

AHRC Assessment Panel Chair's Guidance

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Introduction

The purpose of this document is to help you, as Chair, to prepare for the forthcoming panel meeting. In addition to this document, there will be the opportunity to speak to an AHRC staff member in a briefing session prior to the panel meeting. You should also feel free to contact the nominated AHRC Programme Co-ordinator/PSO if you have any questions you wish to raise prior to the meeting.

1. COVID-19 Update for Reviewers

1.1. Reviewer guidance for mitigation against submitted applications

UKRI recognises that the COVID-19 pandemic has caused major interruptions and disruptions across our communities and are committed to ensuring that individual applicants and their wider team, including partners and networks, are not penalised for any disruption to their career(s) such as breaks and delays, disruptive working patterns and conditions, the loss of on-going work, and role changes that may have been caused by the pandemic.

When undertaking your assessment of the research project, you should consider the unequal impacts of the impact that COVID-19 related disruption might have had on the track record and career development of those individuals included in the proposal, and you should focus on the capability of the applicant and their wider team to deliver the research they are proposing.

1.2 Accounting for unknowns in new applications

UKRI acknowledges that it is a challenge for applicants to determine the future impacts of COVID-19 while the pandemic continues to evolve. Applicants have been advised that their applications should be based on the information available at the point of submission and, if applicable, the known application specific impacts of COVID-19 should be accounted for. Where known impacts have occurred, these should have been highlighted in the application, including the assumptions/information at the point of submission. Applicants were not required to include contingency plans for the potential impacts of COVID-19. Requests for travel both domestically and internationally could be included in accordance to the relevant scheme guidelines, noting the above advice.

When undertaking your assessment of the research project you should assess the project as written, noting that any changes that the project might require in the future, which arise from the COVID-19 pandemic, will be resolved as a post-award issue by UKRI if the project is successful. Potential complications related to COVID-19 should not affect your assessment or the score you give the project.

2. COVID-19 Update for Panel Members

2.1 Guidance for mitigation against submitted applications

UKRI recognises that the COVID-19 pandemic has caused major interruptions and disruptions across our communities and are committed to ensuring that individual applicants and their wider team, including partners and networks, are not penalised for any disruption to their career(s) such as breaks and delays, disruptive working patterns and conditions, the loss of on-going work, and role changes that may have been caused by the pandemic.

When undertaking your assessment of the research project, you should consider the unequal impacts of the impact that COVID-19 related disruption might have had on the track record and career development

of those individuals included in the proposal, and you should focus on the capability of the applicant and their wider team to deliver the research they are proposing. Any comments made by reviewers relating to disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic which negatively impact their assessment of the applicants should be disregarded.

2.2 Accounting for unknowns in new applications

UKRI acknowledges that it is a challenge for applicants to determine the future impacts of COVID-19 while the pandemic continues to evolve. Applicants have been advised that their applications should be based on the information available at the point of submission and, if applicable, the known application specific impacts of COVID-19 should be accounted for. Where known impacts have occurred, these should have been highlighted in the application, including the assumptions/information at the point of submission. Applicants were not required to include contingency plans for the potential impacts of COVID-19. Requests for travel both domestically and internationally could be included in accordance to the relevant scheme guidelines, noting the above advice.

When undertaking your assessment of the research project you should assess the project as written, noting that any changes that the project might require in the future, which arise from the COVID-19 pandemic, will be resolved as a post-award issue by UKRI if the project is successful. Potential complications related to COVID-19 should not affect your assessment or the score you give the project and you should disregard any comments made by reviewers that go against the guidance supplied by UKRI.

2. The role of the Chair is:

- to have read and familiarised yourself with all applications.
- to have familiarised yourself with the [UKRI Principles of Assessment and Decision Making](#)
- to oversee and to run the panel meeting.
- to set the context and tone for the meeting in terms of process and methods of working, following guidance from the AHRC's pre-meeting briefing.
- to ensure that the meeting keeps to time.
- to seek clarification of the panel's views and to ensure there is appropriate discussion, before the panel agrees a grading for each proposal.
- to rank those proposals in the funding range with a score of 6-1.
- to ensure that AHRC procedures and protocols are followed and to refer to AHRC staff for guidance when necessary.
- to provide final approval for feedback, invited resubmissions and conditions on awards, where necessary.
- to ensure the AHRC is provided with a final and agreed ranked list of applications.

