

AHRC

Peer Review Handbook

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Chapter 1: The AHRC's Peer Review College

5.4.3 The AHRC's Peer Review College

The Peer Review College (PRC) forms a crucial part of the peer review process and has a vital role in ensuring that the AHRC supports research of the highest quality.

1.1 Background of the PRC

The AHRC is fundamentally committed to competitive bidding and assessment by process of peer review. Peer Review College members form a key part of this system, which is designed to ensure that peer review is conducted with the utmost attention to fairness and transparency and to the requirements of academic rigour.

The Peer Review College was created in autumn 2004 with an initial membership of 460. The College was set up to improve the effectiveness of the peer review process in terms of providing high quality and objective reviews.

When the Arts and Humanities Research Board (AHRB) was established in 1998, it set up eight peer review panels to assess research applications. Panellists were selected to serve on the panels on the basis of their high standing as scholars and researchers with the aim of achieving a spread of subject expertise across the membership of each panel. Panellists had a broad knowledge and understanding of the subject areas that fell within their panel's remit. They did not, however, have a detailed knowledge of every specialism with which their panel was concerned. For this reason the AHRC also sought advice from specialist reviewers. During the first six years, this was accomplished by asking applicants to identify external assessors/independent evaluators who would provide the panel with an academic evaluation of an application. Panels were then equipped to determine a final grade for each application, taking account of the information provided by the applicant and the assessors/evaluators. Panellists were also asked to prioritise and rank the applications received to the scheme round. This dual approach to peer review worked well and, importantly, secured the confidence of the sector during the initial years of the AHRB, when applying for funding was a relatively new exercise.

After four years, it was considered appropriate to set up a review group to ascertain whether the structure was 'fit for purpose'. The review concluded that the existing approach worked well overall and that there should not be radical change. It did, however, consider that some changes could be made to make the process more effective and efficient and this resulted in the establishment of the College. The most important area concerned the quality of evaluations that the panel received. Under the system where evaluators were nominated by applicants, a high proportion of reviewers gave a

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high quality and high priority grading (A+), and in many cases provided a personal testimonial or uncritical assessment as opposed to a more objective analysis. This limited the evidence-base for the work of the panels, which then had the difficult task of prioritising proposals in the context of a finite number of awards.

In taking account of practice in other subject areas and by other funding bodies, the review group concluded that a college of peer reviewers would be well placed to provide more robust assessments:

- its members would be independently identified as researchers of highstanding who could comment authoritatively on applications for funding
- through induction days and written guidance, members of the College would be trained in the requirements of AHRC's schemes and programmes, and
- College members would be expected to review several proposals in the course of each year, compared to former reviewers who were only approached once or twice over a two-year period. This would enable College members to build up experience and expertise over time and to be well placed to develop the comparative picture of quality that is crucial to the work of panellists.

The College also provides other benefits:

- it provides a base of experienced reviewers from which panellists can be chosen
- it provides a means for the AHRC to consult and communicate with the research community, for example in relation to new programmes and schemes, and to receive feedback on its activities, and
- it broadens the knowledge and experience of, and contact with, the AHRC beyond the panels. This helps research organisations to engage with the AHRC, to understand the AHRC's priorities and goals, and to understand what makes a good application for funding.

In May 2005 a 'Review of the Peer Review College' was undertaken. Despite being conducted at an early stage of the College's development, it was found that the quality of reviews, that are so vital to the work of the AHRC's peer review panels, were proving to be more critical and useful and the profile of grades was more diverse.

To ensure that members of the College provide reviews that add value to the peer review process all members are expected to attend an induction event to be trained in the main aspects of the role of a College member. The events aim to equip members in making

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robust, comparative reviews of the strengths and weaknesses of proposals made to the AHRC's programmes.

Since June 2007 the AHRC has been using the Joint electronic-Submission system(Je-S) for peer review of proposals. This system means that members of the College can view proposals and complete their review online.

Nominated reviews ceased in March 2008. Furthermore, schemes which had allowed for a nominated review had to include an additional assessment from the College. From January 2008, members with technical expertise were recruited onto the College as technical reviewers. These members are called upon to comment specifically on the technical feasibility of research proposals.

Also in 2008, the AHRC undertook a review of its decision-making structures, including its assessment procedures. Some of the decisions affecting the College were:

- from 2009 the standing peer review panels were replaced with non-standing panels with membership convened from the College
- for non-standing panels, which receive independent peer reviews, grading and ranking decisions were to be made based upon expert reviews and Principal Investigators' responses
- non-standing panels which did not receive independent peer reviews were to assess, grade, and rank applications
- to widen membership of the College to cater for the diversity of the AHRC's funding portfolio
- to introduce a number of categories of College membership additional to those covering subject expertise. These classifications cover the following areas: Non-HEI, Knowledge Exchange, Strategic Reviewers, International, and Technical. College members can belong to more than one group, depending on experience.

In 2018 The AHRC decided to disband the Technical College and introduce a Data Management Plan in response to the massive burden the Technical College were under to provide reviews and to make the review of the Data Management Plan a more holistic part of the review of the whole proposal. This change took effect from March 2018.

The College has a large number of members with expertise in research areas across the AHRC's subject domain. A full list of members is provided [on our website](#)

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Chapter 2: Becoming a member of the PRC

5.4.4 Becoming a member of the PRC

2.1 Eligibility

The AHRC categorises its peer reviewers into different groups to improve its ability to match reviewers' expertise with proposals, and to enable it to identify reviewers who can assess certain aspects of proposals. Candidates must meet the criteria for academic reviewers to be eligible for membership of the College, but they can also be nominated for other groups alongside the Academic Group.

2.1.1 Academic reviewers

Academic reviewers are appointed to provide reviews of proposals for academic research and postgraduate training within their area(s) of research expertise.

