



Natural
Environment
Research Council

ASSESSMENT PANEL GUIDANCE NOTES FOR THE CONSIDERATION OF DISCOVERY SCIENCE 'EXPLORING THE FRONTIERS OF ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCE RESEARCH 2022' PROPOSALS

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1. Introduction

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

Following increased investment and a refresh of the Discovery Science portfolio in 2021, NERC have launched the **Exploring the Frontiers** scheme. This is a new scheme that will support outstanding and adventurous researchers to pursue ambitious, curiosity-driven research ideas at the frontiers of environmental science. We will provide flexible funding to allow researchers to explore new and exciting areas of environmental science and exploit new technologies and approaches in a dynamic way. This may include undertaking of “proof-of-concept” research projects or tackling a problem that can be constrained to a shorter duration award than NERC's Pushing the Frontiers funding scheme. Some examples of how this funding could be used, and how it can support scientific excellence whilst meeting diverse needs, can be found in **Annex A** - it should be noted that these are by no means an exhaustive list of the types of projects we expect to fund through this scheme.

The pilot call of this new scheme, “[Exploring the Frontiers of environmental science research 2022](#)”, invites proposals to bid for up to £100,000 per grant (at full economic cost), of which NERC will normally fund 80%. At least £4 million is available to fund approximately 50 projects through this pilot call. There is no set duration for the awards and the requested project duration should be appropriate for the research being proposed. However, based on the award amount we are anticipating that the majority will be between 6-12 months. Awards are not required to start on a fixed date and applicants have been advised to propose realistic start dates based on the needs of the project. Proposals are accepted from either individuals or teams.

As part of UKRI's commitment to reducing bureaucracy, the application process for this scheme is streamlined, with minimal paperwork required for both applicants and those involved in peer assessment of proposals. The Case for Support is a concise three-side document. Two sides of this document should demonstrate how the proposed research

explores new and exciting areas, involves feasible objectives that are ambitious, adventurous and beyond state-of-the-art, and initiates future paths towards ground-breaking, high-risk, high-reward and innovative scientific discovery or has the potential to lead to advancement of the discipline. In addition to this, the Case for Support should include a one-side narrative 'capability to deliver' statement, drawing on the [Royal Society's Résumé for Researchers](#), explaining the team's suitability to undertake and deliver high-quality, innovative science. A detailed costing is not required until a proposal is recommended for funding. **As such, panel members should understand that some detail typical of a longer application may not be included and look beyond this**, focusing on whether the proposed research will explore the frontiers of knowledge, and considering the applicants' ideas and contributions (relative to career stage) to their field of science, the wider research and innovation community and users of research. This should not be solely based on metrics (publications, income, etc.).

This pilot will also trial a new approach to allocating research funding. Assessment panels will agree the final score for proposals, as set out in the announcement of opportunity. Panels will not be asked to rank proposals; instead, funding will be randomly allocated across proposals that fall within the highest scoring bands. The use of a randomised allocation process, in which peer review is used to identify the most meritorious proposals, from which funded applications are selected by random allocation [has been suggested](#) to have many potential advantages over the current system, including reducing bias and improving grantee diversity with regard to seniority, race, and gender. This approach also has potential added benefits of being more efficient by reducing the workload for assessors. It is the role of the panel to determine the excellence of the proposals, based on two assessment criteria, the scores of which will later be weighted and combined to give an overall score by NERC, to be used for the funding allocation process only. Depending on where the threshold for funding falls, proposals deemed fundable and of equal quality (within the same overall score) will be entered into a randomised allocation process and allocated funding until the budget is exhausted.

This pilot will be evaluated, and so we will be asking for your feedback on the scheme and assessment process at the end of the panel meeting, and/or shortly after.

2. Assessment Process

2.1. Notification of Intent

For the "[Exploring the frontiers of environmental science research 2022](#)" call, NERC requires a notification of intent to be submitted in the first instance. This is to inform NERC of the number of proposals expected with enough detail on remit area and the investigators, their project partners and collaborators, to manage our resources, select panel members with the right expertise and to manage conflicts of interest.

The notification of intent stage will not be used in any assessment of the proposals, nor check the eligibility of individuals. However full proposals submitted without a prior notification of intent will be rejected.

