UK Research and Innovation

Equality Impact Assessment

Overview of activity

	Response
Name of activity being assessed	Board and Panel Observer Scheme
Council/department/project team	MRC, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion and Research Funding Policy and Delivery teams
Aims and objectives of the activity	The MRC Board and panel observer scheme offers researchers the opportunity to apply to attend and observe an MRC funding decision meeting, to gain a deeper knowledge and understanding of our assessment process. We hope this will in turn enable observers to submit more effective applications with a higher chance of success and to provide more effective expert review. The scheme is open to all but will prioritise under-represented groups from transitioning to independence. The scheme is being updated and expanding from opportunities to observe 4 of MRC's research boards (Infections and Immunity Board, Neurosciences and Mental Health Board, Molecular and Cellular Medicine Board and Population and Systems Medicine Board to include our: Applied global health research board Better methods, better research panel Developmental pathway funding scheme panel Experimental medicine panel Infections and immunity board Molecular and cellular medicine board Neurosciences and mental health board Population and systems medicine board To apply to observe a board or panel meeting, applicants must: • be eligible as an individual for MRC funding • be based at either at an eligible UK research organisation, or for those applying to observe the applied global health research board (AGHRB) be based at a:

	o research organisation in a lower-middle income country (LMIC), with degree-awarding powers recognised by the government in which the organisation is based
	    o research-focused institute based in an LMIC either funded by the government of the country in which the organisation is based or by a not-for-profit organisation
	    o research-focused not-for-profit organisation based in an LMIC with dedicated research capacity
	
	Those not eligible to apply include those who:
	
	• have already achieved independence as an academic/researcher
	• have already established your own research group
	• already hold an MRC award as a project lead (previously principal investigator), or comparable award from any organisation
	• have previously observed an MRC board through the board observer scheme
	• have an application being assessed by the requested board or panel as project lead applicant, co-lead, staff or project partner.
	
	Where a large number of applications are received and applicants have met the eligibility criteria, those from underrepresented groups may lawfully be prioritised to mitigate disadvantage linked to certain characteristics in the wider research and innovation sector and/or address disproportionate levels of participation and disparities in award rates identified in our data.

Who is affected by your policy/funding activity/event?	Those affected include: • Board and Panel members • applicants to the scheme • MRC staff attending board/panel meetings and supporting observers This scheme is open to all researchers transitioning to independence but will prioritise under-represented groups when assigning the limited spaces available to participate as observers. We define

underrepresented groups as including those who have been identified within the government Diversity and Inclusion in STEM Inquiry and our diversity data. Observers listed below will be prioritised:

- disabled or have a long-term condition as defined by the definition of disability under the Equality Act 2010
- from certain minority ethnic backgrounds such as:
  - Bangladeshi, Indian, Pakistani, Chinese or any other Asian background
  - African, Caribbean or any other Black background
  - White and Asian, White and Black African, White and Black Caribbean or any other mixed ethnic background
  - Gypsy, Irish Traveller, Traveller or Roma
  - Other ethnic backgrounds such as Arab or Arab British
- lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer/questioning or identify with another gender identity (LGBTQ+)
- from a disadvantaged socio-economic background
- women

As such however, it is recognised that in prioritising identified under-represented groups when selecting applicants to be allocated spaces, certain characteristics will be disadvantaged in the selection process. These areas are discussed in the relevant sections, with evidence and data provided to demonstrate how those from underrepresented groups may lawfully be prioritised to mitigate disadvantage linked to certain characteristics in the wider research and innovation sector and/or address disproportionate levels of participation and disparities in award rates identified in our data.

When shortlisting, we will also take into account geographical location and organisation to ensure a wide mix of participants are able to benefit from the experience.

Those who have questions about the scheme can contact the RFPD mailbox, this will be cited on the opportunity guidance.