You will not have been assigned any proposals to introduce; however, in order to chair the meeting effectively, **you are expected to have read all applications in detail to familiarise yourself with their content.** This is necessary for you to be able to regulate the panel discussions, i.e. so that you can be alert to any discussion which is not in line with the assessment process.

3. Start of the meeting

It is suggested that at the start of the meeting panellists introduce themselves by their name and institution.

You should take some time to remind the panel of:

- their role as an introducer.
- the confidential nature of the process.
- the need to review all applications on equal terms, considering only the information provided in the application and the potential for 'unconscious bias' to enter into people's judgements.
- the procedure for dealing with Conflicts of Interest.
- the role of an Assessment Panel.
- the grade descriptors and their meanings.
- the ranking process.
- the opportunity for feedback on the AHRC review process. This will be discussed or collated at the end of the meeting or, if time at the meeting does not allow, by correspondence after the meeting.
- briefly remind the panel of the post meeting administrative process following the meeting and decisions made.

You might find that it takes some time for the panel to get into a rhythm of introducing, agreeing a final grade and ranking. It may be helpful, therefore, to go back to the first few proposals, to ensure the decisions are consistent with those made towards the end. If there is a large number of proposals to be assessed, you may find it helpful to set out the amount of time allocated to discussing each proposal, to ensure that the meeting will run to time and sufficient time is given to each proposal. For example, if there are 25 proposals to be discussed at a six hour meeting, it may be appropriate that with two 10 minute breaks and half an hour for lunch; the panel should try to spend no more than an average of 10 minutes on each proposal, in order to have sufficient time for the final ranking and any other discussion. In order to manage expectations, you should alert panel members to this at the start of the meeting. Finally, you should also inform the panellists of the time the meeting is expected to finish and how it is important to consider those later proposals as fully as the earlier ones.

4. The role of the panellists

Panellists are provided with all the necessary information prior to the meeting and are expected to:

- have familiarised themselves with the guidelines and assessment criteria for the scheme.
- to have commented on and to have graded all proposals which they have been assigned as an introducer (1st introducer, 2nd introducer or supporting introducer).
- to have alerted the office to any conflicts of interest, not picked up by the office.
- to attend the panel meeting to agree final grades and rankings for all proposals.
- to agree any feedback where applicable.
- In undertaking the above tasks, panellists are expected to
- exercise their knowledge, judgement and expertise in order to reach clear, sound, evidence-based decisions.

- treat all applications as strictly confidential at all times.
- be always fair and objective and to adhere to [Research Council Equality and Diversity Policy](#) which states that:

The UK Research Councils are committed to eliminating unlawful discrimination and promoting equality of opportunity and good relations across and between the defined equalities groups in all of their relevant functions.

Accordingly no eligible job applicant, funding applicant, employee or external stakeholder, including members of the public, should receive less favourable treatment on the grounds of:

- gender
- marital status
- sexual orientation
- gender re-assignment
- race
- colour
- nationality
- ethnicity or national origins
- religion or similar philosophical belief
- spent criminal conviction
- age
- disability

Equally, all proposals must be assessed on equal terms, regardless of the sex, age, and/or ethnicity of the applicant. Proposals must therefore be assessed and graded on their merits, in accordance with the criteria and the aims and objectives set for each scheme or call for funding.

4.1 Code of Conduct

AHRC is committed to ensuring that our decision making is fair, robust, transparent and credible. We are also committed to raising awareness of and taking steps to remove the impact of unintentional bias in our systems, processes, behaviours and culture; in addition, we will ensure that our funding is not influenced by, for example, the gender of the applicant or by other protected characteristics. As Chair, you should start the meeting by reminding the Panel about the importance of safeguarding decision making and managing conflicts of interest.

4.2 Safeguarding decision making

AHRC is committed to ensuring that those who make funding decisions recognise the factors that introduce risk into the decision making process. To do this, it is important to raise awareness of, and take steps to remove, any impact of unintentional bias in our processes, behaviours and culture. We know that pressure to make decisions, time pressures, high cognitive load and tiredness all create conditions that introduce the risk of unintentional bias.

