



BBSRC Pioneer Awards 2025/26: discovery bioscience research

Distributed Peer Review – Rules and Guidelines

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1 Introduction

The independent [review of research bureaucracy](#) 2022 recommended that funders should consider innovative models of application assessment to improve and simplify processes. Subsequently, the [review of peer review 2023](#) study specifically explored the use and effectiveness of peer review mechanisms in grant-making processes, recommending that funders use a range of review interventions in order to vary their assessment processes, and that application, review, and decision-making processes should be tailored for each scheme.

Distributed peer review (DPR) is one such review intervention. In DPR, applicants are also assessors and review other proposals submitted to the same funding opportunity. By submitting a proposal, applicants agree to act as reviewers and to have their proposal reviewed by their peers. This innovative approach has produced positive results so far, including in the UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) [Metascience AI early career fellowships](#) call, reviewed in the [UK Metascience Unit: A Year in Metascience](#) report.

DPR has the potential to democratise the peer review process by improving the speed and quality of feedback available to applicants, as well as increasing the consistency and



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expertise of reviews. With DPR a larger pool of reviewers is available, and each proposal is reviewed a greater number of times. DPR lessens the administrative burden on external peer reviewers and shortens the review process. Because this is a pilot for BBSRC we will also be running expert panel assessment alongside DPR to safeguard the process and the quality of the final funding decisions.

1.1 Why is BBSRC trialling DPR in the BBSRC Pioneer Awards 2025/26

The BBSRC Pioneer Awards: discovery bioscience research scheme aims to support excellent, original, and transformative early-stage research with the potential to transform our fundamental understanding of living systems. To achieve this, the scheme seeks to lower perceived barriers in peer review to exploration of novel avenues, by encouraging greater tolerance for risk and reducing the expectation for preliminary data.

Part of BBSRC's strategic objectives is to deliver new discoveries from excellent curiosity-led research and empower researchers to be bold and creative. Via this scheme we wish to support high-quality research to foster scientific excellence and make conceptual advances that unlock the transformative power of discovery. Due to the nature of this call, we believe applicants can collectively play a valuable contribution in helping us to identify the most promising ideas submitted to the opportunity.

Traditional peer review places a considerable burden on researchers and funders, and it is considered prudent to distribute this burden among a larger set of people who are already deeply familiar with the opportunity's scope and criteria. Using DPR could provide greater signal during the preliminary assessment of full applications to aid prioritisation of the best applications (with potentially over six reviews per proposal versus two or three if reliant just on panel members). There are also potential advantages in terms of increased transparency and diversity of perspectives within the process.

The DPR process and outcomes will be evaluated by the UK Metascience Unit. Applicants will be approached for feedback following the process.

2 Rules and guidelines for applicants

2.1 General

All applications to the BBSRC Pioneer Awards 2025/26 will undergo DPR. DPR will be used for the preliminary assessment of the applications and the prioritisation of the subset of proposals (90-120) that will be moved to the full assessment stage.

By submitting an application, you accept the following terms and conditions:

- the project lead (PL) in each application will be expected to conduct the DPR



- all PLs will receive a maximum of six to eight applications to review
- for each review you will be expected to carefully read **only the summary and vision sections** of each application assigned to you and provide a score as well as a short justification for your score
- to assist with matching applications to assessors, during the full application stage we are asking PLs to describe their area(s) of expertise using keywords
- failing to assess all assigned proposals by the deadline will lead to the automatic rejection of the proposal submitted by the given PL
- if a PL's set of reviews are found to be of consistently poor quality (for example, they do not justify the overall scores given), their own application may not proceed

Commented [LU1]: Important that this is really clear (in bold/ highlighted?)

A common concern with DPR is that applicants may give tactically lower scores, in order to improve their own relative position. BBSRC would like to reassure applicants that protections are in place to ensure that it is extremely difficult for applicants to 'game' the system. For example:

- 1 PLs will be assigned to different pools from the applicants they review. As a result, they are not 'competing' against the applicants whose proposals they review.
- 2 No two applicants from the same institution will receive each other's application.
- 3 To mitigate against collusion, we will use an allocation algorithm that avoids having any reciprocal pairs/triads within which PLs review one another.

