panel member, but the fact that you are a member of the one of the Panels is publicly available information.

All personal data collected by NERC will be handled in accordance with the UK Data Protection Legislation and as set out in the UKRI Privacy Notice.

4. Role of the Panel

The primary role of the moderating panel is to review the grant proposals assigned to it by NERC.

The moderating panel will receive the full proposal and any additional background information. In addition, a moderating panel will receive all reviewers’ comments and any applicant’s responses to reviewers’ assessments as appropriate. For the Large Grant call, the panel meeting also includes a short presentation by the grant applicants, followed by some time for questions. Using this information for reference, all moderating panels are responsible for:

i. providing scores for the Research Excellence of each proposal presented to them,
ii. commenting on the Fit to Scheme of each proposal presented to them,
iii. deciding if Pathways to Impact are acceptable,
iv. producing a final ranked list of these proposals,
v. satisfying themselves that the financial resources requested for proposals in the funding frame are reasonable to meet the project objectives and recommending any areas of budget adjustment where necessary and
vi. providing a summary of the panel's discussion of the proposal which will be used as feedback to the applicant(s) and the submitting Research Organisation Administration Office and as a record of the justification for the panel scores and decisions.

To assist in the prioritisation process, panel members will be assigned, in advance of the meeting, to act as introducers or readers for individual proposals. The roles of both introducers and readers are described below.

4.1 Role of Introducers

For each proposal, two panel members will be nominated as introducers. Their role is to moderate the comments made by the reviewers, and the applicant’s response to them.

Prior to the panel meeting, it is the responsibility of the introducers to read all the proposal material including the reviewer comments and PI response and to moderate comments made. Introducers need to be prepared to lead the panel discussion to determine final scores for Research Excellence. Your moderation of the reviewers’ comments and PI response should consider:

- the potential rewards of the project: the significance and quality of the work, and the scientific impact it will have in terms of enhancing or developing insights, developing the field and adding to knowledge or understanding in the area to be studied in a national or international context;
- the extent to which the research questions, issues or problems that will be addressed through the work are stated and their importance and appropriateness specified; and
- the appropriateness, effectiveness and feasibility of the proposed research methods and/or approach.

When assigning provisional scores, introducers must take into account all supporting documentation. The scores awarded by reviewers may be at variance with their comments. Where this is clearly the case, introducers are asked to give careful consideration to the reviewer comments provided. Introducers must be prepared to justify fully these scores.

Introducers should also consider what questions they would like to ask the applicants during their interview; these can be on anything the reviewers raised, including studentships.

4.2 Role of Readers

To assist in the prioritisation process, panel members will be assigned, in advance of the meeting, to act as readers. Given that the Large Grants full bids panel meeting usually includes proposals which cover all of the NERC science remit, it is unlikely that panel members will be a readers on proposals which are within their direct expertise. The running order will show which proposals each panel member has been assigned to act as a reader.

The role of reader is not as comprehensive as an introducer. Readers are expected to be familiar with the proposals to which they have been assigned so that they can provide a verbal summary and scores for Research Excellence, where the two introducers fail to agree. Readers should also consider what questions they would like to ask during the interview.
As well as the proposals that have been allocated to an introducer or reader, panel members should read as many of the other proposals as possible (time permitting and focusing on the proposal form and case for support). This allows them to put the proposals on which they are speaking into context with the rest of those submitted and ensures a full discussion of each proposal at the meeting. Due to the Large Grants full bids meeting covering the whole of the NERC remit, NERC acknowledges that many of the proposals will not be within a panel members’ direct expertise.

4.3 At the Panel

i. With the applicants

Applicants will enter the room, the Chair will welcome them and invite them to give a 10 minute presentation to the panel. Following the presentation for the next 20 minutes, panel members will have an opportunity to ask questions to gain clarification on any outstanding points. Introducers will lead the questioning, then readers will have the opportunity to ask any further questions. The total time allocated to each proposal is **60 minutes**. Depending on timings there may not be enough time to open up questioning to everyone on the panel.