Essential criteria

- Researchers with an active track record who are held in esteem by their peers.
- Able to demonstrate potential to review proposals within and on the margins of their main subject specialism or discipline.
- Experience of leading a research project and having responsibility for the overall management of the research or other activities.

Desirable criteria

- Experience of reviewing proposals for the AHRC and/or other funding bodies.
- Involvement in activities on a national or international level, for example external examining or national level committees.
- Experience of supervising PhD students and/or engagement with research student issues.
- Experience of leadership and responsibility.
- Experience of managing high levels of academic administration.
- Experience of collaborative working (within or beyond the academic sector).

2.1.2 International reviewers

International reviewers are appointed to provide reviews of research proposals of potentially international significance.

The criteria for appointment are the same as for academic reviewers, but nominees for international reviewers **must** also be able to demonstrate one or more of the following:

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- Experience of assessing applications for Research Funding Organisations at International level (e.g. for the National Science Foundation (NSF)); or for the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO)).
- Experience of assessing other types of documentation with an international dimension (e.g. being part of international review panels, refereeing for international academic journals).
- Experience of international research collaboration (e.g. collaboration with international researchers).

2.1.3 Strategic reviewers

Strategic Reviewers are appointed to provide reviews of applications to the Leadership Fellows Scheme and those proposals which involve issues at an organisational level (e.g. Doctoral Training Partnerships or Collaborative Doctoral Partnerships) or high levels of complexity.

The criteria for appointment are the same as for academic reviewers, but nominees for strategic reviewers **must** also be able to demonstrate the following:

- A good strategic overview of arts and humanities in the United Kingdom.
- Experience of a senior management or senior leadership role within a higher education institution (e.g. Pro Vice-Chancellor, Dean, Head of School or College, or Research Director).
- Experience of a leadership role outside the research organisation (e.g. leading a subject organisation or learned society).

2.1.4 Knowledge Exchange (KE) reviewers

Knowledge Exchange reviewers are appointed to provide reviews of proposals that are focused on or include elements of knowledge exchange activities.

The criteria for appointment are the same as for academic reviewers, but nominees for knowledge exchange reviewers must also be able to demonstrate:

- A good understanding of the distinctive nature of knowledge exchange in the arts and humanities, **and** experience of one or more of the following:
 - Participation in any knowledge exchange or impact activity as the result of their research; this can include formal and informal, funded or un-funded, and may have encompassed policy work,

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active dissemination, commercialisation, and/or public engagement activities.

- Collaboration and/or partnership working (including collaborative studentships) with non-academic partners, including commercial business, public sector, and third sector organisations
- Reviewing knowledge exchange proposals for Research Councils or other funding bodies.

2.1.5 Non-higher education institution (HEI) reviewers

Non-HEI reviewers are appointed to provide reviews on the social, cultural, or economic impact of proposals from a perspective outside the academic community.

Reviewers from Non-HEIs or with Non-HEI experience are sought to assess proposals requiring a perspective outside of the academic community. Many reviewers from organisations outside the higher education sector are also part of the other college groups and will also be approached to comment on other aspects of proposals.

Non-HEI reviewers will usually be based in a non-academic organisation (e.g. public-sector bodies, businesses, third sector organisations, museums, and galleries) and must have experience of one or more of the following:

- collaborating with academic researchers
- using the results of academic research, or
- reviewing applications for Research Councils.

2.2 Nominations

From time-to-time the AHRC seeks nominations for new College members. Candidates must be nominated by senior members of staff or representatives within higher education institutions or other organisations, learned societies, or professional associations. Candidates must meet the relevant eligibility criteria.

College reviewers are nominated by peers as experts and are able to comment authoritatively on proposals for AHRC research funding. The profile of the College is intended to reflect the breadth of disciplines and subjects within the AHRC's subject domain.

2.3 Appointment

College members are normally appointed for a term of four years and may serve up to two terms. Members are expected to review up to eight proposals to funding schemes or

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programmes during a 12-month period. This commitment is reduced for anyone acting as a panel member. Members must adhere to the Standards of Service in all Collegework.

2.4 Induction

To ensure that members provide reviews that add value to the peer review process all members should attend an induction day to be trained in the main aspects of the role of a College member. The event provides members with the opportunity to learn about the AHRC peer review process, network with other College members, and participate in a mock panel. We expect members to attend an induction before they are invited to become a panel member.

2.5. Terms and conditions

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2.5.1 Standards of Service

The AHRC relies on reviews from members of its Peer Review College to provide informed assessments of applications as part of the decision-making process. It is imperative that we maintain a high standard in all areas of the process in order to ensure the efficient processing of proposals. Reviews are requested and must be submitted through the Research Councils' [Joint electronic-Submission \(Je-S\) system](#).

College members are therefore asked to agree to abide by [certain standards of service](#).

The AHRC reserves the right to make reasonable changes to these standards of service. Any changes will be effected by a general notice to members of the Peer Review College.

2.5.2 Code of practice

The AHRC has adopted a Code of Practice for members of the AHRC Council, Committees, Panels and Advisory Groups and for those who assist in the work of the Council. In fulfilling your role you should abide by the seven principles of public life that were drawn up by the Committee on Standards in Public Life (the Nolan Committee). [More information on the Code of Practice here](#).

2.5.3 Freedom of information and data protection

This section describes your obligations as a Peer Review College member in relation to confidentiality and information legislation. The following paragraphs provide the context and practical implications.

1. The Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOI Act) seeks to ensure a culture of openness and accountability in the running of public bodies. Any information the AHRC holds could be requested under the FOI Act, and may need to be released – subject to any disclosure exemptions stated in the information legislation. [More information on the AHRC Freedom of Information Policy here](#).

2. The Research Councils must ensure that the peer review process encourages and supports the free and frank exchange of views between specialists, whilst maintaining the highest possible standards of openness and accountability. As such, the Councils use a joint framework (the Peer Review Framework) which outlines which peer review information is routinely disclosed and that which is routinely withheld. The Peer Review Framework can be found [on the RCUK web site](#).