BBSRC will also use independent moderators to safeguard the assessment of this funding opportunity. If a PL does attempt to 'game' the overall scoring system (for example, by giving consistently low scores without clear justification), their own application may not proceed. Where applications receive markedly divergent reviewer scores, the independent moderators will advise on any reviews that should be excluded from the assessment process.

2.2 Overview of the BBSRC Pioneer Awards 2025/26 application process

The BBSRC Pioneer Awards 2025/26 application process is comprised of two mandatory stages: a registration stage and a full application stage.

The aim of the registration stage is to ensure proposals are appropriately targeted to this funding opportunity and to provide an early indication of the level of demand, team composition, and research areas. PLs must register their interest in the funding opportunity by completing a short registration on the UKRI Funding Service before 19 November 2025 4:00pm UK time. If you do not submit a registration, you will not be able to apply for this opportunity.



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Full applications are open only to applicants who have completed a registration. By applying for this scheme, you are consenting to take part in a trial of DPR. Please do not apply for this opportunity if you would prefer not to take part in the DPR process.

As the PL, you are responsible to conduct the preliminary assessment of six to eight applications by reviewing the summary and vision sections of your peers' applications. To assist with matching applications to reviewers, during the full application stage you will have to describe your area(s) of expertise using up to five keywords.

2.3 Overview of the BBSRC Pioneer Awards 2025/26 assessment process

The BBSRC Pioneer Awards 2025/26 assessment process is comprised of the following stages:

Examination of registrations by BBSRC

All registrations will be examined by BBSRC to ensure they meet the eligibility criteria, remit and scope of the funding opportunity. If your registration is outside the scope, you will be advised by email, and we will suggest that you do not proceed in submitting a full application. We aim to notify you of this within two weeks from the closing date for registrations.

Examination of applications by BBSRC

All full applications will also be examined by BBSRC to ensure they meet the eligibility criteria, remit and scope of the funding opportunity. If your full application is outside the scope, you will be advised by email, and we will not assess your application further. We aim to notify you of this around six weeks after the closing date.

Preliminary assessment of applications via DPR

Preliminary assessment of full applications will be conducted via DPR and will focus only on the summary and vision sections. Each application will receive six to eight reviews, each consisting of a score and a brief justification for that score, expected to be at least one paragraph. To safeguard the process at least one expert panel member will be assigned to each application as well, ensuring a fully independent view on each proposal. The aim of the preliminary assessment is to prioritise a subset of the most promising ideas (90-120) for full assessment. This will keep the full assessment stage at a manageable level and retain robust assessment of the highest potential proposals.

We aim to notify you whether your application has been prioritised for full assessment approximately two weeks after the end of the preliminary assessment period. If your application is not prioritised, you will receive the scores and unedited score justifications from the DPR in due course. Since the DPR scores and justifications will not be shared with the expert panels and do not constitute full reviews, there will be no applicant



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response stage. As a result, applications not prioritised for full assessment will not be subject to BBSRC's [resubmission policy](#).

Full assessment of applications by expert panels

Full assessment will be conducted solely by expert panels who will assess all sections of the prioritised applications and score them independently. No applicants will be involved in the expert panels.

We will ask the expert panels to rank applications using a tiered approach, or where not practical to do so, rank them against one another in order to make a funding recommendation. We aim to complete the full assessment process within six months from the closing date for full applications.

2.4 Anonymisation

Single-anonymous DPR ensures applicants will not know who is reviewing their application. Applications will be divided into two groups with assessors allocated (using a ring allocation method) from the other group to ensure that their own relative position is unaffected by the scores they give someone else.

3 UKRI Funding Service

DPR will be performed using the UKRI Funding Service, our online funding application system. When you are invited to review your allocated applications, you will receive email notifications from UKRI. The email will contain:

- a summary of the application
- details of the applicant(s) involved so you can identify any [conflicts of interests](#)
- a 'respond now' button which you will need to use to set up your account on the Funding Service
- the button to respond will take you to the UKRI Funding Service to accept (or decline) the invitation

You do not need to sign in or create an account to accept reviews. You can accept reviews through the button in the invitation email. Once you accept an invitation to review, you can either:

- start your review immediately
- come back to the UKRI Funding Service later to start your review

For more information please read [How reviewers use the UKRI Funding Service](#).