All panel members can listen to the presentation and question & answer session, but those listed as having conflicts of interest cannot participate in the questioning of the applicants, and must leave the room for the private discussion. Following the presentation and questions, the applicants and those panel members with conflicts of interest leave the room. The remaining panel members then have 30 minutes for discussion, at the end of which the final Research Excellence score for the proposal and the feedback for the applicants will have been agreed.

Panel members should focus their questions on substantive issues raised by the reviewers and NOT introduce information to the discussion that has not been previously raised by them, unless a serious issue has been identified. If an introducer (or reader/panel member) considers there is a serious issue, they should raise this at the beginning of the meeting, **before the applicants enter the room**. The chair and the panel can then agree whether the issue should be raised with the applicant during the interview, so they have the opportunity to respond. Any such issues should not be raised later as the applicant will not have had an opportunity to respond to the additional information, and its introduction may raise serious risks of prejudicing the decision made by the panel. It also ensures that all proposals are treated on an equal basis—an issue central to the management of the peer review process.

ii. Private discussion

The Chair and Panel Secretary will ensure that panel members with conflicts of interest leave the room before the proposal is discussed, then:

- Invite the first introducer to give their comments.
- Invite the second introducer to add any additional comments.
- Invite the readers to add any further comments.
- Then, each introducer (first then second introducer), then the readers are invited to give their scores for Research Excellence.

The panel then discusses and agrees a score for Research Excellence.
If the score agreed for Research Excellence is 7 or below the proposal is not discussed further. However, the first introducer should ensure they have sufficient information to complete their consolidated feedback.

If the score for Research Excellence is 8 or more the following should be discussed:

- **Low, medium and high score** qualifiers – panel members should be encouraged to include the use of high, medium and low as within score definitions for the use of moderating panels.
- **Fit to Scheme** – the panel should provide comments on Fit to Scheme and be satisfied that the applicants have justified that that a Large Grant approach is necessary and more appropriate than multiple Standard Grants.
- **Pathways to Impact** – the panel should agree a score for Pathways to Impact – either it is considered “acceptable” or “unacceptable”.
- **Resources** – the panel will be invited to scrutinise the costs (including Pathways to Impact and Equipment) associated with the proposal and confirm that they are appropriate, justified and relevant for the activities proposed and if the costs are not relevantly justified, the panel should recommend cuts.
- **Studentships** – the panel should discuss any studentships in the normal way as detailed in Section 5.

Feedback will be provided for every proposal discussed at the moderating panel meeting.

It is the responsibility of the first introducer to provide a summary of the panel's discussion of the proposal as feedback to the applicant(s) and as a record of the justification for the panel scores and decisions. The same feedback will also be copied to the applicant’s Research Organisation Administration Office.

The first introducer should record the key points using the template document provided in Annex B. Second introducers, readers and other panel members should be prepared to provide the first introducer with inputs if they request it. NERC will, if possible provide time as part of the meeting for attendees to complete their feedback comments and expects panel members to use any available time to prepare feedback or agree the arrangements for coordinating feedback with other members.

Care should be taken to present the feedback constructively; this should not be a list of strengths and weaknesses like a review but should give context to the key factors that led to the proposal getting the score it did and should explain how the applicants could have achieved a higher score. New information not raised by the reviewers should not be included in the feedback and comments should not be made that could reveal reviewer identities or scores. Introducers should ensure that the feedback provided is of a sufficient length to ensure that it provides an appropriate level of detail so that the applicants are clear as to why the proposal received the score it did and can see how it could be improved.

Introducers should also ensure that feedback is provided for the Pathways to Impact. In particular, if the Pathways to Impact is graded as unsatisfactory by the panel, the feedback should provide sufficient information to enable the applicants to re-write their Pathways to Impact document to an acceptable standard.

If the panel recommends any changes to resources as part of their discussions then introducers should ensure that this is included on the feedback form including full details of why the reduction of resources has been recommended.
When the score and feedback have been agreed any panel members with conflicts of interest return to the room so the whole panel can prepare for the next set of applicants.