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3. If an individual is identifiable from information in your possession, and is the focus of that information, such information constitutes personal data and is subject to the rules of the Data Protection Act 1998 (DPA). If you hold personal data, such as that found in copies of applications, award decisions, mark lists, consolidated mark sheets or other relevant papers, you must treat it in accordance with the DPA. Personal data must be kept securely, only used for the purpose for which it was supplied, and disposed of securely once it is no longer needed.
4. Any information you hold (including notes you take) relating to AHRC matters could be the subject of a Freedom of Information request. You should be careful how you record your views, in case your views need to be disclosed. It is essential that Peer Review College members operate impartially, honestly and fairly.
5. The AHRC expects that panel members will shred applications, relevant papers and notes after the panel meeting, or leave them at the meeting for the AHRC to dispose of. Any personal data received by email must also be kept securely, copies must not be made, and electronic files, CDs, etc. must be destroyed as soon as possible and in line with the process for the destruction of paper equivalents.
6. If you carry out a peer review using the Je-S system, the first time you are asked to provide an electronic review for the AHRC a screen will show the "Reviewer Protocols". These outline the standards the Research Councils require of reviewers in terms of confidentiality and conduct. You must agree to follow these protocols before being presented with any review material. You will be expected to confirm compliance with these protocols each year (not each time a new review is requested).
7. If you receive any requests for information relating to your work for the AHRC, please pass them, immediately, to the AHRC's Information Manager (FOI@ahrc.ac.uk). You are not expected to respond directly to the public, or to provide the public with any information.

Section A: Confidentiality and information legislation

Peer Review College members agree to treat all applications made to the AHRC confidentially. This duty of confidence covers:

- the fact that the applicant has applied; and
- the content of the application.

Information about applications must only be disclosed to third parties when the AHRC or the applicant has given consent in writing.

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Peer Review College members must not use information provided in a grant application for any purpose other than providing a review or assessment of it to the AHRC. Peer Review College members will destroy the application once a panel meeting has been conducted or a review has been provided (whichever is relevant).

The AHRC will not normally disclose panel member comments (or notes) to the applicant, although in some cases it may be necessary. The AHRC will only use comments for carrying out panel meetings or as part of the funding decision process. Comments will only be disclosed to individuals outside of the AHRC if it is required as part of the funding decision process, or is required under the Data Protection Act or the Freedom of Information Act (or any other law or regulation to which the AHRC is or may become subject to).

The AHRC will not release your name in connection with any specific comments that are released under the Data Protection Act or the Freedom of Information Act without first obtaining your permission. In such circumstances, the AHRC will ask the applicant to keep your comments confidential and not to release your name in connection with them without first obtaining your permission. However, the names of panel and Peer Review College members are made available on the AHRC's website.

The panel's comments on and grading of, applications will be recorded by AHRC staff. The AHRC 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 AHRC, or any other body that may be funding the applications, as part of the funding decision process
- to send to the applicant as part of AHRC feedback - if first agreed by the panel; or as may be required under the Data Protection Act or the Freedom of Information Act (or any other law or regulation to which the AHRC is or may become subject to).

2.5.4 Freedom of Information Peer Review Framework

The RCUK Peer Review Framework describes how peer review is used in assessing proposals and making funding decisions. The framework also outlines what information is routinely published relating to proposals and awards, and the approach taken by the Councils in responding to requests for information about the assessment process.

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The framework is designed for use by applicants and research organisations, board/panel members and external reviewers, members of the public and Research Council staff and [can be accessed here](#).

2.5.5 Equal opportunities

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 or 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.

2.5.6 Anti-Bribery Policy

The Arts and Humanities Research Council is committed to the practice of responsible corporate behaviour and to complying with all laws, regulations and other requirements which govern the conduct of our operations.

The AHRC is fully committed to instilling a strong anti-corruption culture and is fully committed to compliance with all anti-bribery and anti-corruption legislation including, but not limited to, the Bribery Act 2010 ("the Act") and ensures that no bribes or other corrupt payments, inducements or similar are made, offered, sought or obtained by us or anyone working on our behalf. The full text of the Anti-Bribery Policy [is available here](#).

2.6 Maintaining personal information in Je-S

As a PRC member and a user of the Je-S system you are responsible for updating your personal details. It is crucial that you keep your contact details and your classification information up to date as this will enable AHRC to contact you effectively and ensure that you are sent appropriate applications to review.

To amend your details please log-in to the Je-S system using your Je-S User ID and password and then select "My Details". Some changes, including a change to Department and/or Organisation, will not be displayed until the details have been verified by the Je-S

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Helpdesk. For guidance please refer to the System Help notes and the Maintaining Personal Details Tutorial. If you experience any difficulty using Je-S or have any questions please contact the [Je-S Helpdesk](#) or on 01793 444164.

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3. The review process

For the majority of the AHRC schemes the review process operates as follows:

- proposals are considered by two or more members of the Council's Peer Review College
- applicants provide a response (Principle Investigator Response/Right of Reply) to the anonymised comments of the Peer Review College reviewers
- proposals, reviews, and Principle Investigator responses to the reviews are considered by peer reviewers appointed by the Council to its panels
- a panel grades and ranks the proposals in order of funding priority
- the panels' recommendations are considered by the Director of Research and a final decision is taken on the list of awards to be supported.

Panel members are expected to make informed judgements of all proposals passed to them for review. It is impossible to achieve coverage within a single panel of the full range of subjects and the wide diversity of proposals submitted to the AHRC. Therefore, under the system outlined above, specialist advice is available via the reviews provided by the Peer Review College reviewers. In framing proposals for peer review, applicants are advised to address as wide a group of peers as possible.