4.1 General

By submitting an application, you have agreed that you will carefully read the summary and vision sections of six to eight applications submitted by your peers, score them and provide a short justification for your score, expected to be at least a paragraph. During the full application stage, you will be asked to declare your area(s) of expertise using keywords. We will use this information to assist assigning applications to reviewers. We aim for the majority of applications assigned to you to be broadly within your expertise; however, we may ask you to assess applications outside of your immediate area of expertise when required. Please note that your role as reviewers at the preliminary assessment stage is as generalists, since we ask that you only assess the summary and vision sections on the research to be undertaken.

You will have 3 weeks to complete your reviews, i.e. score all applications assigned to you and submit your short justification for each score you have provided. Failing to complete your assigned reviews on time will lead to the automatic rejection of the proposal in which you are the applicant. If your set of reviews are found to be of consistently poor quality (for example, they do not justify the overall scores given), your own application may not proceed.

Be reassured that we will consider obvious conflicts of interest when matching proposals to reviewers. During the initial phase of the DPR you will also have the option to declare conflicts of interest. Note that you should restrict yourself to those where you feel you are not in a position to express an objective opinion. Conflict flagging must not be used to reduce the number of reviews you have to deliver by the given deadline. In instances where a conflict has been identified, BBSRC will likely reassign applications to you.

During the whole review process, you are expected to behave ethically. This covers confidentiality matters but also the brief justification you will be providing for each of the applications you are assigned. Any attempts to 'game' the system i.e. by providing consistently low scores without justification will lead to the rejection of the application in which you are the applicant.

As a reviewer, you are expected to provide a short justification for each score you are giving. In doing this, keep in mind that your comments will be passed unedited to the applicants. As such please provide constructive feedback, like you would like to receive, using appropriate, factual, and non-offensive language. UKRI will take seriously possible cases of offensive and inappropriate language used by the reviewers. As a reviewer, you



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must provide your feedback in a completely anonymous way. The phrasing must be neutral and must not disclose, directly or indirectly, your identity.

The UKRI Funding Service does not currently allow the anonymisation of applications. During the review you should be objective and focus on the strengths and weaknesses of the proposal. It is important to acknowledge that we all carry inherent biases shaped by our experiences, backgrounds, and environments. All individuals involved in decision-making processes are encouraged to actively reflect on their own potential biases. Recognising and reflecting on these biases is essential to fostering fair, inclusive, and evidence-based decision-making.

The use of generative models (ChatGPT, CoPilot, etc.) in the preparation of reviews is not permitted in view of the confidentiality of the review process. Documents provided for review are confidential and may not be used as input for generative models. Please refer to the UKRI policy on the [use of generative AI in application assessment](#) and the penalties of research misconduct.

Important note on confidentiality

As a reviewer you will have access to information which is covered by intellectual property. None of that information can be disseminated, copied, or plagiarised. Should you have downloaded or printed the proposals which were assigned to you, you must remove/destroy them at the end of the review once the process is completed. UKRI will take violations of the non-disclosure agreement seriously. For further information please refer to the UKRI peer review code of practice, under reviewer protocols in the [UKRI Funding Service terms of use](#).

4.2 Application review

Your Funding Service account will list your allocated reviews and the deadlines for these. Before you start a new review, you will be asked to read and confirm that you accept the reviewer protocols, as described in the [UKRI Funding Service terms of use](#). These are the rules you must follow when carrying out your review.

You can use the Funding Service to:

- read the full applications online in your browser
- see the questions and assessment criteria for each application section
- open and download any attachments uploaded by the applicants
- view the full application as a PDF to read offline or print out

Assessment areas

The preliminary assessment of full applications will only focus on:



- Full application summary
- Vision

You are only expected to read and review the summary and vision sections of the applications that have been assigned to you. The UKRI Funding Service will allow you to access the full application, but there is no expectation for you to read beyond the summary and vision sections, nor to consider information from other parts of the application when giving your score or writing your short justification.

