Arts and Humanities Research Council

AHRC Peer Review College

Review Guide

Contents

Version Control

We will record the latest changes to the Review Guide here. Please ensure you are referring to the most up-to-date version.

Version	Date	Change(s)
1.0	8 September 2025	Old guidance overhauled and combined into Review Guide.
1.1	22 October 2025	Broken website links fixed

Introduction

This guidance is to help you, as an expert reviewer, to prepare for completing a review. You are also welcome to get in touch with the AHRC contact for your review if you have any questions you wish to raise at operations@ahrc.ukri.org.

The review process takes place on the UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) Funding Service platform. Details of how to access the system will be provided within your review invitation email. Additional details will be sent to you by AHRC staff following on from your initial system-generated invitation.

Please add the Funding Service automated email address noresponse@funding-service.ukri.org to your recognised senders to avoid system-generated emails going into your spam folder.

You can also find UKRI guidance for reviewers on the website, including further information on reviewing in the Funding Service.

Please note: throughout 2023 to 2025, UKRI is transitioning grant systems from Je-S to the UKRI Funding Service and as such, you will currently be required to use both systems. We would therefore kindly ask you to please ensure that your Je-S account is still kept up to date.

Purpose of Expert Reviews

Your role as a reviewer is to provide informed reviews of applications submitted to AHRC.

In a single panel meeting, it is impossible to achieve coverage of the full range of subjects and the wide diversity of applications submitted to AHRC. Therefore, we use expert reviews as specialist advice. Your reviews should provide an objective analysis of the applications.

When framing applications for expert review, applicants are asked to address a broad group of peers and laypeople.

Review Requests

When you receive a request to review, you can find the deadline within your invitation email: this is usually 21 days (or 15 working days) from the date of invitation. We kindly ask that you please let us know as soon as possible whether you are able to complete the review or not, so that we have sufficient time to approach alternative reviewers if needed.

If you would like to complete the review, but would be unable to comment within the indicated timeframe, please do reach out to us. We are happy to discuss suitable extensions and always

try to be as flexible as we can, whilst also trying to maintain an efficient process for our applicants.

Main Stages of the Review Process

The assessment process for the majority of AHRC Applicant-led schemes is as follows:

Stage 1

Applications are considered by two or more reviewers with expertise in the subject area, to ensure full coverage against the assessment criteria.

Stage 2

If an application receives two or more reviews with an unsupportive score (1 to 3), the application will be rejected and will not proceed to the next stage (meaning the Project Lead will not be given the opportunity to respond to reviewer comments).

However, if an application receives two or more reviews with a supportive score, depending on the funding opportunity, the application will proceed to the next stage. For Applicant-led schemes, an additional filtering stage applies (as detailed on the relevant funding opportunity webpage).

Stage 3

Applicants may provide a response (Project Lead Response) to the comments of the anonymised expert reviewers and these will only be seen by the panel. This allows applicants to correct any factual errors or conceptual misunderstandings, or to respond to any queries highlighted, in the reviewer comments. It is not intended to be an opportunity for the applicant to change or reconstitute their application in light of your expert reviewer comments.

Stage 4

Applications, expert reviews and Project Lead (PL) responses to the reviews are then considered at panel meetings. Panel members are expected to make informed judgements on all applications passed to them for review.

Panels score and rank applications in order of funding priority.

Stage 5

Panel recommendations are considered by the AHRC Executive Chair and Directors Group, who take a final decision on the list of awards to be supported depending on funds available.

There are some exceptions to this process, for example, the Curiosity Awards. In these cases, we hold assessment panels in which panel members directly assess the applications. You can find other exceptions to the review process in the Funding Finder.

Conflicts of Interest

Everybody involved in UKRI decision-making and funding processes must comply with the UKRI declaration of interests policy and guidance.

It is vital that reviewers are seen to be completely impartial. Therefore, you should not take part in the review of any application where you perceive there to be a conflict of interest. We understand it is likely that academics who work in the same field may know of each other and consequently, this doesn't necessarily exclude you from commenting on an application.

However, if your knowledge of, or relationship with, individuals in the application is such that you feel it would be difficult to be impartial when commenting on the application, please decline the review and select 'conflict of interest' as the reason.

If you believe you may have a conflict of interest, or are in any doubt at all as to whether you have a conflict, please contact us via operations@ahrc.ukri.org for advice before accepting and completing a review.

We want to ensure your time, and that of our applicants, isn't wasted – if it turns out there is a conflict after you've submitted your review, unfortunately we won't be able to use it.

You can find further information on potential conflicts of interest within the UKRI declaration of interests: guidance for assessors, reviewers and panellists and on the AHRC website.

The San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA)

We are committed to supporting the recommendations and principles set out by the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA). You should not use journal-based metrics, such as journal impact factors, as a surrogate measure of the quality of individual research articles, to assess any member of the core team's contributions, or to make funding decisions.

For research assessment, please consider the value and impact of all research outputs (including datasets, software, inventions, patents, preprints or other commercial activities), in addition to research publications. You should consider a broad range of impact measures including qualitative indicators of research impact, such as influence on policy and practice.

