Declaration of Interest Guidance for UKRI assessors, including reviewers and panellists

Introduction

UKRI is a publicly funded organisation and is accountable to government and the public for its actions and for the way it conducts its business, which must be undertaken in a way that is transparent and guards against potential conflicts of interest influencing the outcome of decisions.

UKRI defines a conflict of interest as a situation in which an individual’s ability to exercise judgement or act in one role is, could be, or is seen to be impaired or otherwise influenced by their involvement in another role or relationship. Even a perception of competing interests, impaired judgement or undue influence may be damaging to UKRI’s reputation.

The existence of an actual, perceived or potential conflict of interest does not imply wrongdoing or that the assessor is not well-placed to make an impartial assessment. However, as an assessor, it is vital that they are seen to be impartial at all stages of the decision-making process. Any private, personal or commercial interests which might give rise to such a conflict of interest must be recognised, disclosed appropriately and either eliminated or properly managed.

Everybody involved in UKRI decision-making and funding processes must comply with UKRI declaration of interest policy https://www.ukri.org/publications/ukri-declarations-of-interest-policy-and-guidance/ UKRI will support all individuals to ensure compliance of the policy.

How and why do we collect conflict of interest information

Applicants may declare potential conflicts of interest in their application, related to individuals or organisations. UKRI will endeavour to avoid asking these potentially conflicted individuals/organisations to assess that application when feasible and if the request meets UKRI definitions of a conflict as defined in the UKRI Declaration of Interest Policy.

Reporting, recording and managing potential conflicts effectively protects assessors (reviewers and panellists) and helps ensuring a transparent decision-making process.

UKRI acknowledges that individuals working in the same research and innovation field may know each other, and therefore, this does not prevent them from assessing an application. However, as assessors, they must declare any interest which they feel would prevent them giving an unbiased assessment, for UKRI awareness and evaluation.

Once an assessor declares interests, UKRI evaluates the declaration of interests and deem them as actual, perceived or no conflict. If the assessor’s knowledge/ relationship with the application/applicants is such that they feel it would be difficult to be impartial when commenting on the application, then we ask them to decline the invitation to be part of the assessment by selecting “conflict of interest” as the reason why.

For Reviewers:
Some UKRI review forms contain a confidential section on “declaration of interests”, where reviewers need to disclose relevant information (including a N/A if that is the case). If in doubt, we encourage you to discuss your circumstances with a UKRI office administrator managing the assessment process.

If you are unsure how to proceed, please check with the UKRI member of staff that approached you to carry out the review.

For Panellists:
If you are part of a collective decision-making process, such as a panel, a committee or an interview panel, and a conflict of interest has been identified, this can impact your role in the process. It might mean that you have limited access to the application materials related to the conflict, and that you are asked to leave the room when the application is being discussed.

**Examples of conflicts of interest for assessors**

The list below shows examples of conflicts of interest, including but not limited to review and panel stages. The list is not exhaustive; therefore, you must declare any actual or perceived conflict of interest, reflecting on the perception of both yourself and others.

**Personal conflict**
- You are named on the application.
- You have assisted the applicants in preparing the application.
- You are named as a project partner, subcontractor, visiting researcher or have any type of relationship with the application.
- You have written a letter of support for the application.
- You have been approached and agreed to be a member of a committee or board connected with the proposed project, for example an advisory group or steering committee/board.
- You are in close regular collaboration with any individuals named in the application, 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.
- You have a personal, financial or professional relationship with any individuals named in the application.
- You have been any of the applicants’ PhD supervisor, line manager or group leader in the last three years, or the other way around.
- You stand to gain a financial or professional advantage from a particular outcome for an application which you are asked to review.

**Organisational conflicts**
- You are a current/Emeritus/secondment/visiting member at the same/proposed organisation as any individuals named on the application. This includes holding a position on the governance body or an honorary position within the applicants’ current/proposed organisation.
- You belong to an organisation that is a project partner, subcontractor, are a visiting researcher from or to the Organisation.
- You have any type of recognised significant organisational collaboration with the application which would mean that your participation in the assessment would be seen a conflict.
- You are in receipt of personal remuneration in excess of £5,000 per annum from the applicant’s current or proposed organisation.
- Fellowships only: you are at an organisation chosen by the candidate to be the hosting organisation for their fellowship.

**Commercial or financial conflicts**
- You have any commercial or financial/pecuniary interest, for example where you are a member of an organisation that may benefit financially, directly or indirectly, from any decision made.
- You have stocks or shares in a company named in an application.

**How we manage conflicts in our decision-making process**

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These guidelines set out the procedures for managing real or perceived conflicts of interest. The guidelines apply to all individuals involved in any way in UKRI's assessment or funding processes and have been developed in order to protect the integrity of the decision-making process.

Individual panellists, like others who serve the public, are expected to follow the seven principles of public life set out by the Committee on Standards in Public Life (the Nolan Committee).

**Responsibilities for UKRI staff**

- UKRI staff will make all reasonable efforts to identify and record any real or perceived conflict of interest that involve anyone related to our assessment and funding processes.
- UKRI staff will not invite any assessor with a known conflict of interest to be part of our assessment process for that application.
- Depending on the conflict of interest and business needs, UKRI staff will consider introducing measures to manage and minimise the risk potentially raised by the conflict.
- UKRI will give assessors the opportunity to self-identify any potential conflict of interest that might not have been apparent in previous stages of the process. We expect the assessor to identify these to UKRI staff, who will introduce reasonable measures to minimise the risk form this conflict.
- UKRI commits to not sharing application assessment information with assessors that are not involved in the assessment of the application, e.g., reviewer comments will not be shared with conflicted panellists.
- UKRI will manage any conflict that becomes apparent at different stages of the funding process to safeguard the integrity of the assessment. Depending on the nature of the conflict, different measures can be put in place.

**For Reviewers**

- When you are invited to review an application for UKRI, you will receive a summary of the application and the name(s) of the applicant(s). You must declare any known conflict of interest at this stage and select ‘conflict of interest’ as a reason when declining the invitation as a result of a known conflict of interest.
- If you are unsure as to whether you have a conflict of interest, you should contact UKRI to discuss your concerns before deciding to accept or decline a review invitation.
- If you accept an invitation to review and then identify a conflict of interest, you must let UKRI know as soon as possible so the nature of the conflict can be assessed and appropriate measures can be taken.
- If a conflict becomes apparent, either to you or to UKRI, after the submission of a review, UKRI will classify your review as ‘unusable’ and not use it in the decision-making process.

**For Panellists**

- UKRI will ensure that you are not allocated any application as a panel assessor if you have an identified conflict of interest with that application.
- If you have a known conflict of interest, you will not be able to access application assessment information (e.g., reviewer comments for those applications) to protect the integrity of the assessment process.
- If you believe that UKRI has missed a potential conflict of interest, you must communicate this to UKRI staff as soon as possible to ensure that any measure to mitigate or eliminate the risk can be put in place.
- Depending on the nature of the conflict, your role in the assessment process might need to be altered. This can include your withdrawal from the panel meeting for the discussion of the application.
- Notwithstanding any of the above, as a panellist, you may voluntarily choose to withdraw from the discussion of an application at any time if you wish to do so. This may arise for a number of reasons as the discussion of an application develops. The UKRI staff acting as a secretary
to the panel should record in the minutes the point at which an individual ceases to take part in the discussion and leaves the meeting.