Scoring

After carefully reading the summary and vision sections, you will need to score each application from 1 (poor) to 6 (exceptional). The scoring range definitions are as follows:

- 6 Exceptional:** the application is outstanding. It addresses all questions and criteria of the assessment areas and meets them to an exceptional level.
- 5 Excellent:** the application is very high quality. It addresses most of the questions and criteria of the assessment areas and meets them to an excellent level. There are very minor weaknesses.
- 4 Very good:** the application demonstrates considerable quality. It meets most of the questions and criteria of the assessment areas to a high level. There are minor weaknesses.
- 3 Good:** the application is of good quality. It meets most of the questions and criteria of the assessment areas to an acceptable level, but not across all aspects of the proposed activities. There are weaknesses.
- 2 Weak:** the application is not sufficiently competitive. It meets some of the questions and criteria of the assessment areas to an adequate level. There are, however, significant weaknesses.
- 1 Poor:** the application is flawed or of unsuitable quality for funding. It does not meet the questions and criteria of the assessment areas to an adequate level.

You can locate details of both assessment areas, including questions and criteria, in the 'How to apply' section in the funding opportunity webpage.

There is guidance in the funding service to help you decide the score and write a good score justification.

Write and submit your score justification

We expect you to provide a short justification for the score you have given to each application. This should be at least a paragraph in length and should provide clear reasons for the score you gave. To provide your justification you can either:



- write directly in the text box in the Funding Service – you can save your unfinished justification to come back to later
- use an alternative writing tool such as Word to write your justification and then copy it into the text box

You will need to structure each of your justifications using the two assessment areas as subheadings (i.e. summary and vision). Consider that the main purpose of your feedback is to describe the strengths and weaknesses of applications in a constructive manner and to explain the score you gave. Remember that your feedback will be passed on to the candidates unedited and that you are solely responsible for the content and integrity of your comments. In this process, it greatly helps keeping in mind that you should provide feedback of the same quality you are expecting from your peers.

You can preview and check reviews before submitting them. When each review is finished, submit it to UKRI. Please note that once submitted, reviews cannot be edited.

The following points should help you to write good score justifications:

- Familiarise yourself with the specified assessment areas and scoring system.
- Provide brief comments and recommendations that are consistent with, justify, and explain your scores.
- Ensure your comments are comprehensive but concise.
- Be objective and as specific as possible when commenting on the proposal. Avoid generic statements that could apply to most proposals.
- You do not need to summarise the proposal: the applicants know it very well. If useful, start with a brief outline of the application.
- Clearly identify the major strengths and weaknesses of the application in a constructive manner, to help the applicant(s) understand which aspects of their proposal are strong, and which could be improved.
- Take care to ensure that the strengths and weaknesses you identify do not contradict each other.
- Do not ask questions: this is not an iterative process. If the question stems from a weakness, state the weakness explicitly.
- All score justifications should be impersonal, critiquing the proposal and not the applicant(s). For example, do not write "The applicant(s) did not [...].", but instead write "The proposal did not [...]."
- Write in plain English, avoiding jargon.
- Always use gender neutral language.
- Use complete sentences when writing your score justifications. Try to use correct grammar, spelling, and punctuation.



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- Do not use inappropriate, offensive, sarcastic and/or insulting language, even if you think a proposal could be greatly improved.
- Once you have completed your assessments, re-read your comments as if you were the recipient. If they do not sound useful and/or constructive, edit them.
- Check that the strengths and weaknesses identified are consistent with the assigned grade. Definitely avoid cases in which you do not list any weakness but give a poor grade.

4.3 Decision making

Applications will be ranked based on the average of their overall scores from the DPR. This preliminary ranking of applications will determine the subset (90-120) that will be prioritised for full assessment by expert panels.

The expert panels will assess all sections of the prioritised applications independently against the assessment criteria, making an evidence-based judgement and scoring each application based on their expertise. The panels will then discuss and agree a consensus score for each application. We will use a tiered approach to make decisions, using assessment tools such as ranking and partial randomisation. For more information, please look at the 'prioritising applications for funding' section, under the 'how we will assess your application' chapter in the funding webpage. BBSRC will make the final funding decisions, and we reserve the right to take a portfolio approach to ensure disciplinary coverage.