NERC: Peer Review College Training Handbook

2025 Edition V1.0

Natural Environment Research Council

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1) Welcome to the NERC Peer Review College

A Message from the NERC Peer Review Team…

Welcome to the NERC Peer Review College!

First, we would like to extend our gratitude to you for agreeing to be part of our Peer Review College. Peer Review is an essential part of UKRI & NERC's processes, and your expertise will be an invaluable contribution in ensuring we fund the highest quality of applications.

This training handbook will provide you with the context and tools to effectively deliver peer review for NERC, in line with our policies and processes. We will provide you with information on our college itself, as well as comprehensive guidance on the delivery of peer review, in the form of written reviews & panel meetings.

For any questions of queries regarding the training, or for any general information, please contact our peer review college mailbox at College@nerc.ukri.org where one of our peer review team will be on hand to provide you with a response.

Once again, we would like to thank you for being a member of our college.

NERC PRC Team

Key Terms

In this training handbook, we use a number of key terms.

- Project lead

  Previously called principal investigator, this is the person responsible for the intellectual leadership and overall management of the project. They lead the application submission, and if required then the applicant response to reviews (previously termed PI response). For more information on the project lead, and the wider team, see the role descriptions and responsibilities on the UKRI website.

- Funding opportunity

  Previously called a call, this refers to an opportunity for applicants to submit an application for funding to carry out and deliver research and innovation activities within the diversity of our portfolio. These are listed on the UKRI Funding Finder webpage.

All funding opportunities are either applicant-led or targeted (more information on the UKRI website).

- Applicant-led

  These are the funding opportunities which cover the full NERC remit. Previously NERC termed this discovery science (also previously called blue skies and responsive mode).

- Targeted

  These are the funding opportunities which cover a specific part of the NERC remit. Previously NERC termed this strategic science (also previously called managed mode).

All funding opportunities are assessed against the assessment criteria using one or a combination of three panel types: (i) expert review and moderating panel, (ii) assessment panel, and (iii) interview panel.

- Expert review and moderating panel

  This approach includes expert reviews and then a panel who moderate the presented evidence. The panel assessment is based on the (i) application, (ii) reviews and (iii) applicant response to the reviews (i.e. the panel do not review the applications themselves).

- Assessment panel

  This approach includes a panel only, with no reviews. The panel assessment is based on the application where the panel review the applications themselves.

- Interview panel

  This approach can optionally include either of the two assessment stages above. This panel has more focus on assessing the individual or team capability to deliver, such as with fellowships or large projects

2) Introduction to NERC & NERC Peer Review College

a) NERC end-to-end grant process

A Funding opportunity will go through various approval stages internally before being published on The Funding Service (TFS). Once live, applicants will be able to create and submit their applications to NERC.

When an opportunity has closed, NERC will begin to do their eligibility checks to confirm that an application can move to the next stage of the process. If an application fails eligibility checks, the applicant will receive a notification explaining that their application was unsuccessful, with details as to why this has happened included in the notification. If all checks are passed, an application will move to the next stage, assessment.

Information on the assessment stage can be found here: What happens after you submit your application – NERC – UKRI

b) Introduction to NERC Peer Review College and your role

We currently have over 800 members, with an array of expertise coverage specific for NERC's portfolio.

Our members will be asked to provide their expertise in the form of written expert reviews, or attendance of one of our moderation/assessment panels. Members will be selected for these roles based on the expertise required for applications received.

There will also be opportunity to take the role as co-Chair on occasion, driven by needs such as the Chair being conflicted with applications. This is led by the secretary of the funding opportunity.

c) How we select our college members

A campaign can vary in approach, in some cases they will be targeted for specific expertise areas that we require, whilst other times it will be an open campaign for anyone with expertise related to NERC to join.

Applications are submitted to NERC and will be assessed internally based on criteria that is specific for the campaign that is actively running.

d) Overview of the Assessment Process

UKRI and NERC are currently undertaking a process change in the way we run our funding opportunities (see here for details Funding modes – UKRI). These changes will impact how we run our opportunities moving forward, however this is a work in progress. As of now, NERC are operating assessments as ountlined below, when we are able to present our new assessment processes, we will provide these as updates in this handbook. Over the next 12 months, NERC will be communicating the new approaches.

We currently run our assessment process in the following ways for our opportunities:

Pushing the Frontiers – Stage 1 & 2 assessment panels

Large Grants – Stage 1 assessment panel Stage 2 Expert Review & Moderating Panel

Independent Research Fellowship – Stage 1 & 2 assessment panels

e) Seven Principles of Public Life

NERC, as part of UKRI, have adopted a code of practice for all those who assist in our work. This embraces the seven principles of public life drawn up by the Nolan Committee and endorsed by the UK Parliament, and provides guidance on the standards expected from those that work with UKRI.