What data and consultation have you used to assess the	Scoping ahead of the opportunity included: • Holding consultation conversations across MRC committees, teams and staff to help further shape the initiative

equality impact of your activity?	- Consultation with the Black in Biomedical Research Advisory Group - Consultation with the Board and Panel Chairs and Deputy Chairs - Discussion with the MRC ED&I Forum - MRC data for under-represented groups – including the data for board and panel recruitment and membership - UKRI Competitive Funding Decisions 2022-23	Tableau Public – published data - Diversity and Inclusion in STEM Inquiry - University of Oxford's Equity and Inclusivity in Research Funding report - Previous consultations, outcomes or lessons learned from similar projects such as the CRUK Reviewer Development Scheme, Trainee Development Scheme and MRC Observer Scheme - Feedback from the attendees to the previous MRC Board Observer Scheme - Previous EIAs both within and outside UKRI - Legal team and Data Protection team

Analysing your impact

In addition to data gathering and consultation, the guidance on protected characteristics should be used to assist in identifying impacts on different groups. Where impact has not been identified in the checklists, general EDI considerations, or where there is impact pertinent to your opportunity or activity, it should be recorded here.

Are there **general or overarching impact on multiple groups**? What actions will you take to increase positive impact, or reduce/mitigate negative impact?	The very nature of the scheme provides significant opportunity for positive impact on researchers from groups identified within the data who are specifically under-represented and face barriers within the system. Within the process itself, MRC will ensure that groups are not negatively impacted through mitigations identified in each characteristic, detailed in the table below. There are also elements of the process explained here which could be beneficial in supporting across a wide range of differing and intersectional characteristics. **General Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Considerations**

MRC's research commissioning processes are designed with fairness in mind. MRC is committed to achieving equality of opportunity for all funding, board/panel and scheme applicants and aims to create an inclusive environment that encourages excellence in research through good equalities practice.

Diversity is one of the core MRC values, and we are working to ensure that the ways in which we fund embrace a diversity of thought, people, geographical locations and ideas. Read about our current initiatives.

Boards and panels
- Whilst board and panel members are appointed first and foremost based on experience, we aim to select diverse boards and panels. Final decisions take into account trying to balance the membership by gender, ethnicity and geography and seek to ensure a diversity of career stage and organisations.
- The membership of boards and panels aims to reflect the community they represent, and gender / ethnicity targets are currently in place.
- All applicants and members are given opportunities to inform staff if they have any additional needs to enable attendance or participation (e.g. reasonable adjustments, flexibility etc.). This could also be issues that come up at any point.
- All board and panel members receive guidance and training as part of the induction which covers good practice in safeguarding decision-making (e.g. fairness, objectivity and bias awareness) and equality, diversity and inclusion.
- Board and panel members are reminded that meetings should be conducted inclusively and equitably, allowing everyone to be recognised and ensuring that everyone feels empowered to speak and participate meaningfully.

Funding application assessment process
- MRC endeavours to ensure a diverse pool of reviewers are engaged within the process through its expert reviewer selectors.
- Expert reviewers are required to evidence their views and scores.
- MRC staff conduct usability checks on all review comments and where there is evidence of bias, or a reviewer has failed to provide evidence for their scores, the review will be considered 'unusable'.

- Boards and panels are instructed to assess the application in front of them and not to 'read between the lines' or give the benefit of the doubt based on the reputation of the individual or team, as this would be a form of confirmation bias.
- It is the role of board and panel members to moderate and assess the quality of expert review to agree final scores for each application.
- For each application, three board or panel introducers are appointed who formally moderate and score the application with all board or panel members then asked to participate in discussions to ensure that an open and transparent assessment process is undertaken, and a diverse range of views is represented.

