

PEER REVIEW COLLEGE MEMBERS

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (FAQS)

(Questions that may arise during your term as a member of the Peer Review College)

Contents

1. ESRC Peer review.....	4
1.1 What is peer review?	4
1.2 What types of ESRC reviewers are there and why?	4
1.3 Are the different types of reviewers treated in the same way/given equal weighting? 4	
1.4 How are reviewers chosen?	4
1.5 How many reviews are required for an application?	5
1.6 How are applications scored?	5
1.7 Why do Small Grant and Postdoctoral Fellowship (PDF) proposals have a different reviewer form to that for Standard Proposals?.....	7
1.8 How are decisions made?	9
1.9 Do you ask reviewers to reconsider if the reviewer comments/grades received for an application differ substantially?	10
1.10 What does the office do with inadequate reviewer comments?	10
2. ESRC’s Peer Review College.....	10
2.1 What is ESRC’s Peer Review College?	10
2.2 Why was the Peer Review College set up?	10
2.3 Is there a direct relationship between the membership for the Grants Assessment Panels and Peer Review College?.....	11
2.4 Is the college membership made publically available?.....	11
2.5 How were members of the College recruited?.....	11

2.6	Will there be future rounds of recruitment for College membership, and if so how can I become a College member?	11
2.7	Can I become a member of the Peer Review College if I am already a member of another Research Councils' Peer Review College?	12
2.8	Is ESRC peer review exclusive to College members?	12
2.9	Can applicants still nominate reviewers?	12
2.10	Could I be approached by an applicant to act as a nominated reviewer?	12
2.11	Does ESRC treat reviews from nominated reviewers differently?	12
3.	Role of a Peer Review College member	13
3.1	What is the role of a College member?	13
3.2	How many proposals/final reports will I be asked to review?	13
3.3	If I work part-time will the number of reviews expected of me as a College member be reduced?	14
3.4	Will I be asked to undertake reviews on behalf of other Research Councils?	14
3.5	How will I benefit from being a member of the Peer Review College?	14
3.6	Will I be paid for my role on the Peer Review College?	15
3.7	What is the period of my appointment?	15
3.8	What should I do if I will be unavailable to review proposals for a given period of time?	15
3.9	Who should I approach if I wish to request a temporary suspension of membership?	16
3.10	What if I need to leave the College before the end of my appointment?	16
4.	Reviewing proposals	16
4.1	What sort of review am I expected to provide?	16
4.2	What should I look at when assessing value for money?	17
4.3	What will the reviewer form look like?	17
4.4	Who is the audience for my reviewer comments?	18
4.5	Are there any sections in the reviewer form where I can include confidential comments for ESRC that would not be fed back to applicants?	18
4.6	Considering the large number of applications that the ESRC receives, if a proposal is not assigned a score of 6 does this mean that the proposal will not be funded?	18
4.7	Should we give a higher weighting to those proposals specifically targeting ESRC Strategic Challenge areas?	19
4.8	How long might a review take to complete and how long should my comments be?	19

4.9	How long will I have to review a proposal?.....	20
4.10	How do I receive, complete and return my review?.....	20
4.11	Is there any guidance on how to use the Je-S system?.....	20
4.12	Who should I contact if I have problems using the Je-S System?.....	20
4.13	What happens if I accept to undertake a review and am then unable to submit it by the due date?.....	21
4.15	What if I do not feel sufficiently knowledgeable to review a proposal?.....	21
4.17	What should I do if I think I have a conflict of interest in considering a proposal?..	22
4.18	What constitutes a conflict of interest?.....	22
4.19	What should I do if an applicant approaches me about a proposal to the ESRC?.....	23
5.	Contacting the ESRC.....	23
5.1	Who should I approach if I am unable to review a proposal or consider that I do not have all the information in which to review a proposal?.....	23
5.2	Who should I approach if my contact details need updating?.....	24
6.	Monitoring of performance.....	24
6.1	Will the ESRC monitor and review my performance?.....	24
6.2	Will ESRC provide feedback on my performance as a College member?.....	24
7.	Other responsibilities.....	25
7.1	Will I have any other responsibilities?.....	25
8.	Applying to ESRC's schemes.....	25
8.1	May I apply to ESRC's schemes?.....	25

1. ESRC Peer review

1.1 What is peer review?

“Peer review in the strict sense can be defined as a system by which the intellectual excellence, or importance, of a piece of work is judged by researchers working in, or close to, the field in question.” (Boden report on peer review 1990.)