The content of a paper is more important than publication metrics, or the identity of the journal in which it was published, especially for early-stage researchers. Therefore, you should not use journal impact factor (or any hierarchy of journals), conference rankings and metrics such as the H-index or i10-index when assessing AHRC applications.

Writing a Good Review

Accepting the review

You can accept your review through the button in the email inviting you to review. You will need an account on the UKRI Funding Service to start your review. You cannot use your Je-S account credentials to sign into the UKRI Funding Service and complete your review.

Preparation

You can find an example of what the Funding Service review form looks like within the UKRI guidance video on completing a review.

Before starting your review:

- check for any conflicts of interest, as above
- familiarise yourself with the aims of the opportunity for the application you are assessing
- all applications should now follow the Résumé for Research and Innovation (R4RI) format - this is a flexible narrative CV template
- understand the UKRI principles of assessment and decision making, avoiding any bias in reviews of applications, especially relating to the protected characteristics of any individual
- consult the usable and unusable review policy to ensure that your review will meet the criteria - we appreciate how much time and effort goes into your reviews and we don't want them to go unused
- be aware of the full range of scores and their definitions (Appendix A) at your disposal and contact AHRC staff if anything is unclear
- ensure you read the entire application thoroughly

You may be invited to review applications that do not match your expertise entirely, but where you would be able to comment on a particular element of the application, particularly in interdisciplinary applications. You should let us know which aspect you are assessing without commenting on why or how qualified you feel.

You can find further guidance on writing a good review on the UKRI website.

Structure

There is one free-text box for reviewers to insert their comments in the Funding Service. We kindly ask that you structure your review using the following five subheadings, as these sections form the core framework for assessment:

- Vision
- Approach
- Applicant and Team Capability to Deliver
- Ethics and Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI)
- Resources and Cost Justification

Review guidance is also available within the Funding Service review form to help guide you when writing your review. Above the free-text box, the review criteria for the funding opportunity are displayed. To the side of the text box, there is also guidance on what your review must include.

As some funding opportunities may have additional scheme-specific criteria, you should always refer to the specific guidance.

The 'How to apply' section of the relevant funding opportunity webpage contains further details on what you should be looking for within each review section.

Analysis

Whilst writing your review:

- always provide evidence to support your observations and use only the information provided in the application form
- take into account the information you are being asked to provide under each review subheading and ensure sufficient detail is provided for each one
- clearly identify strengths and weaknesses of the application in a constructive manner, and indicate whether these are major or minor concerns - the hardest part of the panel's job is to separate the truly excellent applications from the very good ones, so the panel needs this advice to help them in the ranking
- provide an evaluation of the risks associated with the project
- contextualise the application within current work in the field, and comment on its relative importance and significance
- identify any inconsistencies and contradictions in the application
- identify issues needing clarification by the applicant in their response
- in interdisciplinary applications: do the different disciplines meet up in a coherent way?
- provide enough information to enable a judgement on the relative quality of this application compared to other applications
- be receptive to new ideas and approaches to thinking within your discipline as well as methodology

Policies related to areas such as research ethics, procurement and organisational process may vary from organisation to organisation, and the context for the applicant may differ from your own. You may make comments related to the design of projects in this context or clarify potential issues but should be mindful of the possible limits institutional policies place on applicants.

Applications may include costs for reasonable adjustments. Where an application includes costs for reasonable adjustments, UKRI will ensure they are eligible, and these should be accepted without comment. You can find further information on disability and accessibility support for UKRI applicants during the application and assessment process on the website.

Interdisciplinary assessment

The UKRI Research Councils have an agreed approach for collaborating on the expert review and funding of applications that straddle our remits under the Applicant-led schemes, known as the Cross Council Remit Agreement. This approach ensures that no gaps develop between our subject domains and safeguards equality of opportunity for applications at the interface between traditional disciplines, where many major research challenges are located.

For multidisciplinary applications, it is unlikely that each individual reviewer will be familiar with all the elements of the programme of research. As mentioned above, you may have been approached for comment because of your expertise in one particular element and reviews will also be sought from experts in the remaining aspects. You should outline your expertise in the usual way and note the areas of the application you are commenting on. This will greatly assist the panel in placing your comments in context.

You should assign the application a score and respond only to those elements on which you consider it appropriate for you to comment. You may additionally want to justify the score you have given or indicate any reservations you have, ensuring the reasons for your score are clear.

Multidisciplinary research is often to be found at the cutting edge, which is inherently risky. Don't be afraid of recommending innovative, speculative and adventurous applications. If you think something is high risk, it is important to ask yourself what the risks are - is it risky because the outputs are unknown, or does the project lack the subject specialism it needs?

It is possible that a standard technique or method is being used in a novel way or context. It isn't appropriate to lower your score to reflect this element if it underpins an otherwise exciting piece of research.

Submit your review

You may find it helpful to complete your comments offline (such as in a Word document) before copying them into the Funding Service, rather than typing directly into the free-text box.