Safeguarding decision-making and bias mitigation
- Staff and board/panel members play a pivotal role in managing bias in meetings and in creating optimal conditions for fair and objective decision making.
- Guidance on good decision making is provided for all new board and members upon their induction into their board or panel and the principles are reinforced at the start of each meeting.
- All board and panel members receive a "Guide for Board/Panel Members to Managing Bias in Peer Review" which should be read in conjunction with the guidance on good decision-making.
- Unconscious bias briefings are held at the start of each meeting round.
- All MRC staff receive Active Bystander Training.
- MRC staff work closely with the board and panel chair(s) to agree approaches that are designed to minimise opportunities for bias and improve transparency of the decision-making process. This includes managing environmental conditions, such as providing appropriate breaks.
- Board and panel members, MRC staff and observers are empowered to constructively challenge potential bias where they identify it.
- Board and panel members are bound by the UKRI Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Policy. All members should ensure that they avoid any bias in the assessment of applications because of the protected characteristics of age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race (which includes colour, nationality and ethnic or national origins), religion or belief, sex or sexual orientation or because of any other relevant factor. Comments in writing and during meeting discussion must not contravene this policy.

	Participation
	• Travel and subsistence and additional child-care costs for attendance at meetings can be reclaimed in accordance with the <u>UKRI Travel and Subsistence Policy</u>
	• Approximately 30-50% of meetings will be conducted virtually, and most with hybrid options, enabling broader participation for example from those with certain disabilities or parental and caring responsibilities.
	• Observers can select a first and second option and state their preference to attend in person or virtually.
	• Observers will be supported to participate flexibly where they need to in a way that meets their personal circumstances.
	• Where any activities involve in-person events, the <u>EDI event planning checklist</u> will be used to ensure impacts are considered across diverse characteristics (e.g. in relation to accessibility for disability etc.).
	• Observers will be asked to provide feedback after attending a board/panel meeting and adjustments can be made to the programme during the trial as needed.

Continued below…

UK Research and Innovation

Protected characteristics

Protected characteristic	Positive impact or opportunity to benefit Leave blank if there is no impact or unknown	Negative impact	Please explain the impact including details of any evidence/data used	Detail actions taken/ that will be taken to increase positive or reduce negative impact (or why action is not possible). Detail how you plan to measure the relevant outcomes and outputs of your activity.
Age	☒	☒	**Positive** Age will not be considered as part of the eligibility criteria, so applicants of any age are welcome to apply. The scheme allows for researchers with less experience writing grant application, and some at a slightly earlier career stage to gain understanding of the assessment process and potentially be more competitive when applying for funding. **Negative** There could be potential bias against an observer due to their perceived or actual age and assumptions around experience and status.	See General Equality and Diversity Considerations above.
Disability	☒	☒	**Positive** MRC has very limited data for disability awarding rate: UKRI Competitive Funding	See General Equality and Diversity Considerations above.

				Decisions 2022-23 | Tableau Public and it is often not disclosed. Research in the reports reviewed shows that disabled people are under-represented within research funding and across scientific research and innovation careers more broadly and face additional barriers to achieving success within academic pathways. Part of the ambition within our equality, diversity and inclusion work is to ensure that our funding assessment process is accessible and inclusive of disabled people. The scheme will provide us with better understanding of some of the issues faced by disabled researchers through feedback, and we will make adjustments where needed. The scheme could potentially lead to more high-quality applications from disabled individuals and contribute towards higher award rates. **Negative** There could be potential discrimination against an observer due to their perceived or actual disability. Observers who are neuro-diverse may experience difficulties with concentration.	All participants will have the opportunity to discuss any reasonable adjustments they may need to be able to fully participate as an observer (both in person and virtually). Website promotion will be accessible and compatible with the range of specialist hardware and software as per UKRI standard (Web Content Accessibility Guidelines). Generally, PDF documents are not considered to be accessible and will not be the only available format on the website. Zoom meeting length considered for training and feedback sessions shortened if needed. Observers will be encouraged to take breaks where needed. Closed captions will be utilised in Zoom meetings for those with hearing impairments. Panel documents will be provided in accessible formats. Consider (on a case-by-case basis) paying costs towards carers or support workers to attend alongside the participant, where this is required and not covered by the Individual's own employment contract.

| | | | and focus during panel assessments, which can be fast-paced over the day.