There are some exceptions to the peer review process outlined above. For example, for the Research Networking scheme, Peer Review College reviews are obtained, but proposals are not considered by peer review panels. Where the grades differ, or the comments are inconsistent with the grade, the proposal and peer reviews will be moderated by a third member of the Peer Review College. S/He will consider the proposal, allocating a final grade. S/He will then rank all batched applications by priority for funding. Final funding decisions will be made by the AHRC. The AHRC also runs Assessment Panels for some schemes where panel members do make assessments of the proposals.

The peer review process used for a particular scheme or call will be outlined in the documentation for that scheme or call.

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3.1 Main stages of the assessment process

3.1.1 Submitting a proposal

Proposals to the majority of our schemes are submitted through the RCUK Joint electronic-Submission (Je-S) system. Applicants must complete the appropriate proposal form for the scheme to which they are applying and submit this along with a 'Case for Support' and other supporting information to Je-S. If the scheme has a closing date, this information must be received by the published deadline for the scheme. Late or incomplete proposals will not be accepted by the Je-S system.

Applicants indicate up to three subject classifications on their proposal form to identify the research area of the proposal. Where there is more than one panel for the scheme, the primary classification determines the panel to which the proposal will be submitted.

3.1.2 Sifting of proposals

Proposals to the following schemes will be quality-sifted by the AHRC:

- Cross-Council funded responsive-mode schemes
- Research Grants and Leadership Fellows – Standard and Early Careers.
- Research Networking.

Proposals are sifted according to the following principles:

- The AHRC will reject a proposal if the proposal does not meet the published eligibility criteria; either relating to documentation requirements or where it does not meet the aims or criteria of the scheme to which it has been submitted.
- The AHRC will sift proposals against quality criteria solely on the basis of information supplied by the AHRC peer review process.
- The AHRC will not sift on the basis of the information supplied by anon-AHRC peer review process.
- The AHRC will not sift outline proposals submitted to its strategic programmes as this process is conducted by a panel.
- The AHRC will not sift a proposal if the final funding decision does not fall wholly within a Research Council peer review process.

A sifting decision will be made based on the overall confidence levels and grades given by the peer review process. A proposal will be rejected if it receives two or more reviews that give the proposal a non-fundable grade (i.e. grades 1 –3).

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3.1.3 Principal Investigator Response ('PI Response')

For all schemes for which peer reviews are sought, except the Research Networking scheme, applicants who pass the quality threshold (i.e. receive two or more reviews graded at 4, 5, or 6) will be invited to submit a PI response to the Peer Review College reviews. This allows applicants to correct any factual errors or conceptual misunderstandings, or to respond to any queries highlighted in the comments from the Peer Review College reviewers. It is not intended to be an opportunity for the applicant to change or re-constitute a proposal in light of the comments. Applicants are not obliged to submit a response, but are encouraged to do so as responses from applicants are forwarded to the peer review panel and are taken into account in the ranking of proposals.

If a response is not received from the PI within the period stated, then the application will proceed to the peer review panel without it.

If a PI considers that a response to a particular review or reviews is not required, they are asked to include a statement to this effect in their response.

Points to consider for PI Response:

- there is no need to repeat reviewer comments
- the PI should aim to keep language neutral in tone, even if they feel strongly about a reviewer's comments
- the PI should focus on answering questions and addressing any issues raised by reviewers
- the PI should aim to be specific in their comments
- the PI should not re-write the application.

3.1.4 Panel papers

Meeting papers are made available to the panel via the peer review extranet a few weeks before the panel meeting. The papers include a number of documents relating to each proposal:

- the proposal documentation
- reviews

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- principal investigator's response to the reviews (if received)
- a mark sheet (to record grades and comments), and
- panel guidance.

3.1.5 Grading scales

There are separate grading scales for the Research Grants Scheme, the Leadership Fellows Scheme and Follow on Funding for Impact and Engagement scheme which can all be found in the Research Funding Guide. Any variations to the scales are outlined in the guidance for individual schemes.

3.2 Freedom of information and data protection

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). You must not disclose the fact that an applicant has applied to the AHRC for a grant nor the content of the proposal to any other person, without the prior written consent of the AHRC or the applicant. You must not use the information in the grant proposal for any purpose other than providing a review of it to the AHRC.

You are asked to bear in mind that your comments will be forwarded to the applicant and their institution and that you should not include any comments that may cause offence. Comments must relate to information in the proposal, they must be evidence-based and be made in relation to the scheme/programme criteria. The reviewer form is anonymised to ensure that your identity is not disclosed to the applicant but please ensure that you do not include comments that would reveal your identity.

Full details of how Freedom of Information (FOI) and Data Protection (DP) impact on your role and your obligations to these can be found in chapter 2.5.

3.3 Awards

The Director of Research agrees the final list of awards within the budget agreed for each round of a scheme.

3.3.1 Award announcements

Once the successful proposals have been approved, it is the role of AHRC Staff to ensure that applicants are notified of the outcome of their proposal. Feedback is provided as appropriate.

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All peer review that panel members undertake needs to be done in the strictest confidence. This includes all written information that is sent to panel members and all discussion at the panel meeting itself.

3.4 Cross-Research Council proposals

The Research Councils' guidance on reviewing interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary proposals, including proposals that straddle Council boundaries, is provided on this page. If you are asked to review a Cross-Council proposal it is important that you read this guidance.

- 1.** The Research Councils have an agreed approach for collaborating on the peer review and funding of research proposals that straddle their remits under their 'responsive-mode' research grants schemes which aims to ensure that no gaps develop between the Councils' subject domains and to ensure equality of opportunity for proposals at the interface between traditional disciplines, where many major research challenges are located. Further details of the Cross-Council Funding Agreement [can be found on the RCUK website](#).
- 2.** The Research Councils already collaborate on programmes of research with defined remits that cross Council boundaries. However, peer review can often be more difficult for responsive mode proposals, which can be submitted in any research area. Responsive mode is taken to mean unsolicited research proposals received in any area relevant to the research councils' remit. For some Research Councils this will include those received in response to highlight notices or priority areas that are processed as if they were unsolicited.
- 3.** This document aims to provide you, as a reviewer, with guidance to help you consider multidisciplinary proposals. This guidance is equally relevant to proposals that cross discipline boundaries within a Council's remit as well as those crossing between remit boundaries.
- 4.** For multidisciplinary proposals, it is unlikely that you will be familiar with all the elements of the programme of research. You may have been approached as a reviewer because of your particular expertise in one element and reviews will also be sought from experts in the remaining aspects. If you only feel confident commenting on particular elements of the proposal, please restrict your comments to these. This will greatly assist the panel in placing your comments in context.