4.4 After the Panel

The first introducer should send the feedback to the Panel Secretary by e-mail as soon as possible and within one week of the meeting date.

5. Associated Studentships

The Large Grant full bids moderating panel assess studentships against two criteria:

i. the studentship research project must be sufficiently distinct from the main grant research activities for its outcome to not affect the research outcomes of the main project; and

ii. the research excellence of the studentship proposal must be of a suitable level for it to justify funding.

Introducers (and readers) should satisfy themselves that studentships are not being used to deliver key objectives of the proposed work. If this is not clear, they should consider whether to question the applicants during the interview, and comment during the private discussion.

All associated studentships satisfying the above criteria on large grant applications that are recommended for funding will receive additional assessment against the following NERC Training Success Criteria before being approved for funding:

i. **Training excellence.** Students are managed as a cohesive group and acquire both research and transferable skills. There is a strong and active community of students that are able – and encouraged – to integrate, work and learn together.

ii. **Multidisciplinary training environments.** Training embedded in multidisciplinary training environments to enrich the student experience and to encourage the knowledge-sharing and interconnectivity, which benefits research within the environmental sciences. This does not mean that individual PhD topics are required to be multidisciplinary.

iii. **Excellent students.** Attracting the right student. NERC funding goes to the right or ‘best-fit’ student: the individual whose previous training, experience and skills best suit the type of training being undertaken.

This additional assessment stage is to ensure that associated studentships receive training and support comparable to studentships supported through other NERC training programmes such as Doctoral Training Partnerships.

This assessment will be carried out by members of the NERC Research Careers Team, and will run alongside the peer review process for the proposal itself, and thus not affect the overall timescale should the proposal be funded. The team will provide appropriate feedback to the applicant should their studentship application be rejected under the additional review criteria detailed above.
6 Proposal Scoring

6.1 Research Excellence Definition

At the peer review stage, reviewers will have been asked to provide a score for Research Excellence based on a 0-6 scoring system (6 being highest) and should be used to guide the panel in their scoring and final ranking of the proposal. In the assessment of Large Grant proposals the primary criterion is Research Excellence.

There is no simple definition of Excellence. Proposals may build directly on prior work, or may involve a speculative leap forward. It may involve progress along an established research direction or a tangential switch into a new or different area, or may bring together expertise and approaches from different discipline areas. All of these approaches could demonstrate excellence, so your judgement should not simply be based on which approach has been adopted.

A proposal that demonstrates Excellence can be characterised by terms such as: novel, ambitious, timely, exciting, at the international forefront, adventurous, elegant, or transformative but need not demonstrate all of them. Often you might expect to see a plausible hypothesis, with some basis within the published literature, and clearly identified objectives that sensibly test that hypothesis. However proposals do not need to be hypotheses driven and may instead focus on an exploratory approach or the development of a new technology. Certainty of outcome is not an indicator of excellence, but neither is an incremental approach necessarily an indicator that a proposal lacks excellence.

Applicants are asked to set the context of their proposal in terms of the current state of knowledge and other work under way in the field. You should comment explicitly on this aspect of the proposal and, where possible, give your view of where this work would sit in relation to related activity internationally. Note that the existence of competing groups elsewhere should not be seen as a reason for downgrading a proposal, unless the work proposed is a direct duplication of other work already being undertaken.

In addition applicants are also asked to provide a track record of the proposers. Reviewers should have used this track record to assess the appropriateness of the team for carrying out and successfully delivering the proposed work. The panel must bear in mind that it is the proposal and not the experience of the applicants that is being assessed. As such panel members should not be tempted to lower their score where the applicants do not have a long standing track record in the particular research area (e.g. early stage researchers, a discipline hopping proposal, cutting-edge research areas) as long as sufficient evidence of suitable support mechanisms has been provided.