Meetings rooms may not be accessible enough for disabled individuals attending board or panel meetings in person. | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Gender reassignment (Trans identity) | ☒ | ☒ | Data is not held within UKRI in relation to gender reassignment. However, research in the reports reviewed shows that LGBTQ+ people are under-represented within research funding and across scientific research and innovation careers more broadly, and face additional barriers to achieving success within academic pathways.

Positive
Trans people are encouraged to apply as part of eligibility to participate in the scheme. This could contribute towards more representation of trans individuals within our research funding.

Impact on reviewing. We are potentially able to reach these groups through the scheme and encourage them to review.

Negative
There could be potential discrimination against an observer due to their perceived or actual gender reassignment. | See General Equality and Diversity Considerations above.

Gender-neutral language will be utilised across all documentation.

Effort will be made to secure venues with gender-neutral toilet options.

Applicants will be invited to include pronouns and 'Mx' or other titles in their applications, should they wish. |

			Observers could be misgendered throughout their participation.

Venues for in-person meetings may not have gender-neutral toilets. | |
| Marriage or civil partnership | ☐ | ☐ | N/A | |
| Pregnancy and maternity/ paternity | ☒ | ☒ | **Positive**
Advert for the scheme clearly states that those on maternity leave or career break can apply. MRC flexible working practices – UKRI

Negative
Childcare responsibilities may be a barrier to attending briefings and board or panel meetings.

Participation in the observers' scheme may be affected by maternity, paternity or parental leave and leave related to surrogacy and adoption.

Individuals may not be able to travel to in-person meetings due to stage of pregnancy and symptoms. | See General Equality and Diversity Considerations above.

Board/panel meeting dates are publicised in advance to allow potential attendees to make arrangements to attend.

Potential for attendees to attend virtually if they cannot attend in person due to caring responsibilities/pregnancy.

Participation will be flexible to accommodate maternity and paternity leave. Child-care costs for attendance at meetings can be reclaimed in accordance with the UKRI Travel and Subsistence Policy

Opportunity closing date falls outside UK school summer holidays and term breaks.

Effort will be made to ensure in-person venues have facilities to accommodate |

					breastfeeding and baby changing, or rooms are booked to accommodate.
Race	☒	☒	[UKRI diversity data](#) for applicants and awardees shows that inequalities exist in awarding rates between applicants who identify as White (higher success rates) compared to applicants who identify as being from a minority ethnic group (lower success rates). This is particularly the case for Black applicants. When the data for applications from ethnic minority researchers is broken down into those from different ethnic groups most applications are from the Asian ethnic group, then mixed ethnic group, with the smallest proportion from the black ethnic group. Numbers of applicants for some groups are so small, that it is not possible to identify trends and therefore more difficult to address. Minority ethnic researchers are also under-represented within MRC board and panel membership, and this also varies by individual boards and panels. As such, an ethnicity target of 24% was set to improve representation across all boards and panels. Research in the reports reviewed shows that people from minority ethnic groups are under-represented within research funding and across scientific research and innovation careers more		See General Equality and Diversity Considerations above. Black in Biomedical Research Advisory Group (BBRAG) have fed into the development of the scheme and inclusive language.

broadly and face additional barriers to achieving success within academic pathways.

Positive
People from minority ethnic groups are encouraged to apply as part of prioritisation criteria for this scheme.

Potential to impact more applications and awards for ethnic minority groups.

Through the scheme more individuals from minority ethnic groups will be encouraged to review applications, recognising the importance of reviews to the overall funding process.

Negative
There could be potential discrimination against an observer due to their perceived or actual race/ethnicity.

