



AHRC Assessment Panel - Panellists' Guidance

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Introduction

The purpose of this document is to help you as a panellist, to prepare for the forthcoming panel meeting. In addition to this document, you should also feel free to contact the meeting's nominated AHRC Programme Co-ordinator/PSO if you have any questions you wish to raise prior to the meeting.

1. The role of the Chair

For your information, the role of the Chair is:

- to have read and familiarised him/herself with all applications.
- to oversee and to run the panel meeting.
- to set the context and tone for the meeting in terms of process and methods of working, following guidance from the AHRC.
- to ensure that the meeting keeps to time.
- to seek clarification of the panel's views and to ensure there is appropriate discussion, before the panel agrees a grading for each proposal.
- to rank those proposals in the funding range with a score of 6-1.
- to ensure that AHRC procedures and protocols are followed and to refer to AHRC staff for guidance when necessary.
- to provide final approval for feedback, invited resubmissions and conditions on awards, where necessary.

- to ensure the AHRC is provided with a final and agreed ranked list of applications.

2. The role of the panellists

As a panellist, you will be provided with all the necessary information prior to the meeting and are expected to:

- have familiarised yourself with the guidelines and assessment criteria for the scheme.
- to have commented on and to have graded all proposals to which you have been assigned an introducer role (Primary introducer, Secondary introducer or Supporting introducer)
- to have alerted the office to any conflicts of interest you may have, including potential conflicts not picked up by the office.
- to attend the panel meeting to agree final grades and rankings for all proposals.
- to agree any feedback where applicable.

In undertaking the above tasks, panellists are expected to

- exercise their knowledge, judgement and expertise in order to reach clear, sound, evidence-based decisions.
- treat all applications as strictly confidential at all times.
- be always fair and objective and to adhere to [Research Council Equality and Diversity Policy](#) which states that:

The UK Research Councils are committed to eliminating unlawful discrimination and promoting equality of opportunity and good relations across and between the defined equalities groups in all of their relevant functions.

Accordingly no eligible job applicant, funding applicant, employee or external stakeholder, including members of the public should receive less favourable treatment on the grounds of:

- gender
- marital status
- sexual orientation
- gender re-assignment
- race
- colour
- nationality
- ethnicity or national origins
- religion or similar philosophical belief
- spent criminal conviction
- age
- disability

Equally, all proposals must be assessed on equal terms, regardless of the sex, age, and/or ethnicity of the applicant. Proposals must therefore be assessed and graded on their merits, in accordance with the criteria and the aims and objectives set for each scheme or call for funding.

Code of Conduct

AHRC is committed to ensuring that our decision making is fair, robust, transparent and credible. We are also committed to raising awareness of and taking steps to remove the impact of unintentional

bias in our systems, processes, behaviours and culture; in addition, we will ensure that our funding is not influenced by, for example, the gender of the applicant or by other protected characteristics.

Safeguarding decision making

AHRC is committed to ensuring that those who make funding decisions recognise the factors that introduce risk into the decision making process. To do this, it is important to be aware of and take steps to remove any impact of unintentional bias in our processes, behaviours and culture. We know that pressure to make decisions, time pressures, high cognitive load and tiredness all create conditions that introduce the risk of unintentional bias.

Many of these factors could be present in the panel meeting; therefore we ask that you are aware of this risk and safe guard the panel's recommendation by taking the actions described below:

- All proposals or nominations must be assessed on equal terms and objectively assessed on their merits using the criteria set for each funding mechanism.
- Decisions must be evidence-based and based on all the information provided.
- Question and challenge cultural stereotypes and bias, as well as being prepared to be challenged.
- Be aware that working with a high cognitive load, with time pressures and the need to make quick decisions, creates conditions for bias which could have an impact on the research we fund.
- try to slow down the speed of your decision making, allowing sufficient time for discussion of each application.
- Reconsider the reasons for your decisions, recognising that they may be post-hoc justifications.
- Question cultural stereotypes and be open to seeing what is new and unfamiliar.
- Remember you are unlikely to be fairer and less prejudiced than the average person.
- You can detect unconscious bias more easily in others than in yourself, so all panel members should feel able to call out bias when they see it.

For further information, the Royal Society has issued a Briefing and video on unconscious bias: <https://royalsociety.org/topics-policy/publications/2015/unconscious-bias/> .

Proposals are submitted to the AHRC in confidence and may contain confidential information and personal data belonging to the applicant (and other researchers named in the proposal). Please ensure therefore that all proposals are treated confidentially, [referring to the AHRC website](#) for further guidance on confidentiality, data protection, and freedom of information.