2.2. Assessment panel

All proposals submitted to the call will first be subject to eligibility and remit checks by the NERC office. Eligible proposals will be evaluated through assessment panels; they will not be sent to reviewers. Expert panels will be formed around the balance of remit areas covered by all submitted proposals, the number of panels will be dependent on how many proposals are received. Panels will comprise appropriate members of NERC's Peer Review College, plus independent experts as needed. Proposals will be assigned to an appropriate panel by the NERC office.

The role of the assessment panel is to assess and score the proposals according to the assessment criteria of Research Excellence and Capability to Deliver (as detailed in section 4 below). After the assessment panel, NERC will use the panel recommendations along with the overall funding opportunity requirements and the available budget in making the final funding decisions. A combined score from the two assessment criteria scores will be calculated to aid the funding allocation process. The primary criterion, Research Excellence (RE), will be weighted twice as much as the Capability to Deliver (CtD) criterion. This weighting will be applied by calculating a combined score out of a potential maximum of 9 for each proposal (RE score x 2 + CtD score). Funding will then be allocated by combined score band within individual panels. Where the threshold for funding falls within a score band, proposals of equal quality that are considered fundable by the panel will be allocated funding through a randomised process until the budget is exhausted. For example, where all proposals scoring 9 can be funded, but the number of proposals scoring 8 exceeds the budget, all proposals scoring 8 will be entered into a randomised allocation process.

All applicants will receive scores out of 3 for the two assessment criteria and written feedback. The criteria scores for each proposal will be published on the [NERC outcomes](#) webpage, indicating if the proposal was funded or not funded (anonymised if the latter) and if the proposal was part of the randomised allocation process.

3. Role of the Panel

The primary role of the assessment panel is to review the grant proposals assigned to it by NERC. The assessment panels will receive a completed Je-S proposal form, a three-side Case for Support and, where relevant, a technical assessment or facility form. No other information is provided (CVs, letters of support, justification of resources and outline data management plans were not requirements on submissions to this call). Using this information, all assessment panels are responsible for:

- providing scores for Research Excellence of each proposal presented to them.
- providing scores for Capability to Deliver of each proposal presented to them.
- providing introducer pre-scores and comments before the panel meeting and, where proposals are discussed in detail at panel, a summary of the discussion. Pre-score comments and summaries of the panel discussion 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.
- 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.

We are committed to the [San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment](#). You should not use journal-based metrics, conference rankings and metrics such as the H-index or i10-index when assessing UKRI grants. 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-career investigators.

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.

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. If you are unsure about DORA, please speak to the panel convener or the Panel Chair.

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.

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.

3.1 Role of Introducers

To assist in the assessment process, panel members will be assigned, in advance of the meeting, the role of Introducer for individual proposals. For each proposal, three panel members are nominated as Introducers. **The role of the Introducers is to submit pre-scores and comments prior to the panel meeting (see details in Section 5 below). It is the responsibility of the First Introducer to lead the discussion at panel and provide feedback to proposals that are brought to the assessment panel meeting.** The running order will detail which proposals you have been assigned to as Introducer. Introducers should first check that they do not have any conflicts of interest with the proposals they are introducing (see Section 6 for further guidance).

As well as the proposals they have been allocated to as an Introducer, 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. However, NERC acknowledges that many of the proposals will not be within a panel members' direct expertise.

Proposals allocated to panel members nominated as First Introducer are likely to be close to their main expertise in most cases, but not necessarily their main area of research. For Second and Third Introducers, the proposals should be in their broad area of science.

However, due to the cross-remit nature of the scheme, excluding PI/Co-Is named in the round, availability of Peer Review College members and conflicts of interest, this may not always be the case.

4. Assessment Criteria and Scoring

Based upon the information in proposals, the panel is asked to assign scores to each proposal for **two** assessment criteria: Research Excellence (the primary criterion) and Capability to Deliver.

4.1. Research Excellence criterion

The panel should assess Research Excellence by considering to what extent:

- does the proposed research explore new and exciting areas of environmental science, and involve objectives that are ambitious, adventurous and beyond the state-of-the-art (for example, novel concepts and approaches or development between or across disciplines)?
- does the proposal initiate future paths towards ground-breaking, high-risk, high-reward and innovative scientific discovery or have the potential to lead to advancement of the discipline?
- is the outlined scientific approach feasible, bearing in mind that the proposed research is high risk or high gain?

The streamlined application process may limit detailed process description, and this too should not undermine a proposal.

Upon consideration of this assessment criterion, a score of between 1 and 3 (highest) should be awarded according to the scoring system below.