Many of these factors could be present in the panel meeting; therefore we ask that you are aware of this risk and safe guard the panel's recommendation by taking the actions described below.

You should ask the panel members to be aware of the biases that they will unintentionally bring to

the process and remind the Panel of the importance of the following action points:

- All proposals or nominations must be assessed on equal terms, and objectively assessed on their merits using the criteria set for each funding mechanism.
- Decisions must be evidence-based and based on all the information provided.
- Question and challenge cultural stereotypes and bias, and be prepared to be challenged.
- Be aware that working with a high cognitive load, with time pressures and the need to make quick decisions, creates conditions for bias which could have an impact on the research we fund.
- try to slow down the speed of your decision making, allowing sufficient time for discussion of each application.
- Reconsider the reasons for your decisions, recognising that they may be post-hoc justifications.
- Question cultural stereotypes; be open to seeing what is new and unfamiliar.
- Remember you are unlikely to be fairer and less prejudiced than the average person.
- You can detect unconscious bias more easily in others than in yourself, so create an environment in which all panel members feel able to call out bias when they see it.

For further useful information, the Royal Society has issued a Briefing and video on unconscious bias: <https://royalsociety.org/topics-policy/publications/2015/unconscious-bias/> .

As Chair, you should remind the Panel of the importance of objectivity in decision making and ensure that assessments are made based on evidence and with reference to the assessment criteria and scoring definitions.

Proposals are submitted to the AHRC in confidence and may contain confidential information and personal data belonging to the applicant (and other researchers named in the proposal). Please ensure therefore that all proposals are treated confidentially, [referring to the AHRC web site](#) for further guidance on confidentiality, data protection, and freedom of information.

5. The role of panel meetings

The purpose of panel meetings is to consider and reach final agreement on the grading and ranking of proposals and where necessary, to agree broad feedback for applicants. The panel's ranked list is presented to AHRC Senior Management, who will make the final funding decisions. They will never overturn or alter the order of the list in making the funding decisions. The exceptions are applications submitted under the early career scheme for which proposals ranked lower than standard proposals may be funded.

Panel meetings also provide an opportunity for panellists to raise issues, such as the quality of peer review or the potential impact of the research proposed through the applications received to that meeting.

Comments and grades (with the exception of the final agreed grade) will not be used outside the peer review / funding decision making process, unless they are subject to specific legal requirements or to be used as the basis of feedback. The AHRC will only collect introducer forms in the case of drafting feedback and then only with the agreement of the panel.

6. Conflicts of interest

It is vital that panel members are seen to be completely impartial at all stages of the review process.

Panel members (including you as Chair) should not therefore take part in the assessment of any proposal where a conflict of interest could be construed. If you think you might have a conflict, as in the examples on the [AHRC website](#), please inform the staff member responsible for your panel at the earliest possible opportunity.

If anyone is in conflict with a proposal, s/he will be required to leave the room whilst the proposal is being discussed. If you are in conflict, we will nominate someone to deputise for you.

All panellists are permitted to be present for the ranking of all proposals; however, it will be your responsibility as Chair to ensure that any proposal where a conflict has been identified is not discussed again in detail. Should discussion need to take place, the panel member who is in conflict with the proposal should leave the room again.

7. Assessment approach

The panel operates using an [assessment approach](#).

In considering proposals, panellists must ensure that their judgements are based solely on the aims and criteria for the scheme and the information that is provided in the application form. Panel members should not allow private knowledge of the applicant or the proposed research to influence their judgement and panellists are expected to decline invitations to sit on a panel if their private views, knowledge or relations will affect the judgement of applications.

8. Guidance for UKRI grant assessors (reviewers and board/panel members, etc.)

We are committed to support the recommendations and principles set out by the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA; <https://sfdora.org/read/>). 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 purpose 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.

We encourage you to challenge research assessment practices that rely inappropriately on journal impact factors or conference rankings and promote and teach best practice that focuses on the value

and influence of specific research outputs.

9. Grading and ranking proposals

Panels are asked to consider each proposal on its merits and award it a grade. Final grading decisions at assessment panels are reached through discussion of the proposals, taking into account the comments of individual members of the panel.