[Back to Top](#)

1.2 What types of ESRC reviewers are there and why?

We have a broad range of reviewers in order to secure expert advice on the wide range of proposals that we receive; this range includes researchers with expertise in interdisciplinary working; in-depth expertise of specific research areas; expertise in the derivation or application of research methodologies; expertise in use of research tools such as databases. It also includes users with experience of research commissioning, practitioners who use research findings and policy makers who draw on research evidence. In addition we draw reviewers from a wide range of organisations and career experience, from postdoctoral fellows through to senior academics and users.

[Back to Top](#)

1.3 Are the different types of reviewers treated in the same way/given equal weighting?

Currently, ESRC treats academic and user reviewers in different ways (i.e. different guidance and forms, assessment criteria, and grading structure are used). Whilst user reviewers feed into the peer review process, the majority of user reviewers are nominated by applicants; most ‘independent’ (i.e. not nominated by the applicant) reviews are sought from academic reviewers. Use of different guidance, forms, etc means that it is difficult to give user reviewers equal weighting.

However, ESRC is currently reviewing its policy for the contribution of users to peer review to ensure that ESRC selects more ‘independent’ user reviewers and gets the best value from its users, and that users feel a valued part of the process.

[Back to Top](#)

1.4 How are reviewers chosen?

We send every application for over £200,000 to between three and six reviewers for expert comment, depending on the amount of funds requested. Reviewers are identified

by the Council's scientific staff, who are graduate social scientists (Case Officers). Between them, ESRC Case Officers have a background in a wide range of social science areas, and use this knowledge to select reviewers.

Case Officers identify reviewers from various sources including the Council's new Peer Review College (see section 2, ESRC's Peer Review College), personal knowledge, academic websites, learned society and on-line databases. Where the applicant nominates reviewers, Case Officers will approach one of the academic and (if applicable) all of the user nominees (subject to conflicts of interests – see section 4, Question: What constitutes a conflict of interest).

[Back to Top](#)

1.5 How many reviews are required for an application?

The number of reviews required for an application depends on the amount requested. For those applications:

- under £500,000 - 3 reviews required
- over £500,000 - 4 reviews required
- over £1M - 5 reviews required

This is the minimum number of reviews required, more reviews may be sought if it is deemed necessary by the Office, for instance if grades differ significantly between reviews. [Note: these numbers refer to the actual reviews, not requests for reviews.]

[Back to Top](#)

1.6 How are applications scored?

As part of the Research Councils' drive to improve efficiency and effectiveness, ESRC's grant administration recently transferred to the RCUK Shared Services Centre (SSC). Moving to the new back-office system has involved our moving to harmonised use of numerical peer review grading scales. The reviewer scores have changed from the ESRC A+, A, A- scale – and for some schemes, other scales – to a single numerical scale from 0 to 6. Please see the following table to see the mapping of the old grades to new.

Score	Equivalent previous grade	Score description based on scientific quality.
		<i>All assessment criteria should be considered before arriving at an overall score.</i>
6	A+	The proposal is outstanding in terms of its potential scientific merit.