Score	Research Excellence (Primary Criterion)
3	Outstanding The proposed work is of excellent scientific quality. It is world-leading, at the forefront of the field internationally. It meets outstanding standards in terms of the initiation of ground-breaking, high-risk, high-reward, innovative scientific discovery and/or the development of technology or methodology, to address an important environmental challenge. High priority for funding.
2	Good The proposed work is of high scientific quality (possibly with aspects of excellence). It is internationally competitive, at the forefront of the field nationally. It meets high standards in terms of the initiation of ground-breaking, high-risk, high-reward, innovative scientific discovery, and/or the development of technology or methodology, to address an important environmental challenge. Fundable.
1	Interesting / Not competitive The proposed work has insufficient merit to be considered ground-breaking and innovative and/or is not addressing an important environmental challenge and/or is not considered feasible. Not a priority for funding / not fundable.

A proposal that demonstrates outstanding research 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. Proposals may build directly on prior work, or may take a speculative leap forward, but should be at the forefront of the field. 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. Proposals do not need to be hypotheses driven and may instead focus on an exploratory approach or the development of a new technology or methodology. All of these approaches could demonstrate excellence, so your judgment should not simply be based on which approach has been adopted.

Discovery Science funding can cross remit boundaries and, where this is the case, a co-remit agreement will have been considered. Do not therefore be tempted to lower your score because you think that the research project fails to fit fully within the NERC remit. Best efforts will be taken to secure suitable experts for the panel to ensure such cross-disciplinary proposals can be assessed appropriately.

Excellent research is often to be found at the cutting edge of science, which is inherently risky so we would not consider risk to undermine a proposal if it is in pursuit of ground-breaking new discovery. You should not be afraid of recommending innovative, speculative and adventurous proposals. Certainty of outcome is not an indicator of excellence, but panel members should assess if the approach is feasible.

4.2. Capability to Deliver criterion

The Capability to Deliver document should be a narrative which explains how the team's relevant experience and expertise demonstrates their ability to successfully deliver the proposal (note that proposals can be submitted by solo applicants, in which cases 'team' would refer to the individual applicant). Applicants should draw on the [Royal Society's Résumé for Researchers](#) when completing their Capability to Deliver statement.

The panel should assess Capability to Deliver by considering to what extent:

- has the team made an outstanding contribution to the generation of new understanding and demonstrated the key skills required to do this?
- does the team demonstrate appropriate expertise and the capability to successfully execute the proposed project, including evidence for capacity to support and mentor researchers involved as appropriate?
- does the team demonstrate the capability to contribute to the wider research community (for example, contributions to improving research culture or advocacy for better research integrity)?
- does the team demonstrate the capability to contribute to broader society (for example, through engagement)?

The assessment process will consider applicants' ideas and contribution relative to career stage, acknowledging that not all team members will have evidence against all criteria.

We have not been prescriptive on how much space should be allocated to addressing each

of the questions above, as this will vary depending on the relevant expertise of each team and the focus of the proposed work.

Panel members should bear in mind that it is the team’s capability to deliver the proposal and not the excellence of individual applicants that is being assessed. 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 career researchers, a discipline-hopping proposal, cutting-edge research areas) as long as sufficient evidence of suitable support mechanisms has been provided. Base your assessment on the proposal and not on your previous knowledge of, or the reputations of, the applicants or their host organisations. Please be careful to avoid any unconscious bias in your assessment on the grounds of a protected characteristic, such as age or gender.

Upon consideration of this assessment criterion, a score of between 1 and 3 should be awarded according to the scoring system below.

Score	Capability to Deliver
3	<p>Outstanding</p> <p>The team has made an outstanding contribution to the generation of ground-breaking new ideas, demonstrates visionary expertise and excellent capability to successfully execute the proposed project. The team demonstrates a strong capability to contribute significantly to the wider research community and broader society. The team has illustrated an outstanding capability to deliver ground-breaking research through this project.</p>
2	<p>Good</p> <p>The team has made a contribution to the generation of ground-breaking new ideas, demonstrates appropriate expertise and capability to successfully execute the proposed project. The team demonstrates the capability to contribute to the wider research community and broader society. The team has illustrated the capability to deliver ground-breaking research through this project.</p>
1	<p>Has potential / Not competitive</p> <p>The team has shown insufficient evidence of contributing to the generation of ground-breaking new ideas, appropriate expertise and/or capability to successfully execute the proposed project. The team has not demonstrated the capability to contribute to the wider research community and broader society. The team has insufficient capability to deliver ground-breaking research through this project.</p>

While this criterion should be scored for the overall capability of the team, we provide here additional guidance on how panels’ expectations of a strong capability to deliver could be adjusted to take into account individual team members’ career stage. This list is by no means exhaustive, nor is it expected that every team member will be able to illustrate each example. Please remember that the streamlined application process may limit detailed capability to deliver narratives and full track records for all team members cannot be expected.

