

NERC Exploring the Frontiers 2026

Distributed Peer Review – Rules and Guidelines

Contents

1. Introduction	1
1.1 Why are NERC carrying out trials of DPR?	2
2. Rules and guidelines for applicants	2
2.1 General	2
2.2 Submission of an application	3
2.3 Assessment criteria.....	3
2.4 Anonymisation	3
3. UKRI Funding Service	4
4. Rules and guidelines for reviewers	4
4.1 General	4
4.2 Application review and grading.....	5
4.3 Decision making.....	7

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 of a range of review interventions in order to vary their assessment processes i.e. 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 applications submitted to the same funding opportunity to decide who gets funding. By submitting an application, applicants agree to act as reviewers and to have their application 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 expertise of reviews, since a larger pool of reviewers are available, and each application is reviewed a greater number of times. DPR lessens the administrative burden on external peer reviewers and shortens the review process, by removing the need to recruit and run external review panels.

1.1 Why are NERC carrying out trials of DPR?

This funding opportunity aims to enable researchers to test new ideas, approaches, or concepts at a stage when they are not yet sufficiently developed for standard funding routes and the outcomes are inherently uncertain. By supporting innovative new lines of research and reducing the expectation for preliminary data, this scheme intends to encourage a high-risk, high-reward culture in the application and assessment process. Due to the nature of this call, we believe applicants can collectively make a valuable contribution in helping us to identify the ideas that could lead to a clear and significant advancement in knowledge, capability or application if successful. 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 assessment of 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.

Based on the success of the UK Metascience trial, UKRI has committed to expanding the use of DPR across our funding opportunities. The DPR process and outcomes will continue to 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 for the NERC Exploring the Frontiers research grant will undergo DPR.

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

- The project lead (PL) in each application will be expected to conduct the DPR.
- To assist with matching applications to assessors, we are asking PLs to describe their area(s) of expertise using keywords.
- All PLs will receive on average 8 applications to review (i.e., between 6 and 10). If an application cannot be matched to the minimum of 6 reviewers NERC will conduct traditional peer review.
- For each review you will be expected to carefully read only the **vision, approach and ethics and responsible research and innovation** sections of each application assigned to you and provide a score as well as a justification for your score.
- Failing to provide the reviews by the deadline will lead to the automatic rejection of the application submitted by the given applicant.
- If an applicant'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.

A common concern with DPR is that applicants may give tactically lower scores, in order to improve their own relative position. NERC 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) Reviewers will be assigned to a different 'reviewer pool' from the applicants they review.

By using different reviewer pools and an allocation algorithm, applications will be assigned to reviewers in such a way that scoring an application has no bearing on the ranking of the reviewer's own application or their likelihood of receiving funding.

- 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 reviewers review one another.

NERC and the Metascience unit will check that reviewers have adhered to the guidelines for this funding opportunity. If an applicant does attempt to 'game' the overall scoring system (for example, by giving consistently negative reviews and low scores without clear justification), their own application may not proceed.

2.2 Submission of an application

In order for an application to be considered, UKRI's Funding Service online application system must be used. When you write your application, you must adhere to the questions stated. You must also adhere to the conditions for the maximum number of words and pages.

Your complete application must have been received before the deadline via UKRI's Funding Service.

After this deadline, you can no longer submit an application. By applying for this scheme, you are consenting to take part in a trial of Distributed Peer Review (DPR). Please do not apply for this particular opportunity if you would prefer not to take part in the DPR process.

Please note an applicant may appear on a maximum of two applications submitted to this opportunity. Of those two, they may be listed as Project Lead on only one

2.3 Assessment criteria

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

Assessment criteria:

- vision
- approach
- ethics and responsible research and innovation

2.4 Anonymisation

Single-anonymous peer review ensures applicants will not know who is reviewing their application.

Applications will be divided into panels based on remit. Panels will be further divided into two pools where reviewers will be assigned to a different 'reviewer pool' from the applicants they review. By using different reviewer pools and an allocation algorithm, applications will be assigned to reviewers in such a way that scoring an application has no bearing on the ranking of the reviewer's own application or their likelihood of receiving funding.

3. UKRI Funding Service

Reviews are 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 involved so you can identify any [Conflicts of interests – UKRI](#).
- 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. Rules and guidelines for reviewers

4.1 General

By submitting an application, you have accepted to review up to a maximum of 10 applications submitted by your peers. As such, you are expected to deliver the evaluations and the comments by the deadline (see timetable). You will be given access to your assigned applications on **6th January 2027**, and reviewing must be complete by **27th January 2027**. Failing to submit the assigned reviews on time will lead to the automatic rejection of the application in which you are the applicant.

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, in accordance with the published assessment criteria, your role as reviewers is as generalists and applicants should therefore have written the application with this in mind. If you decline a review because it is outside your area of expertise, we will resend you the review invitation.

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. Conflicts must be flagged to NERC by **13th January via email**. 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, NERC will likely reassign applications to you.

In extreme circumstances where an application cannot be matched to the minimum of 6 reviewers NERC will conduct traditional peer review.

The maximum word count allowed for reviews on our system is 2500 words. Whilst we encourage you to complete your reviews carefully and methodically, they do not need to be excessive in length. On average, a review of up to 1500 words is satisfactory, providing that it is clear and gives evidence for your assigned review score.

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

As a reviewer, you are supposed to provide constructive feedback, using appropriate, factual, and non-offensive language. In doing this, keep in mind that your comments will be passed unedited to the applicants. UKRI will take seriously possible cases of offensive and inappropriate language used by the reviewers. As a reviewer, you must provide your feedback in a completely anonymous way. The phrasing must be neutral and must not disclose, directly or indirectly, your identity.

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 artificial intelligence in application preparation and assessment](#).

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. Please refer to the [reviewer protocols](#) for further information.

4.2 Application review and grading

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. 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 applicant
- view the full application as a PDF to read offline or print out

Submitting your review

To provide your review you can either:

- write your review using the text box in the Funding Service – you can save your unfinished

review to come back to later

OR

- use an alternative writing tool such as Word to write your review and then copy it into the text box

You will need to structure each of your reviews using the assessment criteria as subheadings.

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.

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.

Assessment criteria:

- vision
- approach
- ethics and responsible research and innovation

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.
- 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.

Scoring:

You also need to score each application from 1 (poor) to 6 (exceptional). The scoring range definitions have been modified to be more suitable for the Exploring the Frontiers call. These will be shared prior to the DPR webinar on 6th January 2027.

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

4.3 Decision making

By using different reviewer pools and an allocation algorithm, applications will be assigned to reviewers in such a way that scoring an application has no bearing on the ranking of the reviewer's own application or their likelihood of receiving funding.

We will evaluate the DPR process and outcomes. You will be approached for feedback following the process.

NERC will make the final funding decision. We reserve the right to adopt a portfolio approach to fund a diverse range of projects in accordance with [How we make decisions – UKRI](#); balancing the remit of funded research in such a way that is appropriate to the funding opportunity aims.