Eligibility criteria within the scheme focused on diversity characteristics could be considered discriminatory towards people who identify as White as spaces for minority ethnic groups will be prioritised. However, the data provided indicates that there is a clear under-representation and disadvantage faced by people from minority ethnic groups. Therefore, the scheme is being launched as a form of positive action under the Equality Act. Additionally, White people who have

			intersectional characteristics which form part of the criteria, will also be prioritised, accordingly.	
Religion or belief	☐	☒	Data is not held within UKRI or MRC in relation to religion or belief. Religion or belief will not be considered as part of the eligibility criteria, so applicants of any religion or belief are welcome to apply. **Negative** Religious holidays or practices may present a barrier to attending briefings and meetings. There could be potential discrimination against an observer due to their perceived or actual religion or belief.	See General Equality and Diversity Considerations above. Board/panel meeting dates are publicised in advance to allow potential attendees to make arrangements/ decide if they can attend. Potential for attendees to attend virtually if they cannot travel before/ after the meeting due to religious holidays or practices. Effort will be made to secure venues with private or designated space within for people to use for short periods, for example, for religious observance, or rooms booked to support this.
Sexual orientation	☒	☒	Data is not held within UKRI or MRC in relation to sexual orientation. However, research in the reports reviewed shows that LGBTQ+ people are under-represented within research funding and across scientific research and innovation careers more broadly and face additional barriers to achieving success within academic pathways. **Positive**	See General Equality and Diversity Considerations above.

			LGBTQ+ people are encouraged to apply as part of eligibility to participate in the scheme. This could contribute towards more representation of LGBTQ+ individuals on MRC boards and panels. **Negative** There could be potential discrimination against an observer due to their perceived or actual sexual orientation.	
Sex (gender)	☒	☒	[UKRI diversity data](#) for applicants and awardees shows that overall representation of female grant holders is below benchmark for the wider population for research grant applicants but above benchmark for fellowships. Women also tend to receive lower award amounts than men. Research in the reports reviewed shows that women are under-represented within research funding and across scientific research and innovation careers more broadly, and face additional barriers to achieving success within academic pathways. **Positive** Women are encouraged to apply as part of prioritisation criteria of the scheme. This could contribute towards more representation of women applying for funding.	See General Equality and Diversity Considerations above.

| | | | Potential impact on reviewers – the scheme could lead to more female reviewers. Through the scheme they will be encouraged to review applications.

Negative
There could be potential discrimination against an observer due to their sex.

Eligibility criteria within the scheme focused on diversity characteristics could be considered discriminatory towards people who identify as men as spaces for women will be prioritised. However, the data provided indicates that there is a clear under-representation and disadvantage faced by women. Therefore, the scheme is being launched as a form of positive action under the Equality Act. Additionally, men who have intersectional characteristics which form part of the criteria, will also be prioritised, accordingly. | |

Additional characteristics

Additional characteristics	Positive impact or opportunity to benefit	Negative impact	Please explain the impact including details of any evidence/data used	Detail actions taken/ that will be taken to increase positive or reduce negative impact (or why action is not possible).
	Leave blank if there is no impact or unknown			

Geographical location and place (consider UK and international offices)	☒	☒	**Positive** Geographical location and place will be taken into account when selecting applicants, to ensure we are offering the opportunity to researchers from a wide range of areas, particularly outside of the Greater South-East. **Negative** Attending in-person meetings could prove difficult for individuals based far away from the chosen venue.	Where possible we will offer the option to virtually attend board and panel meetings. We will also consider organisation type to ensure we're offering equal opportunity across research organisations.
Socio-economic status	☒	☒	Data is not held within UKRI or MRC in relation to socio-economic status or background. However, research in the reports reviewed shows that people from lower socio-economic backgrounds are under-represented within research funding and across scientific research and innovation careers more broadly and face additional barriers to achieving success within academic pathways. **Positive** People from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds are encouraged to apply as part of eligibility to participate in the scheme. This could contribute towards	See General Equality and Diversity Considerations above.