3. The role of panel meetings

The purpose of panel meetings is to consider and reach final agreement on the grading and ranking of proposals and, where necessary, to agree broad feedback for applicants.

The panel's ranked list is presented to AHRC Senior Management, who will make the final funding decisions. They will never overturn or alter the order of the list in making the funding decisions. The exception is applications submitted under the early career scheme for which proposals ranked lower than standard proposals may be funded.

Panel meetings also provide an opportunity for panellists to raise issues, such as the potential impact of the research proposed through the applications received to that meeting.

Comments and grades (with the exception of the final agreed grade) will not be used outside the funding decision making process, unless they are subject to specific legal requirements or to be used as the basis of feedback. The AHRC will only collect introducer forms in the case of drafting feedback and then only with the agreement of the panel.

4. Role of Introducers

To assist in this meeting process, three panel members have an 'Introducer' role for each proposal and these are nominated prior to the panel meeting. Each proposal has a Primary Introducer, a Secondary Introducer and a Supporting Introducer. Introducers should lead discussion on the proposal with prepared notes and will have assigned the proposal an initial grade prior to the meeting.

From the Peer Review Extranet you can download the introducers' list, which sets out your assigned roles for any of the proposals for which you have one of the three introducer roles, along with any additional information regarding the proposals to be considered. For the proposals where you have been assigned a role of 'Introducer', you are asked to read these proposals, consider the assessment criteria provided in the scheme guidance and make your own assessment of the proposal, assigning a grade and producing notes to help your introduction of the proposal.

Introducer report form

We recommend you complete an introducer's report form for each proposal for which you have been assigned an Introducer role. Although the form only acts as an aide memoire at the panel meeting (it does not need to be submitted prior to the meeting), it will help structure your comments effectively. You should assign the proposal a grade 6 – 1; please refer to the grade descriptors (see Appendix A/B). If you decide not to use the form, we would encourage you to still follow the structure for your comments.

As you will be aware within a single panel, it is not possible to achieve total coverage of the full range of subjects and the wide diversity of applications submitted to the AHRC. Therefore, you may have been assigned some proposals that do not lie within your precise area of subject expertise, but where you will still need to make an assessment of the proposal against the aims of the scheme, guided by your experience as both a reviewer and a researcher.

You are asked to read as many proposals as you can as this greatly aids discussion at the meeting.

5. Conflicts of interest

It is vital that panel members are seen to be completely impartial at all stages of the review process.

Panel members (including the Chair) should not therefore take part in the assessment of any proposal where a conflict of interest could be construed. If you think you might have a conflict, as in the examples on the [AHRC website](#), please inform the staff member responsible for your panel at the earliest possible opportunity.

If anyone is in conflict with a proposal, s/he will be required to leave the room whilst the proposal is being discussed. If you are in conflict, we will nominate someone to deputise for you. All panellists are permitted to be present for the ranking of all proposals. Should further discussion need to take place, the panel member who is in conflict with the proposal should leave the room again.

6. Assessment approach

When making an assessment of the proposals, you are carrying out the same kind of assessment, with the same rigour, as if you were acting as a peer reviewer, except that you are addressing your comments to the panel rather than to the applicants, as there will not be a PI response stage.

In order to fully understand the quality and content of the proposals, you must ensure your judgements are based solely on the aims and objectives and the assessment criteria for the scheme and the information that is provide in the application form. A copy of the scheme guidance should be included with the panel papers. If this is not included, or if you have any questions about the scheme which you are assessing, please contact the AHRC officer responsible for the panel meeting.

Panel members should not allow private knowledge of the applicant or the proposed research to influence their judgement and panellists are expected to decline invitations to sit on a panel if their private views, knowledge or relations will affect the judgement of applications.

You should:

- ensure you have read the entire proposal thoroughly.
- familiarise yourself with the strategic aims of the AHRC and the aims of the scheme for the proposal that you are assessing.
- be aware of the full range of grades and their descriptors at your disposal.
- contact staff at the AHRC if anything is unclear.

Analysis

You should:

- always provide evidence to support your observations. Use only the information provided in the application form.
- take into account the information you are asked to provide under each heading or item in the scheme assessment criteria. Ensure sufficient detail is provided for each one.
- give a clear assessment of strengths and weaknesses of the proposal and indicate whether these are major or minor concerns.
- provide an evaluation of the risks associated with the project.
- contextualise the proposal that you are assessing within current work in the field, and comment on its relative importance/significance.
- be receptive to new ideas and approaches to thinking within your discipline as well as methodology.
- identify any inconsistencies and contradictions in the proposal.
- in the case of interdisciplinary applications, assess if the different disciplines meet up in a coherent way.
- provide enough information to enable a judgement on the relative quality of this proposal compared to other applications.