Early career	Established career (in addition to those indicated for early career)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> demonstrates an ability to generate new ideas, technologies or methodologies, with examples of previous breakthroughs, the initiation of ground-breaking discovery, or advancements in a relevant field of environmental science research 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> demonstrates a significant contribution to the generation of new ideas, technologies or methodologies, with examples of previous breakthroughs, ground-breaking discovery or advancements that have transformed a field of environmental science research
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> demonstrates an ability to deliver and communicate excellent research, with examples of relevant outputs that are considered of international quality, such as open data sets, publications, conference presentations, policies, patents etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> demonstrates delivery and communication excellent research, with examples of a significant volume of contributions that are of international quality that has widely influenced the research agenda
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> demonstrates a high level of expertise, with examples of the previous application of relevant key skills or training received, or evidence that they are, or have capability to become, a recognised leader in the field. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> demonstrates a very high level of expertise, with examples of contributing to the advancement of techniques or training given, or evidence that they are recognised as a world-leader in the field.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> demonstrates capability to successfully execute the project, with examples, relevant to the needs of the proposed research, of effective project management, team leadership and collaborative relationships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> demonstrates capability to successfully execute the project, with examples of effective project management, visionary leadership in shaping the direction of a team or organisation, or significant collaborative networks
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> understands the importance of the development of team members and demonstrates the capacity and experience for supervision, training, teaching or mentoring, including students and post-doctoral researchers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> demonstrates significant contributions to the support and development of other researchers, recognised as a role model for the community
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> shows evidence of engagement with the wider research community, including contributions to improving research culture and integrity, with examples of peer review commitments, committee memberships, and positions of community responsibility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> shows evidence of significant engagement with the wider research community, with examples of advocacy roles for research culture and integrity, utilising influence to shape broader policy across the research and innovation landscape.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> shows evidence of engagement with broader society and knowledge exchange across sectors, with examples of public outreach, or contributions to policy development, new practices or business innovation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> shows evidence of significant engagement with broader society and knowledge exchange, with examples of public advocacy roles, championship, engagement with high-level policy makers, or business community

5. The Assessment Panel Process

5.1. Submission of pre-scores and comments

All eligible proposals submitted to the Exploring the Frontiers scheme will be assessed by an appropriate assessment panel. Three panel members, who have been nominated as Introducers, will consider the available evidence. Proposals will be available through a link to the secure Extranet site and a running order with introducer assignments will be sent to the panel. **Introducers should first check that they do not have any conflicts of interest with the proposals they have been assigned to** (see Section 6 for guidance).

Due to the high volume of proposals that NERC are expecting for this call, it will not be possible to discuss all the proposals in detail at a panel meeting. **Introducers must submit their pre-scores and comments for both Research Excellence and Capability to Deliver criteria, including notes of any significant concerns regarding project resources, no later than two weeks prior to the panel meeting.** A scoring spreadsheet will be sent to you, to record your pre-scores and comments for the proposals you are introducing. You **must** return your pre-scores and comments on the scoring spreadsheet to exploringfrontiers@nerc.ukri.org, by the set deadline. This is an important step in the process, so if you are unable to meet this deadline, please contact the team as soon as possible.

Realistic and appropriate pre-scores and comments are needed to make the business of the panel manageable, by allowing effort to be focussed on only those proposals that require further discussion. Please do not use decimals when submitting your scores and follow the scoring system for each criterion in section 4. **Proposals that receive unanimous Introducer pre-scores will not be discussed in detail at panel, regardless of the score.** For example, if all Introducers for a proposal give a score of 3 for both criteria, the proposal will receive a proposed combined final score of 9. To ensure due process, the panel will be asked to confirm with the Chair at the start of the panel meeting that they are satisfied with the proposed final scores for proposals with unanimous pre-scores. **These proposals WILL receive your anonymised Introducer comments as feedback, so care should be taken to write appropriate supporting comments for the applicants when submitting your pre-scores.** Further guidance on writing comments and panel feedback can be found in section 5.3. There will a section of the scoring spreadsheet for you to write comments to NERC and the chairs if you have any specific issues that you would like us to know that will not be shared with the applicants. If you have any comments or concerns on a specific proposal before submitting your assessment, then please contact the team at exploringfrontiers@nerc.ukri.org.