The principles cover:

- Selflessness
- Integrity
- Objectivity
- Accountability
- Openness
- Honesty
- Leadership

Information on the UKRI principles of assessment and decision-making and assessment process can be found on the website and in each funding opportunity.

UKRI also supports the San Francisco declaration on research assessment (DORA), and recognises the relationship between research assessment and research integrity. Reviewers are required to follow our principles and processes.

There's also further advice on the UKRI website, including guidance for reviewers about how decisions are made.

f) Declaration of Interests

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. Generally, conflicts might occur if individuals have, for example:

- a direct or indirect financial interest
- non-financial or personal interests
- competing loyalties between an organisation they owe a primary duty to or some other person or entity, or both

The existence of an actual, perceived, or potential conflict of interest does not necessarily imply wrongdoing on anyone's part. However, any private, personal, or commercial interests which give rise to such a conflict of interest must be recognised, disclosed appropriately and either eliminated or properly managed.

If your involvement in assessing an application might be perceived as a conflict of interest, you should either:

- decline the invitation to review it
- contact the NERC secretary for further advice

Sometimes applicants ask us not to invite certain individuals to review their applications. Because of this, reviewers must not show applications to others or ask anybody else to review them on their behalf.

For practical guidance, please see our policy on conflicts. Further guidance is provided when you act as a reviewer and panellist.

g) Equality, Diversity & Inclusion

Applicants

We are committed to achieving equality of opportunity for all funding applicants. We encourage applications from a diverse range of researchers to apply to our funding opportunities.

We support people to work in a way that suits their personal circumstances. This includes:

- career breaks
- support for people with caring responsibilities
- flexible working
- alternative working patterns

UKRI offer disability and accessibility support for UKRI applicants and grant holders during the application and assessment process. Find out more about equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) at UKRI and NERC's diversity and inclusion action plan.

For every funding opportunity, we conduct bespoke equality impact assessments. This is to support EDI being embedded throughout the entire application and assessment process, including expert review.

Assessors

When you act as a reviewer or panel member you will be provided further EDI guidance to support your activities. Note that we allow reasonable adjustments for all of our assessors, which is considered on a case-by-case basis. You will need to discuss your requirements with the relevant NERC Opportunity lead (contact information will be supplied when you are invited to carry out expert review).

EDI data of the PRC is collected to inform us on areas of improvement, in support of the NERC diversity and inclusion action plan.

h) Confidentiality

Applications 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 applications confidential and not to use or disclose them except as required for the assessment and 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).

Assessors may not disclose the fact that any of the applications have been submitted to NERC or any of the information contained in any of the applications to any person outside the panel or otherwise involved in the peer review and funding decision process. Nor may they disclose or use the information in the applications for any purpose other than as part of NERC peer review and funding decision process.

The assessor's comments on and scoring of these applications will be recorded on TFS and at the panel meeting by NERC staff at which they are discussed. NERC will not use these notes 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 applications as part of the funding decision process
- to the applicant as part of NERC feedback to successful and unsuccessful applicants
- 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 assessor, but if you are a panellist then this 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.

Using generative AI in assessment approaches

Assessors are not permitted to use generative AI tools to develop their assessment. Using these tools can potentially compromise the confidentiality of the ideas that applicants have entrusted to UKRI to safeguard. For more detail see our policy on the use of generative AI.

3) The Assessment Process – Expert Reviews

We rely heavily on the time and expertise of reviewers to help us make the best funding decisions, and we are currently exploring ways to better reward our reviewers for their contribution (such as ORCID recognition).

Typically, it is the applicant-led funding opportunities that require reviewers to support the panel with decision making.

Reviewers are chosen for their recognised expertise in the relevant areas of research to review applications independently of other applications. A review is based on the reviewer's judgement of the assessment criteria alone.

a) Selection Process & Invitation to review

NERC panel secretaries identify suitable reviewers for an application and request reviews to be completed through TFS. They will perform a preliminary check for conflicts, but we cannot be aware of all potential conflicts; if any reviewer suspects they might be conflicted, they should seek advice from the relevant panel secretary before starting the review by replying to the request to review.

You will receive an invitation through TFS to your email (the subject will read as follows: UKRI Funding Service – Invitation to review). This includes basic details about the application and you click 'respond now'.

On average, reviews take between 2 to 6 hours to complete - but this varies depending on the reviewer and the application. We'll give you the guidance required to complete your review.