6.2 Research Excellence Scoring System (0-10)

Based on the reviewers' assessments, the PI's response, the interview and questioning, and the subsequent discussion, the panel must assign a Research Excellence score of between 0 and 10 (highest) to each proposal using the definitions below.

Do not be tempted to lower your score because you think that the research project fails to fit fully within the NERC remit. Discovery Science funding can cross remit boundaries and, where this is the case, a co-funding agreement will have been considered. Discovery Science research within NERC is unconstrained by strategic science priorities. This is to ensure that Discovery Science provides an open arena for scientists to explore new and emerging ideas that will help meet the challenges of tomorrow. The success or otherwise of
a proposal should not depend on its relationship to topics highlighted within the NERC science strategy or other NERC priority areas.

Multidisciplinary and technology-led research is often to be found at the cutting edge of science, which is inherently risky. You should not be afraid of recommending innovative, speculative and adventurous proposals.

The chair, with input from the rest of the moderating panel, will be asked to identify any proposals in which the proposed research is particularly ‘adventurous’. NERC defines ‘adventurous’ research as that which is innovative and high risk, challenging current conventions from a position of intellectual strength, exploring new boundaries or adapting novel techniques to an entirely different field.

Your final score should be based on a balance of the comments from all the referees, taking into account the context of the overall research project, its Research Excellence and novelty. It may help you to consider the broader impacts of the proposed research, such as expected beneficiaries, potential for exploitation, enhancement of the infrastructure for future research and training, and science and society.

Don’t forget that your comments will be fed back, anonymously, to the applicant. Where you are not recommending the research because you consider it to be flawed in approach or to contain elements of poor quality, the reasons must be clear and unambiguous.

The panel are asked to assign a final score of between 0-10 to each proposal for Research Excellence using the definitions provided below.

Please note that for proposals where you assign a Research Excellence score of 8 or above to a proposal you may also wish to use a score qualifier of low, medium or high in order for you to indicate gradations of quality within that score. These qualifiers can aid the panel discussion and the prioritisation of similarly scored proposals at the end of the meeting. These scores are not part of the official record; however, they are only to be used to aid the panel discussion and the prioritisation of similarly scored proposals at the end of the meeting.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Usual Indicators</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Excellent quality proposal</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>The proposed work is outstanding and represents world-leading standards in terms of quality, significance and scientific impact. Highest priority for funding.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>The proposed work is excellent and represents world-class standards in terms of quality, significance and scientific impact. Very high priority for funding.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>The proposed work is very good, contains aspects of excellence, and represents high standards in terms of quality, significance and scientific impact. High priority for funding.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<p>| <strong>Good quality proposal</strong> | |
| 7     | The proposed work is of a good quality, internationally competitive, at the forefront of UK work and has a high level of scientific impact. Should be funded if possible. |
| 6     | The proposed work is of a good quality, on the borderline between nationally and internationally competitive, and has a good level of scientific impact. Potentially fundable. |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>The proposed work is of a good quality, has some scientific merit and addresses useful questions, but is not at the leading edge. It is suitable for funding in principle but in a competitive context is not a priority.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Potentially useful proposal</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>The proposed work is of a good quality, has some scientific merit, but has a number of weaknesses. Not recommended for funding.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>The proposed work is of a satisfactory quality. It would provide some new knowledge, but fails to provide reasonable evidence and justification for the proposal. Not recommended for funding.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Unacceptable proposal</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>The proposed work is weak in terms of quality, significance and scientific impact, and has only a few strengths. Not suitable for funding.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>The proposed work is of an unsatisfactory quality and is unlikely to advance the field. Not suitable for funding.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>For special cases, e.g. flawed in scientific approach, subject to serious technical difficulties, does not address operational risks, sufficiently unclearly written that it cannot be properly assessed, success depends on the project student, or is duplicative of other research.</td>
</tr>
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### 6.3 Fit to Scheme

Reviewers of Large Grant proposals have also been asked to provide comments on Fit to Scheme. As detailed above, Large Grants are intended to support adventurous, large-scale and complex research tackling big science questions that cannot be addressed through other NERC funding opportunities. Multidisciplinary approaches, via inter- or intra-institutional collaboration, are encouraged and appropriate management arrangements are required.