General points

You should:

- provide an impartial, objective, fair and analytical assessment of the proposal which you are reviewing.
- ensure you are providing an evaluation, not a description of the work proposed.
- ensure your grade is justified by, and consistent with, your comments.

All costs that are considered justified as reasonable for the research proposed are allowable and should be accepted. Comments on the justification can only be considered for:

- 'Directly incurred' costs.
- The level of investigators' effort (i.e. the time they are spending on the project).
- 'Other Directly Allocated' costs (except charge out costs for departmental technicians and administrative services).
- 'Exceptions' costs (this is where costs relating to project studentships will appear).

7. Grading and Ranking proposals

Regardless of whether you are Primary, Secondary or Supporting Introducer or not assigned to a proposal which you have read, it is acceptable to begin to think about a relative 'rank' for proposals which you have graded similarly. This will help you gauge how you think applications might fare against each other when ranking during the panel meeting.

The Panel as a whole will agree an overall grade from 6-1 for each proposal, reached through discussion of the proposals – taking into account the Introducers' initial grades and comments, alongside the comments of the panel as a whole. The overall grade will be used in determining the proposal's relative ranking.

The panel should rank proposals relative to one another as they proceed through the meeting. Some panels may find it useful to use decimals or high/mid/low when allocating grades if they have a high number of proposals to rank e.g. 5.5 or 5 mid. At the end of the meeting, the panel will review the ranking list before finally agreeing the ranked order. Proposals given a 3, 2 or 1 grade do not need to be ranked.

AHRC does not use averages or 'weighted grades' in determining the grade; the panel needs to weigh up all the information that has been provided and make a judgement as to the appropriate grade. The descriptors will be available in the meeting, should panellists need to refer back to them at any point in the discussion.

All proposals need to be graded but only those graded 4 or above should be ranked. Using a decimal grading system for proposals is an effective and efficient mechanism for the ranking of proposals. Introducers should assign a decimal grade to each proposal with a view to the panel agreeing a final decimal grade. This allows the introducers to indicate the strength of their grading. For example, a good 4 might become a 4.6, a weak 5 a 5.1, and an excellent 6 a 6.8. As the meeting progresses, it is permissible to revisit the earlier decimal places in light of the discussion on other applications. The key thing is to make sure that the grade and its descriptor fit the quality of the proposal i.e. a proposal graded '4' fulfils the criteria for a grade of 4, and that the panel is content with the ranked order of the proposals.

Importantly, the decimal grading is a mechanism to aid the ranking of proposals and it is only the final agreed grade which will be fed back to the applicant.

Please remember to bring with you to the panel meeting

- all the applications
- introducer forms for all proposals where you are Primary, Secondary or Supporting Introducer, if you have used them.

8. Amendments, conditions and feedback

The panel can make recommendations on individual proposals based on panellists' comments, for the AHRC to take forward, for example:

- **Costings:** the panel may make adjustments to the costs identified in proposals prior to making awards, if the assessors are clear that the case has not been made for the costs.
- **Conditions:** the panel can suggest conditions, based on panellists' comments, for the AHRC to impose on the award. These could either be conditions that need to be met before an award is confirmed OR a requirement that the condition be met during the undertaking of the project. Once the award holder has advised the AHRC that they have met the conditions imposed for the award to be granted, the AHRC will expect the Chair or a designated panel member to advise on whether they are satisfied the conditions have been met.
- **Feedback:** The panel can decide to provide feedback if the application is likely to be successful and it wishes to highlight some advice from the panel, but where it is not significant enough to be made a condition of the award.

For Assessment panels, where applicants will not have had the benefit of seeing reviewer comments, the panel may wish to provide applications with specific feedback where there is something significant to be communicated to the applicant that is not covered by the grade descriptor. In doing so, unsuccessful applicants should receive more detail than successful applicants, in order to help them in preparing future bids.

Any feedback for both successful and unsuccessful applications should be agreed in principle by the panel at the meeting, providing either specific text, or a clear set of bullet points, with the final text of the feedback being agreed by the Chair before being communicated back to the applicant.

9. Resubmission Policy

Resubmission of unsuccessful applications is no longer permitted except in very particular circumstances, where the panel may exceptionally decide to invite the applicant to resubmit the proposal.

This will happen only where the panel identifies an application of exceptional potential and can identify specific changes to the application that could significantly enhance its competitiveness. In this case, the panel does not need to agree a grade for the application, but it will need to agree specific feedback – based on the panellists' comments - to be provided to the applicant.

