GUIDANCE FOR MODERATORS OF DISCOVERY SCIENCE URGENCY GRANTS

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Urgency Grant Assessment Criteria

In assessing Urgency Grants, moderators are asked to provide a review which should take into account the following three aspects of the proposal: Research Excellence (primary criterion) and Fit to Scheme. As you may know, NERC accepts Urgency Grant proposals, for rapid consideration, when an unexpected and transient scientific opportunity arises.

Urgency Grant proposals are sent straight out to peer review, once reviewer reports have been received we require a member of the NERC Peer Review College to provide additional comments, award a final score of between 0-10 (highest) taking into account the reviewer comments and highlight any financial cuts that need to be made. Urgency grants must meet the same criteria for funding as other Discovery Science (Responsive Mode) schemes.

Conflicts of Interest

Before you complete your moderation please ensure that you do not have a conflict of interest with the proposal. 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 proposal you have been asked to review.

General Guidance for Moderators

NERC has a policy of feeding back moderator comments to applicants anonymously. The comments are also provided to the Research Organisation after the decision stage. The confidential sections of the form with your personal details and your overall assessment scores will not fed back to applicants or their organisation. **You should avoid comments in the non-confidential sections that could identify you, your level of expertise or the scores you have awarded to the applicant.** For example, if you need to cite your work then say “the” rather than “my” paper. All comments made should be in a manner suitable to be fed back to the applicant. If you think a particular comment could be misinterpreted or cause offence, please do not include it.

Please have regard to the Equality Act and be careful to avoid any unconscious bias in your assessment on the grounds of a protected characteristic such as age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage/civil partnership, pregnancy/maternity, race, religion/belief, sex or sexual orientation.

We are committed to the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment. You should not use journal-based metrics, such as Journal Impact Factors, as a surrogate measure of the quality of individual research articles, to assess an investigator's contributions, or to make funding decisions.

For the purposes of research assessment, please consider the value and impact of all research outputs (including datasets, software, inventions, patents, preprints, other commercial activities, etc.) in addition to research publications. You should consider a broad range of impact measures including qualitative indicators of research impact, such as influence on policy and practice.

The content of a paper is more important than publication metrics, or the identity of the journal, in which it was published, especially for early-stage investigators. Therefore, you should not use journal impact factor (or any hierarchy of journals), conference rankings and metrics such as the H-index or i10-index when assessing UKRI grants.

In completing the review you will be asked to self-assess your level of expertise for the proposal. Please only complete the review if you consider that you have an appropriate level of expertise in the area i.e. 'medium' or 'high'.

If you have a comment which you do not wish to share with the applicant but feel NERC should be made aware of please insert it into the *Confidential Comments* box on the form. On a final note please ensure that you fully justify all scores given by providing clear and comprehensive comments in the accompanying text boxes.

Research Excellence Criterion

There is no simple definition of Research 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. Moderators should use this track record to assess the appropriateness of the team for carrying out and successfully delivering the proposed work. Moderators must bear in mind that it is the proposal and *not* the experience of the applicants that is being assessed. As such moderators should not be tempted to lower their grade 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.

Your moderation 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;
- the appropriateness, effectiveness and feasibility of the proposed research methods and/or approach; and
- the description of the proposed research. This can be up to 4 sides of A4 which should include justification for urgency, detailed work plans and methodologies, a data management plan and the strategy for taking the research forward once the urgent phase is completed. It is not acceptable for the description of the proposed work to be missing key methodological details simply because of the rapid submission of an Urgency application.

Research Excellence (0-10)

Based on the reviewer scores and comments, moderators are asked to assign a final grade of between 0-10 to a proposal for Research Excellence using the definitions provided below.

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, is duplicative of other research, or not suitable for the scheme.

Fit to Scheme

The Urgency Grant scheme is intended to provide funding for unexpected and transient scientific opportunities created by unpredictable natural events such as earthquakes, drought, temporary exposure or short-timescale events in an ecosystem. Urgency applications are permitted if conforming to the available funding opportunities would result in a missed opportunity to undertake environmental research of high scientific importance. Urgency grants can be up to 12 months in duration and are expected to focus on the urgent data collection and essential initial analysis only. A clear strategy for taking the research forward once the urgent phase is completed is required. More details on the scheme, including circumstances that are not considered grounds for urgency, can be found on the Urgency Grants page of the NERC website.

NERC will fund excellent research through this scheme only if it meets the criteria for urgency outlined above. The moderator should provide an assessment of the Fit to Scheme (scientific objectives), including the following;

- Has the applicant made a convincing case for the urgency of the proposed work?
- Is an appropriate strategy in place to use the research once the urgent phase has been completed?

Project Partner Involvement

NERC seeks to increase collaborative research and encourages joint research activities between academic researchers and partners in public or private sector organisations. When project partners are named, Value Added should be assessed. Value may be added through: tangible input by named partners, e.g. cash or in-kind contributions; timeliness of the research; or increased potential impact and benefit to the research as a result of the partnership.

Resources

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

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.

The moderator is asked to consider and comment upon the resources requested.

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. Moderators should assess whether what has been requested is appropriate and justified in the supporting documentation.

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

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	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]	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.**
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.