The panel should be satisfied that the applicants have fully justified that a Large Grant approach is necessary and more appropriate than multiple Standard Grants. Panel members should not confuse Fit to Scheme with Research Excellence; Fit to Scheme is only used by NERC to ensure proposals comply with NERC’s current policy for Large Grants; it should not be part of the assessment for Research Excellence.

### 7. Pathways to Impact

An exploration of ‘Pathways to Impact’ continues to be required with every proposal; the Pathways to Impact attachment describes potential opportunities and approaches to generate economic and social impact from the proposed research over different timescales.

Whilst NERC does not expect applicants to be able to predict the economic and societal impact of their research, NERC does expect applicants to have explored the following from the outset:

1. Who could potentially benefit from the proposed research over different timescales?
2. How might the potential beneficiaries benefit?
iii. What will be done during and after the project to increase the likelihood of the research reaching the identified beneficiaries and maximize the likelihood of the identified benefits being achieved?

Whilst Pathways to Impact is not a secondary assessment criterion for ranking of proposals, an acceptable Pathways to Impact is required before a grant may start. Grants will not be allowed to start unless unacceptable Pathways to Impact are enhanced to an acceptable level within one month of notification of the panel outcome.

Panels are responsible for discussing Pathways to Impact and identifying any unacceptable Pathways to Impact or unjustified costs associated with proposals within the funding frame and providing feedback on the unacceptable Pathways to Impact. Panel members should assess whether applicants have completed a robust thought-process around the potential economic and societal impacts of their research and proposed ways to move towards, accelerate or implement these and whether any costs requested to deliver these are justified.

An acceptable Pathways to Impact will:

i. be project-specific and not generalized;
ii. be outcome-driven;
iii. identify and actively engage the key relevant research end-users and stakeholders at appropriate stages;
iv. demonstrate a clear understanding of the project-relevant needs of end-users and consider ways for the proposed research to meet these needs;
v. contain evidence of existing engagement with relevant end users e.g. via letters of support/supporting statements;
v i. detail the planning and management of associated activities including timing, personnel, budget, deliverables and feasibility.

Pathways to Impact which meet the relevant criteria above should be considered “acceptable” and those failing to meet criteria appropriate to the proposed research should be considered “unacceptable”. Where Pathways to Impact are identified as “unacceptable” the panel should give details in their feedback of where the criteria were not met and what action and improvements are required to raise it to an acceptable level of quality.

Further information on Pathways to Impact is available on the NERC website.

8. Proposal Prioritisation

Once all the proposals under discussion have been scored at the meeting, the panel is then asked to place them in priority order based upon the Research Excellence scores given. A ranked list of the proposals will be compiled based on the final scores assigned to each proposal for Research Excellence. If the panel assigned a grade qualifier of low, medium or high at the point of scoring the proposal these will be used in forming an initial ranking to aid the comparison of similarly scored proposals. However these score qualifiers will not be recorded as the final score for the proposal and can be discounted if the panel conclude that they do not accurately reflect the comparative excellence of the proposal within a Research Excellence boundary (i.e. score).

All panel members will be present during proposal prioritisation (ranking), but those with conflicts will not be allowed to contribute to discussions when a proposal for which they were conflicted is being compared with another proposal. If any member of the panel would prefer
not to be present for any part of the proposal prioritisation process, then they can of course leave the room.

9. Consideration of Resources Requested

The paragraphs below describe the approach the panel should take to the resources requested on the proposals.