In order for a proposal to be invited for resubmission the panel should satisfy itself that it meets all of the following criteria:

- the core research ideas and approach are original, innovative and exciting and the proposal has outstanding, transformative potential. It has clear potential to secure a grading of 6 if the identified weaknesses can be satisfactorily addressed

- there should be clear potential for the revised proposal to significantly increase its overall grading and priority for funding
- the panel should be confident that issues identified in deeming a proposal to be unfundable can be addressed through resubmission and that these are surmountable. This does not necessarily mean that the panel is able to identify how this will be achieved, just that they are confident that it is possible.
- the issues should be of sufficient scale and significance that they could not have been adequately addressed through the PI response or through the use of conditions. Requested changes should be of sufficient scale to require the proposal to go through the full panel assessment process.
- the panel must be able to provide clear guidance on the key issue or issues which need to be addressed in any resubmission.

We would normally expect invited resubmissions to be used in instances where the panel considers the proposed research to be particularly challenging, novel, complex, adventurous or risky and where it may be difficult to get everything right first time, or where there are challenges that might have been difficult for the applicants to have anticipated in preparing the proposal (an example might be a development which has happened since the proposal was submitted in terms of new or recently published research or a change in 'real world' conditions affecting the project).

When invited resubmissions are submitted they will be assessed in the usual way in competition with all other proposals.

Invited resubmissions should not be used:

- where the identified weaknesses relate to under-development, poor presentation or other problems relating to the preparation of the proposal, which could reasonably have been expected to be addressed in submitting a proposal of this kind.
- for proposals where the core ideas, rationale and foundations, aims and focus or overall design of the project need substantial re-working, since such radically revised proposals could be submitted as a significantly re-worked new proposal rather than as a resubmission.

In addition, there are schemes/calls where invited resubmission is not an option due to the particular nature of the scheme/call, i.e. because the call is a one off and there will be no further rounds under which to submit applications. In such cases the panel may wish to consider the possibility of a conditional award (as detailed above), where appropriate.

10. Feedback on AHRC processes

Should the panel have any feedback on AHRC policy, process and/or documentation, this can be discussed and recorded once all applications have been assigned a final grade and ranked. If there is not sufficient time to discuss this at the end of the meeting, the chair may collect and collate any

comments from panellists via email before forwarding them to an AHRC officer. These will be formally recorded and used by the AHRC to inform the future development of processes.

11. After the panel meeting

After the panel meetings, the final funding decisions will be made by the AHRC on the basis of the ranked list provided and the 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 by the AHRC. Any panel member who is asked directly for feedback by applicants should refuse and advise applicants to direct all such requests to the AHRC.

You will be asked to leave any hard copies of the documents at the panel meeting and following the meeting, you must delete all e-copies that you have created.

12. Panel outcomes

Panellists can find the final funding decisions in relation to their panel [on the AHRC web site](#).

13. Scheme guidance

Please refer to the [Research Funding Guide](#) for guidance about the AHRC schemes.

Appendix A. Generic Grading Scale

Score	Description	Definition
6	Exceptional Should be funded as a matter of the very highest priority	Work that is at the leading edge internationally, in all of the assessment criteria – scholarship, originality, quality and significance, and meets the majority of them to an exceptional level. Likely to have a significant impact on the field. The proposal’s evidence and justification are fully and consistently provided and management arrangements are clear and convincing.
5	Excellent Should be funded as a matter of priority	Work that is internationally excellent in all of the assessment criteria – scholarship, originality, quality and significance, and meets them to an excellent level. Will answer important questions in the field. The proposal’s evidence and justification are fully and consistently provided and management arrangements are clear and convincing.
4	Very Good Worthy of consideration for funding	Work that demonstrates high international standards of scholarship, originality, quality and significance. Will advance the field of research. It meets all assessment criteria. The proposal’s evidence and justification are good and management arrangements are clear and sound.
3	Satisfactory In a competitive context, the proposal is not considered of sufficient priority to recommend for funding	Work that is satisfactory in terms of scholarship and quality but lacking in international competitiveness. It is limited in terms of originality, innovation and significance and its contribution to the research field. It meets minimum requirements in terms of the assessment criteria and the proposal’s evidence and justification are adequate overall.
2	Not Competitive Not recommended for funding	Work that is of inconsistent quality with some strengths, innovative ideas and good components, but has significant weaknesses or flaws in its conceptualisation, design, methodology and management. Unlikely to advance the field significantly. It does not meet all scheme assessment criteria.
1	Unfundable Not suitable for funding	A proposal that has an unsatisfactory level of originality, quality and significance. Has limited potential to advance research within the field and may be unconvincing in terms of its management arrangements or capacity to deliver proposed activities, especially for the amount of funding being sought. Unlikely to advance the field. It falls short of meeting the assessment criteria for the scheme