5	A+	The proposal is excellent in terms of its potential scientific merit.
4	A	The proposal is important as it has considerable potential merit.
3	A-	The proposal has significant potential scientific merit but is not of a consistently high quality.
2	B	The proposal will add to understanding and is worthy of support, but is of lesser quality or urgency than more highly rated proposals. Such proposals are unlikely to have a significant influence on the development of the research area.
1	Reject	The proposal is flawed in its scientific approach, or is repetitious of other work, or otherwise judged not worth pursuing; or which, though possibly having sound objectives, appears seriously defective in its methodology.
0	Not able to assess	Not able to assess

All peer review forms now have four core criteria (below) plus up to two scheme-specific ones. For consistency, the sub-scores for each criterion are also on a scale from 0 to 6. For ESRC standard research proposals the criteria are as follows:

Assessment Criterion 1	Originality; Potential Contribution to Knowledge
Assessment Criterion 2	Research Design and Methods
Assessment Criterion 3	Value for Money
Assessment Criterion 4	Outputs, Dissemination and Impact
Assessment Criterion 5	<i>Scheme specific – not used for responsive mode standard grant proposals</i>
Assessment Criterion 6	<i>Scheme specific – not used for responsive mode standard grant proposals</i>

For other schemes please see the specific guidance for that scheme. Please note that the score mappings for user reviewers are as follows:

Previous user grades	Mapping
High	5-6
Moderate	3-4
Low	2
None	1
Not able to assess	0

Proposals receiving an average reviewer score of below 4 (equivalent to A previously) are normally rejected without referral to the Grants Assessment Panels (GAPs). All proposals with an average score of 4 or above are forwarded to the Panels for consideration. The Je-S guidance has also been changed for easy reference to the new scale.

[Back to Top](#)

1.7 Why do Small Grant and Postdoctoral Fellowship (PDF) proposals have a different reviewer form to that for Standard Proposals?

The form you need to fill in on Je-S for Small Grant and PDF proposals is the new Panel Introducer's form (see Answer 1.8), which has a different scoring scale to that for peer reviewers shown in Answer 1.6: in this case the score range is 1-10, where score 10 represents an outstanding proposal (please see table below). [This is because these proposals are not referred to the full Grants Assessment Panels for a funding recommendation, but rather to one Panel Member only; formally the peer-review stage is missed out of the assessment process and you are acting as an Introducer in such cases.] The Introducer's form is simpler than the reviewer's form, and does not have sub-sections for specific assessment criteria. Nevertheless, please do include all relevant comments you have on the proposal on your form, including anything against any of the specific assessment criteria, even though there is no designated section for them on the form.

Introducer scores	Equivalent previous Assessor	Score description based on scientific quality. <i>All</i>

	grades	<i>assessment criteria should be considered before arriving at an overall score.</i>
10	A1 (H)	Exceptional proposals which are of outstanding scientific merit, i.e., of such innovation, novelty or timeliness that they are highly likely to make an exceptional scientific contribution and/or greatly enhance the development of the applicant's academic career.
9	A1 (L)	Outstanding proposals which are of excellent scientific merit, i.e., of such innovation, novelty or timeliness that they are likely to make an outstanding scientific contribution and/or greatly enhance the development of the applicant's academic career.
8	A2 (H)	Excellent proposals which are of significant value, and are highly likely to make a very important scientific contribution and/or will significantly enhance the development of the applicant's academic career.
7	A2 (L)	Very good proposals which are of significant value, and are likely to make a very important scientific contribution and/or will significantly enhance the development of the applicant's academic career.
6	A3 (H)	Good proposals which are of considerable value, and have the potential to make an important scientific contribution and/or will seriously promote the development of the applicant's academic career.
5	A3 (L)	Good proposals which are of considerable value, and have the potential to make a valuable scientific contribution and/or will seriously promote the development of the applicant's academic career.
4	A4	Proposals which are of value in their scientific contribution and/or may augment the development of the applicant's academic career.
3	A5	Proposals which offer some value in the potential scientific contribution of the proposal, but which may not be of a consistently high quality and/or are unlikely to enhance the development of the applicant's academic career.
2	Beta	Proposals which will add to understanding and are

		worthy of support, but which are of lesser quality or urgency than more highly rated proposals and would not greatly enhance the development of the applicant's academic career.
1	Reject	Proposals which are flawed in their scientific approach, or are repetitious of other work, or otherwise judged not to be worth pursuing, or which, though possibly having sound objectives, appear seriously defective at a technical level.
0	Reject	Proposals which fall outside of the scope of the scheme or cannot be assessed for some other reason.