Note that you do not have to be an expert in every aspect of the application to be able to complete a review. For example, you may have expertise in the specific methodology but not the subject matter.

When you click to accept to review, you will be reminded of the declaration of interest policy and need to confirm you accept these are met.

b) Your anonymity

Your name and all your comments will be seen by the moderating panel but to maintain anonymity when your comments are passed back to applicants, your name will not appear on the form. Instead, a unique reviewer number is generated which links you to an application. If you receive more than one application, they will each have a different reviewer number.

To maintain your anonymity, you should remember not to mention your name or your grade in the comments on the form, and you should carefully consider providing any information which may enable an applicant to identify you.

In some instances, the application documentation may include a link to a web site containing information on the research proposed. As a reviewer, you are not required to consider this additional information when providing comments on an application. If you choose to look at this information, you should remember that is possible that your anonymity to the applicant will be compromised.

c) Timescales

Standard timings to deliver a review are 15 working days. If you are unable to provide a review within the indicated timescale, then please let us know immediately on receipt of the review request. If you are unable to provide a review due to a conflict or a mismatch of expertise, you should also let us know immediately as this will allow us to approach an alternative reviewer. When you are unable to review for us, If you know of anyone that can assist with a review, we would appreciate any suggestions.

d) Applicant Response

Where permitted under the rules of an opportunity, applicants are invited to submit an applicant response to comments received from assessors or reviewers. This is an opportunity for applicants to correct any factual errors or conceptual misunderstandings, or to respond to any queries highlighted in comments from the assessors or reviewers. The applicant will be unable to rewrite their application, so reviewers should be mindful of how to structure the review, in order to provide the applicant a fair chance at responding. Applicants are not obliged to submit a response but are encouraged to do so as this forms a significant part of the panel assessment and decision making process. If a response is not received from the applicant within the period stated, then the application will proceed to panel without it. The Project Lead can nominate someone else in their team to respond if they are unavailable.

e) Reviewing Applications

When reviewing an application, it’s important that your comments are clear and easy to understand so that your feedback adds the most value to the applicant and assessor.

The application should clearly demonstrate the methodology that the applicant intended to use to achieve their objectives. You should comment on how clearly these are described and how appropriate they are for the planned activity, as well as their feasibility. Raising concern in the form of questions can be helpful, as it provides constructive criticism in a form the PL can respond to.

Reviews should be evidence-based and objective, outlining an application's strengths and weaknesses and providing justification for the score awarded.

Your review will be fed back anonymously to the applicant who will then be allowed to respond to factual inaccuracies or any questions that you raise. Following this, members of the moderating panel will be asked to use your reviews as the chief tool for discussing applications. It's crucial your feedback is consistent and fair and the scores you've given reflect the comments you've raised and reflect the scoring criteria provided.

What not to put in your review*:*

Reviewers should note that policies related to areas such as research ethics, procurement and organisational process may vary from organisation to organisation and that the context for the applicant may differ from their own. Reviewers 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.

When reviewing it's important that you don't compromise your anonymity. If you are referring to your own work it might be prudent to limit the number of citations, just so that it doesn't become obvious who you are. Refer to 'the paper' or 'the work of Dr Smith'.

You should avoid reference to the score you've given to the application. The review scores are not passed onto the applicant as they sometimes don't reflect the comments made.

You shouldn't refer to your own level of expertise in a negative way, for example 'I am not an expert in this area'. If you don't feel that you have sufficient expertise to review a application, then please let NERC aware and we will reallocate the review.

Reviews are made available to applicants, and all criticism should be made in such a way that they could respond. Offensive or personal comments are not permitted.

f) Overall Expert Review assessment

When assigning your overall score it's important to ensure your score reflects your review comments. The scores are expressed as whole numbers and definitions will be available to you as part of the specific scheme or call guidance. Reviewers are asked to use the full scoring range.

Scoring Range

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

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.

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

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 proposal activities. There are weaknesses.

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

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

4) Assessment Process (Panel Meetings)

Purpose of panel meetings

The purpose of panel meetings is to consider and reach final agreement on the scoring of applications, and where applicable agree feedback or conditions to applicants. The NERC Head Officeconsiders the panel's recommendation and agrees a final list of awards to be made depending on the available budget. Panellists are briefed at the start of the panel meeting following standard panel guidance: if you have questions in the days and weeks prior to a panel, please contact the panel secretary responsible for your meeting. There are two types of meeting:

a) Selecting process and invitation to panel meeting

Whenever possible, panel membership is drawn from the NERC Peer Review College. Unfortunately, not all College members will have the opportunity to sit on the panel during their term of membership due to availability, conflicts of interest and the expertise required on the panel.