In the delivery of your review:

- provide an impartial, objective, fair and analytical assessment of the application

- ensure you do not identify yourself within your comments in order to keep the review anonymous
- avoid overly negative comments and do not include any personal comments
- make constructive criticism wherever possible, identifying how any issues could be realistically addressed by the Project Lead
- do not take into account or speculate whether generative AI has been used to develop the application
- ensure you are providing an evaluation, not a description of the work proposed
- ensure that the language you use is clear, easy to understand and jargon-free - could your review be understood by a non-specialist?
- provide comments and recommendations that are consistent with, justify, and explain your score (refer back to the scoring range to ensure you're happy with your assessment, noting that scores of 1 to 3 are classed as unsupportive)
- could a non-expert make a final scoring decision based upon your review?

To maintain anonymity when your comments are shared with applicants and panellists, your name will not be shown and instead each reviewer is given a number.

Please note that in some instances, applications may include links to a website containing further information on the research proposed. You are not required to access the information they lead to or consider it in your assessment of the application. If you do choose to look at this information, it is possible that your anonymity to the applicant could be compromised.

Safeguarding Decision-Making

Applications are submitted to AHRC in confidence and may contain confidential information and personal data belonging to the core team (and others named in the application). Please ensure that all applications are treated confidentially.

In addition to this, you are not permitted to use generative AI tools as part of your assessment activities. Using these tools can potentially compromise the confidentiality of the ideas that applicants have entrusted to UKRI to safeguard. For more detail, please see our policy on the use of generative AI.

When completing expert reviews using the Funding Service, the first time you access an application and on an annual basis thereafter, Reviewer Protocols will be shown. These outline the standards of confidentiality and conduct that UKRI requires of reviewers. You must agree to follow these protocols before being presented with any review material.

Accessibility and Inclusion

We are committed to promoting equality and to ensuring our guidance is accessible to all users. Please see the Accessibility statement for the UKRI Funding Service. We welcome and

encourage you to contact peerreviewcollege@ahrc.ukri.org with any feedback, queries or concerns.

Additional support

If you require any additional support or reasonable adjustments in order to complete a review, please don't hesitate to get in touch with us at operations@ahrc.ukri.org.

Appendix A: Review Scoring Range

Each application must be scored against the assessment criteria using the review scoring range as defined below. The scoring range can also be accessed on the same page that you complete your review in the Funding Service, so that you can refer back to it easily.

Score 6

Exceptional: the application is outstanding. It addresses all of the assessment criteria and meets them to an exceptional level.

Score 5

Excellent: the application is very high quality. It addresses most of the assessment criteria and meets them to an excellent level. There are very minor weaknesses.

Score 4

Very good: the application demonstrates considerable quality. It meets most of the assessment criteria to a high level. There are minor weaknesses.

Score 3

Good: the application is of good quality. It meets most of the assessment criteria to an acceptable level, but not across all aspects of the proposed activities. There are weaknesses.

Score 2

Weak: the application is not sufficiently competitive. It meets some of the assessment criteria to an adequate level. There are, however, significant weaknesses.

Score 1

Poor: the application is flawed or of unsuitable quality for funding. It does not meet the assessment criteria to an adequate level.

Appendix B: Useful Links and Contacts

Assessment

- UKRI principles of assessment and decision-making: https://www.ukri.org/publications/ukri-principles-of-assessment-and-decision-making/
- Core section questions: https://www.ukri.org/apply-for-funding/how-to-apply/how-applicants-use-the-ukri-funding-service/responsive-mode-opportunities-funding-service-core-application-section-questions-and-assessment/core-section-questions-and-how-they-will-be-assessed/#contents-list
- Funding Finder, AHRC opportunity webpages: https://www.ukri.org/opportunity/?filter_council%5B%5D=814
- UKRI policy on the use of generative AI: https://www.ukri.org/publications/generative-artificial-intelligence-in-application-and-assessment-policy/use-of-generative-artificial-intelligence-in-application-preparation-and-assessment/

Completing a review in the Funding Service

- Sign in to your Funding Service account: https://funding-service.ukri.org/signIn
- Reviewer Protocols: https://www.ukri.org/who-we-are/terms-of-use/ukri-funding-service-terms-of-use/
- Conflicts of interest: https://www.ukri.org/publications/ukri-declarations-of-interest-policy-and-guidance/
- Usable and unusable review policy: https://www.ukri.org/councils/ahrc/guidance-for-reviewers/peer-reviews/carrying-out-a-peer-review/reviewer-guidance-notes/review-usability/
- Receiving an invitation to review in the UKRI Funding Service: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ripUjjaP2l8
- UKRI guidance for reviewers: https://www.ukri.org/apply-for-funding/how-to-apply/how-reviewers-use-the-ukri-funding-service/
- UKRI guidance video for completing a review: https://youtu.be/EYxv_1KifhM

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI)

- UKRI Reasonable Adjustments Policy: https://www.ukri.org/apply-for-funding/how-to-apply/disability-and-accessibility-support-for-ukri-applicants-and-grant-holders/

Useful Contacts

- Operations Team (operations@ahrc.ukri.org): for queries about a review you've been invited to do, extension requests, conflicts of interest, or for any support
- PRC Team (peerreviewcollege@ahrc.ukri.org): for anything related to your membership