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5. You should assign the proposal a grade and respond to those elements on which you consider it appropriate for you to comment. You may additionally want to justify the grade you have given or indicate any reservations you have. Please use the "Overall Assessment" section of the on-line review form to ensure that the reasons for your grade are clear; but please ensure that you DO NOT disclose the grade you awarded the proposal, as your comments are returned to the applicant.

6. Multidisciplinary research is often to be found at the cutting edge, which is inherently risky. You should not be afraid of recommending innovative, speculative and adventurous proposals. If you think something is risky, 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?

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

8. Do not be tempted to adjust your grade or score downward because you don't think that the research project fits fully within the administering Council's remit. Responsive funding can cross remit boundaries and where this is the case, a co-funding agreement will have been considered by the relevant councils. (Please note that co-funding is not considered appropriate for values of less than £150k). If we have forwarded this application to you, please respond on the assumption that we have accepted it as falling within our remit.

9. Multidisciplinary research may necessitate a researcher moving disciplines. While it is important that you are convinced that the appropriate logistical support is in place (including training where necessary), you should take care to review the project, not the applicant(s).

10. Don't forget that your comments may be fed back, anonymously, to the Principal Investigator. Where you consider the research is flawed in approach or contains elements of poor quality, the reasons must be clear, unambiguous and evidence-based.

3.5 Conflicts of interest

The Research Councils have adopted a code of practice for all those who assist in the work of the Councils which embraces the "Seven Principles of Public Life" drawn up by the Nolan Committee and endorsed by Parliament. These Principles refer to selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership.

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An important aspect of this code is the avoidance of any conflicts between personal interests and the interests of the Research Councils to ensure the probity of the decisions made by the AHRC and its representatives. In the context of peer review of research proposals, a conflict of interest might arise as a result of direct, or indirect, personal, academic, financial or working relationships. The acid test is whether a member of the public, knowing the facts of the situation, might reasonably think the judgement could be influenced by the potential conflict of interest.

3.5.1 Disclosure

Conflicts of interest may occur (1) when you are invited to do a review and (2) when you are invited to sit on a panel.

3.5.1.1 When invited to do a review

It is vital that all reviewers are seen to be completely impartial at all stages of the review process. You should not take part in the review of any proposal where a conflict of interest may be construed.

AHRC officers endeavour to identify conflicts of interest and will not select you as an assessor if there is a clear conflict. However, not all conflicts are obvious from the information we have available. **If you consider you may have a conflict of interest, you must contact the AHRC before proceeding with the review.**

3.5.1.2 When invited to sit on a panel

It is vital that panel members are seen to be completely impartial at all stages of the review process. You should not take part in the moderation of any proposal where a conflict of interest could be construed. If you think you might have a conflict, please inform the staff member responsible for your panel at the earliest possible opportunity.

You may still serve on the panel but you will be required to leave the room whilst the proposal(s) for which you have a conflict is/are being discussed. You are permitted to be present for the ranking of all proposals and it will be the responsibility of the chair to ensure that such proposals are not discussed again in detail, to ensure fairness and avoid any potential embarrassment.

You should not be involved in any way with a proposal prior to its submission or once a decision has been taken, e.g. you should not comment on, or help colleagues in preparing a proposal. If you are in any doubt as to whether you have a conflict of interest, you should consult staff working on your panel. If you are approached by applicants to discuss their proposals in any way – whether it be before, during or after

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the assessment process – you should decline. You are free to talk to applicants about the Council's structures, policies and modes of operation, so long as the information is in the public domain (e.g. in the Research Funding Guide or on the website). You must not divulge information about individual awards or application statistics, unless the information is already in the public domain (via press release, Annual Reports, etc.).

3.5.2 Examples of conflicts of interests

A conflict of interest occurs for a reviewer or panel member when you:

- are a personal friend or a relative of the applicant
- are intending to submit or have already submitted a proposal to the same round of the competition for which you are being asked to provide a review. For schemes which operate without closing dates, if you have or are intending to submit a proposal within 3 months of when you are being asked to provide a review
- are directly involved in the work that the applicant proposes to carry out and/or have assisted the applicant with their application for funding
- are a current member of staff or a Professor Emeritus/Emerita at the same research organisation as the applicant, or at the proposed host institution for Fellowship proposals. If you are at Cambridge or Oxford University you should not review proposals from any college at your institution. Please note that staff employed by a member institution of the University of London or University of Wales may review proposals from other member institutions
- have collaborated on a research project, or worked closely, with the applicant in the last five years
- have been employed at the same department as the investigator(s) in the last 12 months
- were the PhD Supervisor for the investigator(s)
- are asked to review an application in which your RO is named as a partner institution
- have a vested interest in the research, for example you are a general editor of the series to which the work that is the subject of the proposal will contribute, or a curator of a gallery where the work will be exhibited
- have been approached and agreed to be a member of a committee connected with a research project, for example an advisory group or steering committee, you should not - if approached - also act as a reviewer for that project

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- are invited to sit on a panel which will moderate an application that you have reviewed.

Please note that, the restrictions which apply to the Principal Investigator, in terms of research organisation, past research organisation, past collaborations and any other types of conflicts of interest as mentioned above, apply equally to the Co-Investigator(s) on an application.