The following is taken into consideration when selecting panellists:

- Number of panellists required and relative to the number of applications being discussed.
- Required panellist experience and expertise, noting that some panels may evaluate a broader range of applications than others.
- There will only be one panel member from any one institution where possible. Due to expertise constraints and availability, it may not be possible to adhere to this for every panel.
- Ensuring that a representative spread of panellists sit on panels in any given year, considering protected characteristics.

b) Pre-meeting

Before each meeting, panel members will receive access to a set of applications they have been assigned to and any additional background information. Panel members will be asked to provide pre-scores ahead of the meeting, panel secretaries will confirm the dates we require pre-scores to be returned. These scores will be used to inform discussions and agree a final scoring with fellow assessors. Panellists will also be invited to a pre-meeting briefing by the panel secretary, we expect all panel members to attend this meeting, however if attendance isn't possible, the meeting will be recording and we ask that this is watched ahead of the panel.

c) The Chair's Role

- Ensure that the correct procedures are followed, and the meeting runs to time.
- Moderate the discussion of applications and ensure each application is graded solely according to its merits and ranked accordingly, ensuring that all panellists are given time and space to make their assessment.
- Ensure that an agreed list of applications and recommendations for funding is produced and any conditions or feedback are recorded.
- Help to identify intellectual trends apparent from the applications assessed.
- Liaise and work with NERC staff responsible for your panel.
- Wherever possible, comply with any deadlines given, to enable staff to conduct panel arrangements as smoothly as possible.
- Complete and return a Chairs report to NERC within the given deadline requested by NERC.

d) The NERC Officers

At the panel meeting NERC staff:

- Note questions concerning policy, protocols, and assessment practices.
- Advise in any points of protocol or policy where necessary.
- Ensure that proper procedures and protocol guidelines are enforced during the meeting, including adherence to NERC's commitment to Diversity, Equity & Inclusion.
- Ensure that the panel provides and records appropriate feedback comments for applicants where necessary.

e) Assessors Role

- Ahead of the meeting, panel members are assigned the role of First Assessor, Second Assessor and Third Assessor to a number of applications. Depending on the funding opportunity the panel secretary may assign readers to ensure there are enough opinions on the applications to give a fair assessment.
- Assessors should read all their assigned applications.
- Assessors should grade and comment on all their assigned applications in advance of the panel meeting, considering the aims and assessment criteria for the scheme concerned.
- Scores should be whole numbers in relation to the scoring scale provided.

- Panellists should provide their pre-scores to NERC, if requested, ahead of the meeting as these drive panel discussion in a logical and structured way.
- During the meeting the Second Assessor and Third Assessor Reader only add comments that have not already been raised by the Lead Assessor.
- Depending on the funding opportunity the Lead Assessor will be asked to create feedback based on the discussion at the panel meeting.

f) All panel members

As well as the applications that have been allocated to them as an Assessor, panel members should read as many of the other applications as possible (time permitting). This allows them to put the applications on which they are speaking into context with the rest of those under discussion and ensures a full discussion of each application at the meeting.

Meeting papers are made available to panel members via the UKRI TFS system prior to a panel.

g) Panel meeting feedback

The Lead Assessor should record the key points using the feedback form provided. Second and Third Assessors should be prepared to provide the Lead Assessor with input.

Care should be taken to present feedback constructively. It should not just be a list of strengths and weaknesses as in a review. Lead Assessors should ensure that the feedback provided gives context to the key factors that led to the application getting the score it did and is of a sufficient length. Feedback should also clearly identify how the application could be improved. More guidance on how to structure feedback and what to cover is included on the Feedback Form. The feedback form is to be returned to the panel secretary via email.

h) Moderating panel meeting (approach to meeting)

Moderating panels operate differently to assessment panels. The panel assign final grades and rank applications in order of priority for funding. The role of the panel is to make judgements on the application based on the feedback from the peer reviewers and Project Lead (PL) response only. It is not their role to reassess the applications when deciding the final grade.

The rank ordered list agreed by the panel forms the funding recommendation for NERC.

i) Assessment panel meeting (approach to meeting)

Assessment panels are used to make some funding decisions including Pushing the Frontiers and Independent Research Fellowships. As applications are discussed it is the role of the panel members of these panels to assess the application and assign a grade against the scoring criteria. The panel discusses each application’s strengths and weaknesses on their own merit and a final score is then agreed. The final scores from the panel form the funding recommendation for NERC.

j) Interview panel meeting (approach to meeting)

Different funding schemes may vary but generally following expert review against a specific criteria for the funding opportunity a shortlist of applicants will be invited to an interview panel. The interview panel will make a funding recommendation to NERC.