[Back to Top](#)

1.8 How are decisions made?

For the majority of applications (e.g. Standard Grant proposals submitted under the Research Grants Scheme), applications may be submitted at any time, and are sent to reviewers for expert comment. Once applications have received a minimum number of comments and grades from reviewers, applications with an average score from reviewers of 4 or better are forwarded onto the Grants Assessment Panels (GAPs), which generally meet in March, July and November, for consideration. [Note: for proposals where the average reviewer score is below 4 the proposal is normally rejected without referral to the GAPs.]

Prior to consideration by the GAPs, each application is assessed by two GAP Members (Introducers) with knowledge of the subject area, who provide a score and comments, taking into account both their own expertise and the comments and scores provided by the reviewers (please see the table in Answer 1.7). Applications with the highest Introducer scores are sent to other GAP members before the meetings, along with reviewer comments. At the GAP meetings, GAPs assess applications and classify them by overall score. Funding recommendations are then made by the Grants Delivery Group (GDG), which is supported by the GAPs.

Further information about the assessment process for ESRC responsive mode applications can be found on the ESRC website ([Grants Assessment Process](#)).

[Back to Top](#)

1.9 Do you ask reviewers to reconsider if the reviewer comments/grades received for an application differ substantially?

No, we do not ask reviewers to reconsider their grades once these have been submitted. In these instances Case Officers may seek one or two additional reviews from other peer reviewers. If the grade and comments in one review differ substantially the office will bring this to the attention of the Introducers, and will ask them to bear this discrepancy in mind when assessing the proposal.

[Back to Top](#)

1.10 What does the office do with inadequate reviewer comments?

We do sometimes receive reviews which are not very useful or informative; we will pass these on to Introducers alongside all other reviews (unless libellous) but will approach additional reviewers to ensure full and fair consideration of the proposal.

[Back to Top](#)

2. ESRC's Peer Review College

2.1 What is ESRC's Peer Review College?

ESRC's Peer Review College is a group of approximately 1,800 experts (UK and overseas academics, and users) who have agreed to peer review a certain number of applications each year. The College provides peer review comments for most ESRC applications and awards (excluding fast-track applications such as Small Grants, Post-Doctoral Fellowships and Follow-on-Funds).

The profile of the Peer Review College is intended to reflect the breadth of disciplines and subjects within the ESRC's subject domain and the anticipated level of grant applications.

[Back to Top](#)

2.2 Why was the Peer Review College set up?

Peer review is and has always been at the very heart of the ESRC's activities. Previous to the introduction of the College ESRC's peer review process involved requesting reviews from members of the ESRC community with the appropriate expertise, with the potential pool of reviewers being drawn from across the entire research base. However this system, despite positive inputs from many academics, had unfortunately become very inefficient, with ESRC receiving only a 36% response rate from reviewers. The

College was established to improve this response rate and thus reducing processing times for proposals, by establishing a more focussed pool of reviewers and by requiring a College member to provide up to 8 referees comments per annum.

Quality of reviewers' comments is also very important to the ESRC; briefing events covering the main aspects of the role of a College member have been provided to help ensure that the College will improve the quality of peer review comments.

[Back to Top](#)

2.3 Is there a direct relationship between the membership for the Grants Assessment Panels and Peer Review College?

There is no direct relationship between membership of these two bodies. Members of the Grants Assessment Panel, whose role is to assess applications submitted under the responsive mode schemes and classify them by grade, are not drawn from members of the Peer Review College but through an application process and nomination by the ESRC. However, after your term has finished on the College you may be approached to join the Grants Assessment Panel.