AHRC does not use averages or 'weighted grades' in determining the grade; the panel needs to weigh up all the information that has been provided and make a judgement as to the appropriate grade. The descriptors will be available in the meeting, should you need to refer panellists back to them at any point in the discussion.

Please note that early career applications should be ranked alongside the standard route applications using the same criteria and should not be given any special weighting by the panel. The funding formula used by AHRC ensures that early career applications have a higher success rate than the standard route.

All proposals need to be graded but only those graded 4 or above should be ranked. Using a decimal grading system for ranking is an effective and efficient mechanism and Introducers should award a decimal grade to each proposal, with a view to the panel agreeing a final decimal grade. This allows the Introducers to indicate the strength of their grading. For example, a good 4 might become 4.6; a weak 5 may be graded at 5.1; and, an excellent 6 graded at 6.8. The decimal is only for the purpose of ordering the applications and has no value outside the rank ordered list; as such, the final ranking should not have a decimal. The key is to make sure that the grade and its descriptor fit the quality of the proposal and that the panel is content with the ranked order of the proposals.

10. Amendments, conditions and feedback

The panel can make recommendations on individual proposals based on panellists' comments, for the AHRC to take forward, for example:

- **Costings:** the panel may make adjustments to the costs identified in proposals prior to making awards, if the assessors are clear that the case has not been made for the costs.
- **Conditions:** the panel can suggest conditions based on panellists' comments, for the AHRC to impose on the award. These could either be conditions that need to be met before an award is confirmed OR a requirement that the condition be met during the undertaking of the project. Once the award holder has advised the AHRC that they have met the conditions imposed for the award to be granted, the AHRC will expect the Chair or a designated panel member to advise on whether they are satisfied the conditions have been met.
- **Feedback:** The panel can decide to provide feedback if an application is likely to be successful and it wishes to highlight some advice from the panel, but where it is not significant enough to be made a condition of the award.

For Assessment panels, where applicants will not have had the benefit of seeing reviewer comments, the panel may wish to provide applications with specific feedback, where there is something

significant to be communicated to the applicant that is not covered by the grade descriptor. In doing so, unsuccessful applicants should receive more detail than successful applicants in order to help them in preparing future bids.

Any feedback for both successful and unsuccessful applications should be agreed in principle by the panel at the meeting, providing either specific text or a clear set of bullet points, with the final text of the feedback being agreed by yourself as Chair before being communicated back to the applicant.

11. Resubmission Policy

Resubmission of unsuccessful applications is no longer permitted except in very particular circumstances, where the panel may exceptionally decide to invite the applicant to resubmit the proposal.

This will happen only where the panel identifies an application of exceptional potential and can identify specific changes to the application that could significantly enhance its competitiveness. In this case, the panel does not need to agree a grade for the application but it will need to agree specific feedback – based on the panellists' comments - to be provided to the applicant.

In order for a proposal to be invited for resubmission the panel should satisfy itself that it meets all of the following criteria:

- the core research ideas and approach are original, innovative and exciting and the proposal has outstanding, transformative potential. It has clear potential to secure a grading of 6 if the identified weaknesses can be satisfactorily addressed.
- there should be clear potential for the revised proposal to significantly increase its overall grading and priority for funding.
- the panel should be confident that issues identified in deeming a proposal to be unfundable can be addressed through resubmission and that these are surmountable. This does not necessarily mean that the panel is able to identify how this will be achieved, just that they are confident that it is possible.
- the panel must be able to provide clear guidance on the key issue or issues which need to be addressed in any resubmission.

We would normally expect invited resubmissions to be used in instances where the panel considers the proposed research to be particularly challenging, novel, complex, adventurous or risky and where it may be difficult to get everything right first time (an example might be a development which has happened since the proposal was submitted in terms of new or recently published research or a change in 'real world' conditions affecting the project).

When invited resubmissions are submitted they will be assessed in the usual way in competition with all other proposals.

Invited resubmissions should not be used:

- where the identified weaknesses relate to under-development, poor presentation or other problems relating to the preparation of the proposal, which could reasonably have been expected to be addressed in submitting a proposal of this kind.