9.1 Full Economic Costing

All research proposals submitted for consideration are expected to present the full economic cost (FEC) of the project. Proposals must include the funds for the investigators’ effort and the overheads supporting the research activity. Proposals are composed of four summary fund headings, as follows:

- **Directly Incurred Costs** – Costs that are explicitly identifiable as arising from the conduct of a project, are charged as the cash value actually spent and are supported by an auditable record.
- **Directly Allocated** – The costs of resources used by a project that are shared by other activities (including the costs of estates). They are charged to projects on the basis of estimates rather than actual costs and do not represent actual costs on a project-by-project basis.
- **Indirect Costs** – non-specific costs charged across all projects, based on estimates that are not otherwise included as Directly Allocated costs.
- **Exceptions** – Directly Incurred costs that are funded at 100% of FEC, subject to actual expenditure incurred, or items that are outside FEC.

For any proposals in the funding frame, the panel is asked to consider and comment upon the resources requested.

9.2 Individual Aspects of Resourcing the Proposal

Are the specific funding requests in the following areas essential and sufficient for the proper conduct and exploitation of the research proposed?

- The amount of time to be devoted to the project by the proposed principal and co-investigators.
- The level of the proposed principal and co-investigators.
- The amount of time for research, technical and support staff proposed.
- The level of appointment for such staff.
- The equipment, consumables and other directly incurred costs such as travel and subsistence. Where equipment has been requested please comment explicitly on the viability of the arrangements described to access equipment needed for this project, and particularly on any university or third party contribution.
- Costs of collecting, establishing, providing or organising the necessary data and research materials.
- Resources devoted to maximising the scientific, societal and economic impacts of the proposed research.
- Access to institutional research facilities
- The overall length of time for the project

Please comment if you believe any of these might need to be curtailed or expanded.
9.3 Areas where you should not comment

The costs of particular resources are for resolution as to true economic cost between the research councils and other relevant bodies. You should not comment therefore upon:

- The level of estate costs in different institutions
- The level of indirect costs
- Charging rates of institutional or other research facilities which are not open market provisions
- Specific salary levels in individual institutions

9.4 Equipment

See Annex C of this panel guidance for assessment of Equipment requests costing over £10k.

10. Funding for International Collaborations

We work internationally with other funding organisations to help support excellent research collaborations. Agreements exist with priority funders to allow researchers to submit a single collaborative proposal. These agreements help minimise the risk of double jeopardy - instead of being reviewed by both funders, each collaborative submission is reviewed by a single panel, avoiding duplication of effort for applicants and peer reviewers. These agreements do not represent additional funding, their aim is to make routes to collaboration as 'normal business' as possible.

Agreements operate with the NSF division of environmental biology (DEB), the NSF directorate for geosciences (GEO) and the Research Council for the State of São Paulo, Brazil (FAPESP).

More details on funding for international collaborations can be found on the NERC website.

Any proposals submitted under these mechanisms should be assessed in the same way as other proposals submitted to this round. The panel should satisfy itself that the collaboration is well thought out, that it is an integrated part of the project and that it will add value.
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:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conflict</th>
<th>Action Required</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 You are a named investigator, staff member or project partner involved in the proposal or have signed a letter of support</td>
<td>NERC should identify these conflicts please tell us if an error has been made</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 You have a formal affiliation to any Research Organisation or Project Partner organisation involved in the proposal. 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. For Fellowship proposals conflicts apply to both the organisation where the applicant is currently based and the organisation where the fellowship would be held. [Association with an organisation that has provided a letter of support but is not a Project Partner is not a conflict]</td>
<td>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. If you are moving to a new organisation please inform us as this will create new conflicts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>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.</td>
<td>Please inform us NERC may not have received complete information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 You have an existing business or professional partnership with any of the investigators or staff named in the proposal</td>
<td>Please inform us NERC does not hold this information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 You are a close relative - spouse, child, sibling or parent - of any of the investigators or staff named in the proposal.</td>
<td>Please inform us NERC does not hold this information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>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.</td>
<td>Please inform us NERC does not hold this information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 You are in close regular collaboration with any individuals 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.</td>
<td>Please inform us NERC does not hold this information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 On Fellowship proposals: you have been the applicant's supervisor within the last eight years.</td>
<td>Please inform us NERC does not hold this information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>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.</td>
<td>Please inform us NERC does not hold this information.</td>
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</table>

**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.
Annex B

Panel Feedback Form

This form should be used to provide a description and justification of the moderating panel's assessment of research proposals. Comments included will be used as feedback to the applicant and as a record of the panel's discussion for NERC. The same feedback will also be copied to the applicant's Research Organisation Administration Office.