			more representation of people from lower socio-economic with MRC funding. Funding will be provided to enable observers to travel to in-person meetings. **Negative** There could be potential bias against an observer due to their socio-economic background.	
Education background	☒	☒	**Positive** Applicants must be at a certain phase in their career; however, a PhD is not necessarily required. Equivalent industry or technical experience will also be acceptable, thereby opening up the opportunity to a broader range of individuals. **Negative** There could be potential bias against an observer due to their educational background.	See General Equality and Diversity Considerations above.
Parent/guardian responsibilities	☒	☒	**Positive** Flexibility is built into the scheme to help support differing needs of individuals. **Negative** Parent/guardian responsibilities may be a barrier to attending events and meetings.	See General Equality and Diversity Considerations above. Board/panel meeting dates are publicised in advance to allow potential attendees to make arrangements to attend.

			Completion of observer programme may be affected by parental leave carer/ parent guardian responsibilities.	Potential for attendees to attend virtually if they cannot attend in person due to parent/guardian responsibilities.
Carer/parent carer responsibilities	☒	☒	**Positive** Flexibility is built into the scheme to help support differing needs of individuals. **Negative** Carer/ parent carer responsibilities may be a barrier to attending events and meetings. Participation in the observers' scheme may be affected by leave carer/parent carer responsibilities.	See General Equality and Diversity Considerations above. Board/panel meeting dates are publicised in advance to allow potential attendees to make arrangements to attend. Potential for attendees to attend virtually if they cannot attend in person due to parent/guardian responsibilities.
Political opinion (Northern Ireland only)	☐	☐	N/A	
Institution type	☒	☐	**Positive** Institution type will be taken into consideration when short-listing to ensure we are giving opportunities across participants from different institutions, e.g. not only selecting individuals from Russell Group universities.	

Evaluation

Final Decision:	Select the relevant box	Include any explanation / justification required
1. No negative or positive impact identified; therefore, activity will **proceed**.	☐	
2. **Adapt or change** the activity in a way which you think will eliminate negative impact or promote equality.	☐	
3. **Stop** the activity because the evidence shows bias or negative impact towards one or more groups.	☐	
4. Barriers and impact identified, however having considered all available options carefully, there appear to be no other proportionate ways to achieve the activity (e.g. in **extreme cases** or where **positive action** is taken). Therefore, you are going to **proceed with caution** with this activity knowing that it may favour some people less than others, providing justification for this decision.	☒	The scheme has been justified based on the evidence provided and actions put in place to mitigate negative impacts described in the previous sections.

Continued below…

Review and sign off

What are the arrangements for monitoring and reviewing the impact of your activity?	Regular feedback and input will be sought from observers, board and panel members, and MRC staff. After individuals have completed the scheme, we will continue to track alumni career progression and seek feedback to see if participants have gone onto receive funding, from MRC or elsewhere. The EIA will be reviewed as part of an annual evaluation of the scheme, to ensure it is adding value and can continue to be justified based on current data.
Next review date:	Prior to launch of second round in January 2025

Will this EIA be published? * Yes/Not required	Yes (with sensitive data redacted)
Point of contact:	Amy Waite/ Rosie Timbrell/ Sarah Goler-Solecki
Responsible owner:	Amy Waite
Accountable owner:	Sarah Collinge
Signed off by (name and date):	**Sarah Collinge 30/01/2024**

Change log

Name	Date	Version	Change
		1	E.g. Based on input received from consultation groups at the **business case** stage, added actions under the gender section
		2	E.g. Based on input received from x at the **announcement of opportunity** stage, added/removed/edited x
		3	E.g. Based on input received from x at the **investment authorisation** stage, added/removed/edited x

Continued below…

Action plan

Use the table below to define the actions you intend to take (or have taken) to address the indications of negative impact you have identified or to promote equality. Actions should be SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, Time-bound).

Action	Deadline	Owner	How will it be monitored?	What is/will be the impact/outcome?