

MODERATING PANEL GUIDANCE NOTES FOR THE CONSIDERATION OF DISCOVERY SCIENCE STANDARD AND NEW INVESTIGATOR GRANT PROPOSALS

Published: January 2019

1. Introduction

The Standard Grant call (which includes the New Investigator Grant call) is an open competition for curiosity-motivated basic, strategic or applied research in the environmental sciences. Eligibility for the New Investigator Grant call is restricted but beyond that, the rules and the review and moderating processes are the same for both calls.

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 documents, all reviewers' comments and any applicant's responses to reviewers' assessments as appropriate. Using this information for reference, all moderating panels are responsible for:

- providing scores for the Research Excellence of each proposal presented to them,
- deciding if the Pathways to Impact are acceptable,
- producing a final ranked list of these proposals,
- 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
- 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, the role of introducer or reader for individual proposals. The roles of both introducers and readers are described below.

4.1 **Role of Introducers**

For each proposal, two panel members are nominated as introducers. Their role is to both submit pre-scores and lead the discussion of the proposal at the moderating panel meeting (if appropriate). As well as the proposals they have been allocated to as an introducer and reader, panel members should read as many of the other proposals as possible (time permitting). 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 at the meeting.

4.2 **Role of Readers**

The role of reader is not as comprehensive as that of the 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 score for Research Excellence, in cases where the two introducers fail to agree. The running order will detail which proposals you have been assigned to as reader.

5. The pre-score process

All proposals submitted to the Standard Grant and Standard Grant (New Investigator) schemes are subject to peer review, and the PI has the opportunity to respond to the reviewer comments received. At least two moderating panel members, who have been nominated as introducers, then consider the available evidence. Not all proposals can be discussed in detail at the moderating panel meeting and NERC asks introducers to submit pre-scores for Research Excellence prior to the meeting. This allows the Panel Chair and Deputy Chair to prioritise proposals for discussion. This is increasingly important as numbers of standard grant proposals in some panels have increased significantly, so realistic and appropriate pre-scores are needed to make the business of the panel manageable, by allowing effort to be focussed on only those excellent proposals with a realistic chance of funding. Based on the pre-scores, those proposals with the potential to be judged as being of excellent quality are discussed at the moderating panel meeting. The discussion is led by the introducers and a final score and rank is agreed by the panel. Proposals not discussed at the meeting receive a final Research Excellence score that is the highest pre-score.

It is the responsibility of the introducer to:

- identify any possible conflicts of interest with proposals not identified by NERC, please notify the panel secretary as soon as possible so the proposal can be reassigned to another panel member if needed;
- consider all the proposal material including the reviewer comments and PI response;
- moderate comments made (being careful not to introduce any new information which the applicants have not had a chance to respond to);
- submit appropriate pre-scores for Research Excellence based on the NERC criteria.

Your moderation of the reviewer's 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.

5.1 How to complete pre-scores via Je-S

The process for completing and submitting pre-scores in [Je-S](#) is very similar to the process for completing and submitting a review, although please note only the Introducer form will be visible in Je-S. The proposal documents will not be visible in Je-S, and will need to be accessed via the Extranet:

- When you are required to provide pre-scores through Je-S then you will receive an email notification that you have assessments pending. To see the details, log in to Je-S in the normal way.
- The Introducer forms are in the document menu, under 'Other'. Clicking on the Introducer Assessment link will take you through to the Introducer Form. You will be sent a single combined document in which you will be able to record your scores for all of the proposals that you are introducing. Exceptionally, you may receive a second document but this will only happen if we ask you to introduce a further proposal after the initial document is issued. As noted above, the Introducer forms do not contain any links to the proposal documentation. This will need to be accessed separately through the Extranet.
- The first section of the form (Introducer Details) will contain details of the introducer and the meeting name, meeting date and the assessment due date. The Research Grants section will contain details of all of the proposals that require scoring. Each proposal assessment can be accessed by selecting the 'Edit' link. You should then add an appropriate score and some brief comments on the scores provided. **Please do not use decimals when submitting your score – our system will not accept these and your score will be rounded up to the nearest whole number.**
- Each proposal assessment must be saved separately, using the 'Save' function on the top tool bar. There is a limit of 4000 characters for the free-text box. **Please do ensure that you provide some comments justifying your score for each proposal where you are providing a pre-score.** These are vital to assist the Chairs in making final decisions regarding which proposals should be discussed by the panel at the meeting. **Note that any text comments provided WILL NOT be fed back to the applicants. The text comments will only be used by NERC and the meeting Chairs to provide context for the scores given.** If you do experience any problems saving your scores/comments then please refer to the instructions on the front page of the Je-S website.
- Once all of your proposal assessments have been completed and saved, please submit your Introducer form to NERC by selecting the 'Submit Document' button, which will appear in the top tool bar. This button will not be visible until all of your proposal assessments have been entered and saved successfully, and your pre-scores will not be sent to NERC unless this button has been pressed. Once this button has been pressed your pre-scores and

comments will be returned to NERC via Je-S. Your submitted pre-scores will then be sent to the Chair and Deputy Chair before the meeting.

If you have any comments or concerns on a specific proposal then please contact NERC directly, at college@nerc.ukri.org.

6. The Panel Meeting

6.1 Before the Panel

The pre-scores are used to prioritise proposals for discussion. All proposals submitted to the Standard and New Investigator schemes will proceed to the PI response stage but not all proposals will be discussed at the moderating panel meeting. You will be sent a list of grants to be discussed at the moderating panel meeting once the pre-scores have been sent to the Chair and Deputy Chair for approval. You will have one week prior to the meeting to make any final preparations ahead of the meeting and/or to inform NERC and/or the Chairs if you have any comments about the list of grants to be discussed.

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 (being careful not to introduce any new information which the applicants have not had a chance to respond to). Introducers need to be prepared to lead the panel discussion to determine a final score for Research Excellence.

6.2 At the Panel

During the meeting, the Chair will invite the introducers of proposals that have been prioritised according to the pre-scores to lead the discussion by summarising their comments and making reference to reviewers' comments and any PI responses. The discussion will then be opened up to the readers and then the panel by the chair and a final score for Research Excellence agreed. Panel members are asked NOT to introduce information to the discussion that has not been previously raised by the reviewers, unless a serious issue has been identified. This is primarily because 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.

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 requested. 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; it should not be a list of strengths and weaknesses as in a review. It 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 so that it provides an appropriate level of detail to enable the applicant to be clear as to why their proposal received the score it did and so that they 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.

6.3 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. Proposals not discussed at the meeting will be given a final overall score based on the highest of the two pre-scores submitted at the discretion of the Chair and Deputy Chair. Introducers do not need to provide additional feedback for these proposals.

7. Proposal Scoring

Reviewers are asked to provide a score for Excellence on a 0-6 scoring system (6 being highest) and these should be used to guide the panel in their pre-scoring and final grading and ranking of the proposal. The scores should not be summed or averaged by the panel, but treated as distinct scores.

7.1 Research Excellence Criterion

There is no simple definition of Research Excellence. Proposals may build directly on prior work, or they 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.

7.2 Research Excellence Scoring System (0-10)

Based on the reviewer scores and comments and the PI response to those comments, moderators are asked to assign a final score of between 0-10 to a proposal for Research Excellence using the definitions provided at the end of this document.

When considering multidisciplinary proposals (those which cross disciplines both within and between Council remits), please be aware that reviewers may have only been able to comment on particular areas of the proposal. Reviewers will have been selected to try and cover all the proposed research between them. Do not be tempted to lower your score because you do not think that the research fits fully within the NERC remit. Discovery Science funding can cross funder responsibilities and where this is the case, a co-funding agreement will have been considered by the relevant councils.

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.

As a guide the general distribution of scores, based on recent results in the standard grant scheme, is as follows:

Score	10	9	8	7	6-0
Percentage proposals received JUL16, JAN17, JUL17 and JAN18	<1%	10%	27%	33%	29%

Introducers are encouraged to use the entire range of pre-scores as appropriate and should give the highest scores when the work appears outstanding.