5.2. The Panel Meeting

Proposals that do not receive unanimous Introducer pre-scores will be the focus of discussions at the panel meeting, to determine the final scores for the Research Excellence and Capability to Deliver criteria.

A final running order will be prepared with approval by the Chair and Deputy Chair. This will

be sent to you no later than one week prior to the meeting. You should then make any final preparations ahead of the meeting and/or inform NERC and/or the Chairs if you have any comments about the list of grants to be discussed. Before proceeding with the discussion of proposals scheduled for the meeting, the Chair will ask the panel to confirm that they are satisfied with the proposed final scores for the proposals that received unanimous pre-scores. These will be clearly marked in a separate section of the running order, and it is anticipated that these proposals will not be discussed in detail at the meeting. If you have any concerns about any of these proposals before the meeting, please contact the NERC team and Chair in advance.

Introducers need to be prepared to lead the panel discussion and provide further feedback comments on the Panel Feedback Form that reflects the panel discussion. It can be helpful in advance of the meeting to draft comments on the Panel Feedback Form provided for each proposal.

For each proposal, the Chair will invite assigned introducers in turn to discuss their assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the proposal. The discussion will then be opened up to the panel by the chair. The panel will then discuss and agree on final scores for Research Excellence and the Capability to Deliver.

Final scores cannot be changed once assigned so the panel should consider this process carefully.

5.3. Guidance on Introducer Comments and Panel Feedback

Feedback will be provided for every proposal; those that receive unanimous Introducer pre-scores will receive your Introducer comments submitted alongside your pre-scores, while those discussed at the panel meeting will receive written feedback based on the discussions at panel. For the latter, 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**. Other introducers and 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 submitted Introducer comments and the panel feedback constructively; it should not only be a list of strengths and weaknesses. 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. Introducers should ensure that the feedback provided is succinct but 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. If the panel recommends any changes to resources for proposals in the funding frame then Introducers should ensure that this is included on the feedback form (for NERC office only) including full details of why any

changes in resources has been recommended.

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.

6. Conflicts of Interest

NERC maintains a [conflicts of interest policy](#), available at **Annex C**. 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 (exploringfrontiers@nerc.ukri.org), particularly if you are an introducer, 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 meeting whilst discussions are taking place.

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.

7. 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](#).

Annex A

Examples of how this flexible funding could be used include, but are not limited to:

- 12-month project with a large fieldwork element, conducted by a research team consisting of a principal investigator, co-investigator and field assistants (the latter introducing undergraduates to a research career)
- six-month (or longer) project funding a principal investigator, research co-investigator (who helped develop the proposal) and technician to undertake lab-based research
- modelling-based project funding a principal investigator and postdoctoral research associate for nine months (or longer, if a part-time postdoctoral research associate is appointed).

The following examples illustrate how this funding can support scientific excellence whilst meeting diverse needs:

- Dr S takes up their first lectureship, which is two years fixed-term (to cover colleagues' research fellowship success and caring leave). They welcome this funding opportunity as they can bid as the principal investigator for research funding that can be completed during their tenure.
- Their field-based research programme would fund colleagues and field assistants, therefore helping with network development. It would evidence leadership skills and the ability to act as the principal investigator, supporting future employment after the fixed-term post.
- Professor M and their colleague, the researcher co-investigator (who co-develops the proposal), welcome this opportunity as it can flexibly support part-time employment for the researcher co-investigator.
- This researcher co-investigator has recently become a new parent and finds many postdoctoral research opportunities inaccessible, as they have research programmes designed around a full-time appointment.
- Dr A, now living with chronic illness, returns to work part-time after absence due to this illness. They welcome the shorter and streamlined application as it offers a more accessible approach for funding. The opportunity provides a doctoral researcher with experience through a collaboration with Dr A.

Annex B

Panel Feedback Form

This form should be used to provide a description and justification of the 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 Research Excellence (1 – 3)	
Please detail the panel's justification for this score.	
Panel Score Capability to Deliver (1 – 3)	
Please detail the panel's justification for this score.	
Please detail any comments and recommendations made by the panel on the resources etc. (for NERC office only)	
Additional comments. Please add any other comments pertinent to the assessment of this proposal at the panel meeting which have not been included above	

Annex C

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 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 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

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.