This is not an exhaustive list: if you are in any doubt about whether or not you should assess a proposal due to a possible conflict of interest, please contact the Programmes Coordinator who has approached you for a review.

Please also refer to the conflicts of interest section of [the AHRC's Code of Practice](#) for members of the AHRC Council, Committees, Panels and Advisory Groups.

Chapter 4: Role of the PRC reviewer

4. Role of the PRC reviewer

This chapter outlines how the PRC reviewer fits into the overall peer review assessment process.

College members are invited to submit peer reviews which are used by moderating panels to make decisions on whether applications are of a fundable standard and to rank the proposals. Assessments are made using a pre-defined grading scale. Typically three reviews are required for each proposal.

Members of AHRC staff select reviewers on the basis of the research classifications and key words listed in the application. These are chosen from the cross-council classification system, available in Je-S. The same list is used by applicants, to classify their research proposal, and by College members, to describe their research expertise. Using common lists for both reviewers and applicants helps ensure that reviewers receive proposals within their area(s) of expertise. PRC members can help in this process by ensuring that their classifications on Je-S are up to date.

The AHRC always endeavours to choose reviewers from within its College membership, but will draw on non-college members from the wider academic and user communities when a suitable College member is not available.

Your primary role will be to provide the AHRC with informed reviews of proposals submitted to the AHRC. **The Council is seeking expert academic reviews of proposals, not personal testimonials.** Reviews that provide an objective analysis of research proposals are key to the assessment process.

As a Peer Review College reviewer, you should exercise your knowledge, judgement and expertise to reach clear and soundly based decisions that are fair, objective and evidence-based. The AHRC is committed to equal opportunities. Please ensure therefore that all proposals are reviewed on equal terms. Proposals must be reviewed and graded on their merits, in accordance with the criteria for each scheme or call for funding.

You may be invited to serve as a panel member, as a representative of your (broad) subject area. Panels rank and grade proposals to a given scheme based on the aims, objectives and criteria of the scheme, as well as its assessment procedures.

Chapter 4: Role of the PRC reviewer

4.1 Peer Review College review

The AHRC normally contacts two or more Peer Review College members to review each proposal received. If you are selected, you will receive an email request from the Je-S (Joint Electronic Submission) system regarding the proposal that you are being asked to review. The proposal and all the paperwork can be accessed via the Je-S system and you will need to complete and submit your review on the Je-S system. All Peer Review College members need to have a Je-S account.

For almost all of our schemes you will need to use the Je-S system to submit your review. AHRC will not be able to accept your review via email or in hard copy, unless otherwise stipulated by us.

If you need any assistance or advice in your use of the system or experience any problems, you should contact the Research Councils' Je-S Helpdesk. They can be contacted by telephone on 01793 444164 or by email on JeSHelp@rcuk.ac.uk from 8.30am to 5pm Monday–Friday.

If you consider that you have been inappropriately matched to a proposal or are unable or unwilling to complete the review, please log in to the Je-S system and decline the review (by selecting 'Decline to Review' under the Document Data menu in the Je-S review form and select 'SUBMIT'). We ask that any decline notifications are sent as soon as possible and no later than five working days so that an alternative reviewer can be approached immediately. It would be helpful if you could suggest the name of an alternative reviewer but please do not approach the individual yourself.

A reviewer can decline to carry out the review at any point. If the reviewer is able to complete the review, but not by the due date given, they should not decline the review immediately but should contact the person named in the 'Instructions to reviewer' section to discuss an extension to the deadline.

A reason for declining the review must be given. The options given are:

- Outside area of expertise
- Too busy
- Conflict of Interest
- Other

Please note that it is mandatory to provide further details in the text field if "other" is selected.

Chapter 4: Role of the PRC reviewer

If you intend to complete the review, it would be helpful if you could let us know. You can do this by emailing the AHRC contact named in the 'Reviewer Information' section of the form.

If a review is received after the due date and you have not sought prior approval to submit it late, we may not be able to use it.

You will be expected to review up to eight proposals during each 12-month period (normally no more than four per quarter).

You will be asked to provide a review, covering the following broad headings:

- quality and importance
- people
- management of the project
- value for money and appropriateness of resources requested
- outputs, dissemination and impact
- overall assessment (grade and overall conclusions on proposal, including strengths and weaknesses).

Scheme/Programme specific guidance, including review criteria is available via the Je-S Help Text. This will detail what points you should address under each of the headings. You will also need to assign each proposal a grade, as indicated in the guidance.

When composing your review please bear in mind that a copy of your comments will be forwarded – anonymised – to the applicant. You are asked to keep in mind the guidance within the Freedom of Information and Data Protection section. You are also asked to word your comments carefully, to avoid any personal remarks that may cause offence, and to adhere to the AHRC's Equal Opportunity policy. Please ensure that you only provide comments that relate to the information in the proposal and are relevant to the criteria for the scheme in question.

Guidance for UKRI grant assessors (reviewers and board/panel members, etc.)

We are committed to support the recommendations and principles set out by the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA; <https://sfdora.org/read/>). 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 an investigator's contributions, or to make funding decisions.

For the purpose of research assessment, please consider the value and impact of all research outputs (including datasets, software, inventions, patents, preprints, other

Chapter 4: Role of the PRC reviewer

commercial activities, etc.) 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 investigators. 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 UKRI grants.

You are responsible for keeping your contact details up-to-date. To amend your details, please [log in to the Je-S System](#) using your Je-S User Id and password, and then select the "My Details" option to amend the details. Please be aware that some changes, including a change to department and/or organisation, will not be displayed until the details have been verified by the Je-S Helpdesk. The system will also prompt you, at regular intervals, to check and re-affirm your details.

Chapter 4: Role of the PRC reviewer

If you are unable to provide reviews for a given period of time – for example, if you are intending to go on sabbatical, are ill or on maternity leave - please log your unavailability in Je-S. You will not be asked to do any reviews during that period.