- for proposals where the core ideas, rationale and foundations, aims and focus or overall design of the project need substantial re-working, since such radically revised proposals could be submitted as a significantly re-worked new proposal rather than as a resubmission.

In addition, there are schemes/calls where invited resubmission is not an option due to the particular nature of the scheme/call, i.e. because the call is a one off and there will be no further rounds under which to submit applications. In such cases the panel may wish to consider the possibility of a conditional award (as detailed above), where appropriate.

12. Feedback on AHRC processes

Should the panel have any feedback on AHRC policy, process and/or documentation, this can be discussed and recorded once all applications have been assigned a final grade and ranked. If there is not sufficient time to discuss this at the end of the meeting, the chair may collect and collate any comments from panellists via email before forwarding them to an AHRC officer. These will be formally recorded and used by the AHRC to inform the future development processes.

13. At the end of the meeting

By the end of the meeting, the panel should have provided an agreed grade or outcome for all applications and produced a rank ordered list. Any feedback for applicants, conditional awards or invited resubmissions should also be agreed.

You should ask panel members to leave behind any hard copies of proposals, notes etc. so that AHRC can dispose of it securely. Also, any e-copies of documents that they have created must be destroyed.

Please remind panel members that the discussions and outcomes are confidential and must not be discussed outside of the meeting. Should they be approached by applicants to discuss their proposals, in any way, they must decline.

They may talk to applicants about the Council's structures, policies and modes of operation, so long as the information is in the public domain (e.g. in the Research Funding Guide or on the website). They must not divulge information about individual awards or application statistics, unless the information is already in the public domain (via press releases, annual reports, etc.).

14. After the panel meeting

Where the panel has agreed feedback for applicants, conditional awards or invited resubmissions, you as the Chair, will be invited to agree the final wording to be communicated back to the applicant. This is to ensure it is a true reflection of the comments agreed by the panel at the meeting and/or to check that the condition has been met.

Immediately after the meeting, you will be asked to attend a short debrief session, so that the AHRC Officers can gain feedback from you regarding the running of the meeting, its content and any associated processes you may wish to discuss. The AHRC officer attending the meeting will have a completed Meeting Record form for your approval. This acts as the formal record of the meeting and will include the final wording of any feedback, conditions or resubmission guidance along with the final grades and ranking of the proposals. As Chair, you are required to sign the Meeting Record as an authorised record of the meeting.

Appendix A. Generic Grading Scale

Score	Description	Definition
6	Exceptional Should be funded as a matter of the very highest priority	Work that is at the leading edge internationally, in all of the assessment criteria – scholarship, originality, quality and significance, and meets the majority of them to an exceptional level. Likely to have a significant impact on the field. The proposal’s evidence and justification are fully and consistently provided and management arrangements are clear and convincing.
5	Excellent Should be funded as a matter of priority	Work that is internationally excellent in all of the assessment criteria – scholarship, originality, quality and significance, and meets them to an excellent level. Will answer important questions in the field. The proposal’s evidence and justification are fully and consistently provided and management arrangements are clear and convincing.
4	Very Good Worthy of consideration for funding	Work that demonstrates high international standards of scholarship, originality, quality and significance. Will advance the field of research. It meets all assessment criteria. The proposal’s evidence and justification are good and management arrangements are clear and sound.
3	Satisfactory In a competitive context, the proposal is not considered of sufficient priority to recommend for funding	Work that is satisfactory in terms of scholarship and quality but lacking in international competitiveness. It is limited in terms of originality, innovation and significance and its contribution to the research field. It meets minimum requirements in terms of the assessment criteria and the proposal’s evidence and justification are adequate overall.
2	Not Competitive Not recommended for funding	Work that is of inconsistent quality with some strengths, innovative ideas and good components, but has significant weaknesses or flaws in its conceptualisation, design, methodology and management. Unlikely to advance the field significantly. It does not meet all scheme assessment criteria.
1	Unfundable Not suitable for funding	A proposal that has an unsatisfactory level of originality, quality and significance. Has limited potential to advance research within the field and may be unconvincing in terms of its management arrangements or capacity to deliver proposed activities, especially for the amount of funding being sought. Unlikely to advance the field. It falls short of meeting the assessment criteria for the scheme