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

Please note that for proposals to which you assign a Research Excellence score of eight or above, 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.

Score	Usual Indicators
Excellent quality proposal	
10	The proposed work is outstanding and represents world-leading standards in terms of quality, significance and scientific impact. Highest priority for funding.
9	The proposed work is excellent and represents world-class standards in terms of quality, significance and scientific impact. Very high priority for funding.
8	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.
Good quality proposal	
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.
5	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.
Potentially useful proposal	
4	The proposed work is of a good quality, has some scientific merit, but has a number of weaknesses. Not recommended for funding.
3	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.
Unacceptable proposal	
2	The proposed work is weak in terms of quality, significance and scientific impact, and has only a few strengths. Not suitable for funding.
1	The proposed work is of an unsatisfactory quality and is unlikely to advance the field. Not suitable for funding.
0	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.

8. 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, we do expect applicants to have explored the following from the outset:

- Who could potentially benefit from the proposed research over different timescales?
- How might the potential beneficiaries benefit?
- 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. A grant will not be allowed to start unless an unacceptable Pathways to Impact is 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. They are also responsible for providing feedback on 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:

- be project-specific and not generalized;
- be outcome-driven;
- identify and actively engage the key relevant research end-users and stakeholders at appropriate stages;
- demonstrate a clear understanding of the project-relevant needs of end-users and consider ways for the proposed research to meet these needs;
- contain evidence of existing engagement with relevant end users e.g. via letters of support/supporting statements;
- 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.

There is further information on [Pathways to Impact](#) on the NERC website.

9. Proposal Prioritisation

Once all the proposals under discussion have received a score 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 Excellence. If the panel assigned a 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. *The score qualifiers can be discounted during the ranking if the panel conclude that they do not accurately reflect the comparative excellence of the proposal within a Research Excellence boundary (i.e. score).* Panel members should note that the score qualifiers are recorded and are published online on the ranked list of proposals if no further ranking of proposals of a particular score takes place. Proposals that are not discussed at the meeting will be given a score based on the highest awarded pre-score but will not be ranked.

10. Consideration of Resources Requested

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

10.1 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.

10.2 Exceptional Permission to Exceed the Standard Grant Limit

The limit for projects to the Standard Grant (including New Investigator) call is £800k at 100% FEC. There is a mechanism by which a case can be made to exceed this limit, which is detailed in section B of the Grants Handbook. All proposals being considered by the panel which are requesting funding in excess of the £800k limit

have agreement from NERC. Any proposals submitted without this approval are office-rejected.

10.3 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.

Please note that under full economic costing applicants can request all costs that they believe are necessary to undertake the proposed research and maximise the impact. It is not possible for NERC to set specific rates or limits (e.g. a maximum of two conferences per researcher or a maximum of £1200 per conference) as this goes against the principles of full economic costing. Panel members should assess whether what has been requested is appropriate and justified in the supporting documentation.

10.4 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 on:

- 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 provision
- Specific salary levels in individual institutions

10.5 Equipment

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

11. 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), the Research Council for the State of São Paulo, Brazil (FAPESP) and Fonds National de la Recherche (FNR) in Luxembourg. There are more details on the arrangements for [international collaborations](#) 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.

Annex A

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 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.	Please inform us 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.

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

Proposal details	
Introducer Name	
Grant Reference	
PI Name	
Proposal Assessment details and feedback to applicant	
Panel Score for Research Excellence (0 – 10)	
Please detail the panel's justification for this score	
Panel Assessment for Pathways to Impact (Acceptable/Unacceptable)	
Please detail the panel's justification for this assessment below. <i>If the panel considered that the Pathways to Impact was unacceptable, please detail any actions/improvements required of the applicants to raise this to an acceptable level.</i>	
Please detail any comments and recommendations made by the panel (including any adjustments) regarding cost effectiveness and resources requested, including e.g. staff time, equipment costs etc.	
Please detail any particular reviews that you consider to be excellent or substandard. Please include the reviewer reference and the reason for this.	
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	

Annex C

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 fewer 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.