4.2 Resubmission

In line with the AHRC's approach to demand management, unsuccessful applicants will not be permitted to resubmit the same, or substantively similar, proposal to the same scheme.

In very particular circumstances the AHRC 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. Invited resubmissions will be assessed in the usual way in competition with all other proposals.

For general information on resubmission and for information specific to schemes, please see the [Research Funding Guide](#).

4.3 Interdisciplinary proposals

The Research Councils have an agreed approach for collaborating on the peer review and funding of research proposals that straddle their remits under their 'responsive-mode' research grants schemes. Guidance on reviewing interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary proposals is detailed in section 3.5. If you are asked to review a proposal that crosses Research Council remits it is important that you read this guidance.

4.4 Applying to the AHRC

You may apply to the AHRC's research programmes but you will not be permitted to review competing proposals in the round to which you intend to apply or to attend the panel meeting at which your application will be assessed.

If you are connected to a proposal which is either awaiting a funding decision or which will be submitted in the next three months, please check whether it was, or will be, directed to the same scheme for which you are being invited to provide a review. If this is the case, please decline the review.

If you have already agreed to sit on a panel and intend to apply, please notify the staff member responsible for your panel as soon as possible. You will need to stand down from that meeting and will not be able to receive the panel member's fee for that meeting.

Chapter 4: Role of the PRC reviewer

AHRC Peer Review College reviewers are free to apply for funding from other sources, including the British Academy and other Research Councils.

4.5 Monitoring and performance

We expect you to observe the standards contained within the 'Standards of Service' document which you agreed to on becoming a member of the College. We will periodically review data on numbers of requests made, numbers of reviews provided and number of acceptances and declines made. You may be asked to withdraw from the College if you do not comply with the 'Standards of Service'.

5. Panels

The AHRC convenes non-standing panels from the membership of the College. Panels meet on an *ad hoc* basis according to the requirements of the scheme for which they provide final grades and ranking.

To avoid conflicts of interest College members are not appointed to panels for which they have submitted a review or where they are involved with a proposal that is being considered at the meeting.

The AHRC relies on moderating panels to make funding recommendations for most of their schemes, including Research Grants and Leadership Fellows with open deadlines. Moderating panels assign final grades and rank proposals in order of priority for funding. The rank ordered list agreed by the panel forms the funding recommendation for AHRC. The role of the panel is to make judgments on the applications on the basis of the feedback from the peer reviewers and PI response. It is not their role to reassess the applications when deciding the final grade.

Assessment panels operate differently. It is the role of the members of these panels to assess the application and assign a suggested grade against the scheme criteria, normally prior to the meeting. The panel meets to discuss the pre-assigned grades, agree final grades and rank proposals in order of priority of funding. The rank ordered list agreed by the panel forms the funding recommendation for AHRC.

5.1 Panels for schemes

Research Grants and Leadership Fellows operate a single panel. Proposals to some schemes such as the Research Networking scheme do not go to panel at all. Further information about the assessment route for these schemes can be obtained from our website. The panels are non-standing and convened on an *ad hoc* basis from the College membership. [Details of panel membership](#) can be found on our website.

5.2 Panel membership

Whenever possible, panel membership is drawn from the College. Not all College Members will have the opportunity to sit on a panel during their term of membership.

The following is taken into consideration when determining membership for panel meetings:

- for each research grants scheme panel, the subject spread and number of applications are predicted and the size and scope of the panel organised accordingly. We aim to get a spread of expertise but we cannot cover all subjects in which we are likely to get applications
- an equal balance between those that have previously sat on a panel/acted as Chair and those who have not previously sat on an AHRC panel
- there will only be one panel member from any one institution
- those who have submitted an application or a review for an application which will be considered at the panel meeting, will not be invited, as these constitute a conflict of interest
- the AHRC is committed to equal opportunities and aims to ensure an even geographical spread from across the UK and a fair gender balance.

5.3 Role of the panellist

As a panellist, you are expected to:

- familiarise yourself with the guidelines and assessment criteria for the scheme(s) with which you may be involved
- comment on and grade all proposals which are directed to you, except where you have a conflict of interest
- attend panel meetings to agree final grades and rankings for all proposals, and feedback for applications where applicable
- make a note of your opinion of the proposals. If, for some reason and at the last minute, you can't attend we might ask for your notes.

Full guidance on what kind of comments you are expected to make will be sent to you along with the applications. Your comments will facilitate discussion at the meeting, and contribute to feedback if applicable. Please ensure that your remarks are carefully worded, as applicants may request access, under the Data Protection Act, to all personal data being held on them by the AHRC.

In undertaking the above tasks, you are expected to exercise your knowledge, judgement and expertise to reach clear and soundly based decisions; treat all applications, award reports and assessments as strictly confidential at all times; always be fair and objective; and adhere to [the RCUK Equality and Diversity Policy](#).

Panel Members are paid a fee of £170 per meeting and Chairs will receive £230 per meeting. This is considered as income from self-employment and is taxable as such.

When you are serving on a moderating panel, you will not be allowed to introduce new criticisms or comments that have not already been raised by the peer reviewers. Full guidance about your role will always be provided when you accept an invitation to serve on a panel.

It is impossible to achieve coverage within a single panel of the full range of subjects and the wide diversity of applications submitted to the AHRC, therefore you will be expected to make informed judgements of all proposals assigned to you for moderation (except where there is a conflict of interest), including those which do not lie within your precise area of subject expertise. Even if you consider that you cannot make informed judgements on matters such as the significance and importance of the research, you may have valuable comments to make on matters such as the feasibility of the methodology, or whether the proposed research would present value for money. You should be guided by your experience as a researcher as well as the expert advice from the peer reviewer.

Under the system outlined above, specialist advice will be provided by the assessments from Peer Review College reviewers. We advise applicants that, in framing applications for peer review, they should address as wide a group of peers as possible and to consider the widest possible routes for dissemination of their work.