Shortlisted applicants will be invited to deliver a presentation, followed by interview questions from the panel. These questions will consist of scientific questions raised by panel members about the proposed work and follow-on questions related to the funding opportunity.

k) How do we score and prioritise applications?

The panel discuss and agree a grade for the applications.

In considering the application, you must ensure that your judgment is based solely on the aims and assessment criteria for the scheme and the information provided to you in the application form and PL responses where applicable.

Individual panellists' comments on and grading of applications will be recorded by NERC staff. The NERC will not use these minutes or grades, or disclose them to any person or organisation, except:

- As is necessary to record the decisions of the panel.
- To inform any other person or body within the NERC, or any other body that may be co-funding the applications, as part of the funding decision process
- As may be required under the Data Protection Act or the Freedom of Information Act (or any other law or regulation to which the NERC is or may become subject).

Funding opportunities are run through the UKRI Funding Service ('The Funding Service' – TFS). TFS allows scores up to 10 when submitting panel pre-scores. See below for our scoring range in TFS.

Scoring Range

10 Exceptional: The application meets all of the assessment criteria to the highest standard. It's hard to see how the application could be improved.

9 Outstanding: The application very strongly meets all of the assessment criteria.

8 Excellent: The application strongly meets all of the assessment criteria.

7 Very Good: The application meets the assessment criteria well but with some minor weaknesses or limitations.

6 Good: The application meets the assessment criteria well but with some clear weaknesses or limitations.

5 Adequate: The application meets the assessment criteria but with clear weaknesses or limitations.

4 Weak: The applications meets the assessment criteria but with significant weaknesses or limitations.

3 Poor: The applications meets the assessment criteria but has major weaknesses or limitations.

2 Unsatisfactory: The application does not meet one or more of the assessment criteria.

1 Very Unsatisfactory: The application does not meet any of the assessment criteria.

Depending on the scheme you have been invited to be an Assessor for the process for assessment will alter slightly and you should refer to the specific guidance provided by the responsible panel secretary.

In some cases, panels will be asked to rank all fundable applications. When ranking applications where there is a conflict of interest for a member of the panel, the application should not be discussed again in detail unless that panellist leaves the room.

NERC staff may adjust the costs identified in applications prior to making awards, acting upon recommendations from panels (for example reducing the amount of staff time, or reducing the overall resource for travel or equipment).

Conditions may also be applied by panels before awards can be confirmed.

l) Factors to consider when scoring an application

Panels are asked to consider each application on its' merits and award it a score. Scoring decisions at panels are reached through discussion of the applications. In considering them, panel members must ensure that their judgement is based solely on the aims and assessment criteria for the scheme and the information provided to them in the application form, the reviews and the PL response to theses, where received. Moderating panel members should not allow private knowledge of the applicant or the proposed research to influence their judgement. If you do have serious concerns about an application, then you should raise these with the panel secretary in advance of the meeting.

m) Funding decisions

After the panel, the final funding decisions will be made by the NERC based on the list provided and level of funding available. It is, therefore, vital that panel members do not divulge or discuss panel meeting outcomes with individuals outside the meeting. Maintaining confidentiality is paramount.

All announcements of outcomes and funding decisions will be made available by NERC. Any panel member who is asked directly for feedback by applicants should refuse and advise applicant to direct such queries to the NERC.

We do not encourage taking any copies of information from the system but recognise this may be required in some circumstances. Any copies taken must be held securely and must be destroyed after the meeting has been held.

n) Payment of expenses and honoraria fees

Panellists will normally receive a fee of £200 per meeting for their attendance and Chairs will receive an honorarium of £1,000.

Fees are not payable to attendees who are employees of organisations whose funds are derived from Votes of Parliament (for example, Government Departments, UK Atomic Energy Authority, British Broadcasting Corporation, research councils, UKRI and other Non-Departmental Public Bodies. This includes all civil servants (full-time or part-time)).

Payments are paid in full and are subject to income tax and NI deductions.

Panellists and Chairs will be reimbursed their necessary expenses incurred in attending panel meetings or other events they are required to attend. Please refer to the Travel, Subsistence and Expenses Policy before submitting an expenses claim form.

The expenses claim form must be completed in full, signed and receipts should be attached. You should send your expenses to your panel secretary for processing.

Relevant weblinks

UKRI principles of assessment and decision making – UKRI

Conflicts of interests – UKRI

UKRI travel, subsistence and expenses policy – UKRI

Expenses claim form for non-UKRI employees – UKRI