Please note:

- The first introducer for each proposal is responsible for completing this form and sending it to the Panel Secretary within one week of the meeting date.
- Please note, your comments will be fed back verbatim to the applicant and their Research Organisation Administrative Office.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proposal details</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introducer name</td>
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<tr>
<td>Grant reference</td>
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<tr>
<td>PI name</td>
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<tr>
<th>Proposal Assessment details and feedback to applicant</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Panel Score for Research Excellence (0 – 10)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Please detail the panel's justification for this score.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Panel Assessment Score for Pathways to Impact (Acceptable/Unacceptable)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Please detail the panel's justification for this assessment below. If the panel considered that the Pathways to Impact was unacceptable, please detail and actions/improvement required of the applicants to raise this to an acceptable level.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Please detail any comments relating to the Fit to Scheme</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Please detail any comments and recommendations made by the panel (including any adjustments) regarding cost effectiveness and resources requested, e.g. staff time, equipment costs etc.</td>
</tr>
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<tr>
<th>Additional comments. Please add any other comments pertinent to the assessment of this proposal at the moderating panel meeting which have not been included above</th>
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</table>
Annex C

The Assessment of Equipment Requests

Assessment of Equipment Requests for items of equipment costing between £10k and £138k (£115k ex VAT)

Evidence must be provided of an evaluation of the use of existing relevant capital assets. The Justification of Resources should be used to:

- confirm that the piece of equipment is not already available for use within the host institution, or at any other accessible location (for instance by making reference to any asset registers consulted)
- provide evidence that at all other reasonable options have been considered
- explain, if the equipment requested will replace existing equipment, what will happen to the existing equipment
- set out what contribution the Research Organisation is making towards the cost of the equipment

Panel members are asked to comment explicitly on the viability of the arrangements described to access equipment needed for this project, and particularly on any university or third party contribution to new purchases. The panel should provide NERC with a recommendation as to whether requests to purchase new equipment are justified and should be funded, whether the proposed contribution level is appropriate, whether the planned work can proceed without the equipment and any points of clarification needed from the applicants before any funding should be released.

Assessment of Equipment Requests for all items above the upper threshold value

Applicants must provide a business case which should outline the strategic need for the equipment. NERC will decide the strategic location for these items and will potentially fund them at 100% FEC. Funding at this level will be exceptional and a contribution from the Research Organisation of at least 50% of the cost will be the normal expectation. The business case should not be more than 2 sides of A4 and should include at least 3 quotations from different potential suppliers. Where there are less than 3 potential suppliers, this must be fully explained in the accompanying Justification of Resources.

Panels are asked to assess the strength of the strategic business case and comment on whether the requested equipment is appropriate and has been fully justified. Panels should consider the following:

- Is the provision of this equipment essential to the completion of the proposed work i.e. is the proposal feasible without the requested equipment?
- Are the costs quoted sensible and justified?
- Are their suitable arrangements detailed for the ongoing support and maintenance of the equipment?
- Have the host institution and/or other third party collaborators made appropriate contributions?
- Is this an appropriate location and user base for this investment?
- Does this represent a coherent and effective package across this institution?
- Does this proposal effectively build on and properly utilise existing inventory?
- Have effective arrangements been demonstrated for extending the user base i.e. is there evidence that this will be used for more than one project?

The panel should provide NERC with a recommendation as to whether the request should be funded, whether the proposed contribution level is appropriate, whether the planned work
can proceed without the equipment and any points of clarification needed from the applicants. Business cases supported by the panel may be further assessed against other business cases recommended for funding if the capital budgets available are exceeded. The advice provided by the panel will inform this process.