If you have been approached to sit on a panel and you know that you will be applying to any AHRC scheme, you are asked to inform the AHRC as soon as possible as you may need to step down. Early notification is important in order to provide the AHRC with enough time to find a replacement.

5.4 Panel meetings

The purpose of panel meetings is to consider and reach final agreement on the grading and ranking of proposals, and also to agree broad feedback for applicants, where applicable. The panels' recommendations are then presented to the Director of Research who will make the final funding decisions. Panel meetings also provide an opportunity for panellists to raise issues such as the quality of peer review or the potential impact of the research proposed through the applications received to that meeting.

If you are invited to act as panel chair, you may particularly wish to focus on those proposals where there is a divergence of views amongst panellists. Your principal role will be:

- to chair the meeting ensuring that the correct procedures are followed, conclusions and recommendations are agreed, and that the meeting runs to time
- approve and sign panel meeting minutes
- if required, approve draft feedback comments provided by staff responsible for your panel
- moderate the discussion of applications and ensure each application is graded and ranked appropriately
- ensure that an agreed rank ordered list of proposals is produced
- help to identify intellectual trends apparent from the proposals assessed
- help to identify particularly significant or newsworthy projects which might be used in AHRC publicity and other documentation for wider audiences
- liaise and work with AHRC staff responsible for your panel
- wherever possible, comply with any deadlines given, to enable staff to conduct panel arrangements as smoothly as possible, for example commenting promptly on draft minutes or feedback comments to unsuccessful applicants.

Panellists and chairs are normally appointed for approximately seven weeks before and five weeks after the scheduled panel meeting date. You will be expected to fulfil your agreed role during this period. If for any reason you cannot, you are asked to notify us as soon as possible so that we may find a replacement. For the period of your panel appointment you have the option of making yourself unavailable to undertake reviews by updating your details in Je-S with the period of your unavailability.

If you know that you will not be able to attend the meeting, please inform the staff member responsible for your panel as soon as possible. You may still be required to provide detailed comments, which can be taken in to account at the meeting.

You are expected to have familiarised yourself with all of the proposals which have been assigned to you as first or second introducer or supporting introducer and have read as many of the other proposals as you can, as this helps the panel's discussions. Taking account of the aims and assessment criteria for the scheme concerned, you will need to have graded and commented in advance on all of the proposals you have been asked to introduce. You should grade the applications independently.

If you think that you do not have all the paperwork, or if you are aware of any problems that could be resolved in advance of the meeting, please alert the AHRC staff member

responsible for your panel at the earliest opportunity and at the very least before the meeting so that s/he can take the appropriate action.

Any feedback given to applicants as part of the review process will normally be released to the applicant in an anonymised form which they are asked to keep confidential. It is important therefore that your comments are coherent, carefully considered and avoid any personal remarks.

Your comments and grades will not be used outside the peer review/funding decision making process unless they are subject to specific legal requirements.

5.4.1 At the panel meeting

The AHRC convenes the panel. Before the panel, every proposal is assigned to two introducers and possibly a supporting introducer. Before the meeting, each introducer will decide an overall grade.

The panel discusses and agrees a grade for the proposal, and ranks it relative to the other proposals.

Finally, the panel reviews its final grades and ranking list which constitutes its funding recommendation.

At the panel meeting AHRC staff:

- minute questions concerning policy, protocols and assessment practices
- advise on any points of protocol or policy where necessary
- ensure that proper procedures and protocol guidelines are enforced during the meeting, including adherence to AHRC's commitment to equal opportunities
- ensure that the panel provides and records appropriate feedback comments for applicants where necessary.

It is vital that panel members are seen to be completely impartial at all stages of the process. You should not, therefore, take part in the moderation of any proposal where a conflict of interest could be construed. If you think you might have a conflict, please inform the staff member responsible for your panel at the earliest possible opportunity.

If you are in conflict with a proposal, you will be required to leave the room whilst the proposal is discussed. You are, however, permitted to be present for the ranking of all proposals and it will be the responsibility of the chair to ensure that such proposals are not discussed again in detail, to avoid any potential embarrassment.

You should not be involved in any way with a proposal prior to its submission or once a decision has been taken – e.g. you should not agree to advise or comment on, or help colleagues in preparing, a proposal. If you are in any doubt as to whether you have a conflict of interest, you should consult staff working with your panel. If you are approached by applicants to discuss their proposals in any way – whether it be before, during or after the assessment process – you should decline.

You are of course free to talk to applicants about the Council's structures, policies and modes of operation, so long as the information is in the public domain (e.g. in the Research Funding Guide or on the website). You must not divulge information about individual awards or application statistics, unless the information is already in the public domain (via press release, Annual Reports, etc.).

5.4.1 Grading and ranking proposals

Panels are asked to consider each proposal on its merits and award it a grade.

Grading decisions at moderating panels are reached through discussion of the proposals taking into account the comments of the reviewers, the Principal Investigator's response to the reviews, grades and comments of individual members of the panel. At assessment panels grading decisions are reached through discussion of the proposals based on grades and supporting comments of individual members of the panel.

Panels will be asked to rank proposals. The number of proposals that need to be ranked will vary according to the scheme, the round and the level of funding available. AHRC staff will be able to advise further at the meeting. 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.

AHRC staff may make adjustments to the costs identified in proposals 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.

In considering the proposals, 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, the reviews and the PI's response to these, where received. You should not allow private knowledge of the applicant or the proposed research to influence your judgment nor should you introduce new concerns or criticisms that have not been raised by the reviewers.

5.5 Payment of expenses

Expenses can be claimed for AHRC meetings or other events that members are required to attend and where the AHRC has specified that expenses can be claimed. Expenses for other relevant meetings that members are invited to attend may be paid but require advance authorisation in writing from an Associate Director.

Panel members must complete a claim form, available from the relevant staff member, and submit it, signed and with original receipts, within the stipulated time and submission deadline of the meeting/event.