[Back to Top](#)

2.4 Is the college membership made publically available?

Yes; the College membership is made publically available on the ESRC website ([Peer Review College Membership](#)).

[Back to Top](#)

2.5 How were members of the College recruited?

Members of the College were recruited predominantly through nomination by ESRC (a selection of ESRC awards holders), and senior members of ESRC's academic and user communities. Additional members were identified by ESRC to target gaps in academic, international and user coverage.

[Back to Top](#)

2.6 Will there be future rounds of recruitment for College membership, and if so how can I become a College member?

It is likely that there will be future rounds of recruitment for the Peer Review College, but on a smaller scale in the first instance. These are likely to be held on an annual basis, details of which will appear on ESRC's webpage for the Peer Review College in due course. ESRC does not allow self-nomination for the Peer Review College.

[Back to Top](#)

2.7 Can I become a member of the Peer Review College if I am already a member of another Research Councils' Peer Review College?

Yes.

[Back to Top](#)

2.8 Is ESRC peer review exclusive to College members?

Whilst the College will handle most of ESRC's peer review activity, ESRC peer review will not be exclusive to the College. ESRC will continue to seek reviews from outside of the College where necessary.

[Back to Top](#)

2.9 Can applicants still nominate reviewers?

Yes; applicants can still nominate up to two academic and two user reviewers. In addition to seeking reviews from within/outside of the College, ESRC will endeavour to gain reviews from at least one of the nominated academic reviewers, and both (if two are selected) of the nominated user reviewers.

[Back to Top](#)

2.10 Could I be approached by an applicant to act as a nominated reviewer?

College members may be approached by applicants to undertake reviews as nominated reviewers. Applicants are informed by ESRC that they should seek the person's permission before nominating them as a reviewer. As a College member, any reviews you undertake as a nominated reviewer will also count towards your agreed number of reviews.

[Back to Top](#)

2.11 Does ESRC treat reviews from nominated reviewers differently?

No, reviews from nominated reviewers are given equal weighting as those from other reviewers, however, Introducers are made aware of which reviews have been provided by nominated reviewers.

[Back to Top](#)

3. Role of a Peer Review College member

3.1 What is the role of a College member?

Your primary role as a Peer Review College member is to assist in ESRC's peer review process by providing expert quality reviews of proposals. Your reviews will inform the discussions of the peer review panels responsible for making final decisions on proposals. You also have a secondary developmental role to support the learning of applicants as researchers through constructive anonymised feedback. Constructive, high quality feedback can both reinforce what they have done well and indicate how they could improve applications in the future.

The Council is seeking expert reviews of proposals, not personal testimonials.

Reviews that provide an impartial analysis of proposals are key to the assessment process. You are expected to abide by the ESRC [Peer Review Code of Practice](#).

When completing reviews you should exercise your knowledge, judgement and expertise to reach clear and soundly based decisions that are fair, impartial and evidence-based. The ESRC is committed to equal opportunities. Please ensure therefore that all proposals are reviewed on equal terms. Proposals must therefore be reviewed and graded on their merits, in accordance with the criteria for each scheme or call for funding.

College members will also be asked to assist with monitoring of awards by providing reviews of final reports, and in some cases interim reports, arising from ESRC-funded projects. [Note: further details of the Council's monitoring policy and guidance on how to review monitoring reports will be provided when you are asked to undertake a review.]

You should treat all proposals, final reports and reviews as strictly confidential at all times. Proposals are submitted to the ESRC in confidence and may contain information and personal data belonging to the applicant (and other researchers named in the proposal). You must not disclose the fact that the applicant has applied to the ESRC for a grant nor the content of the proposal to any other person without the prior written consent of the ESRC or the applicant. You must not use the information in the proposal for any purpose other than providing a review of it to the ESRC.

[Back to Top](#)

3.2 How many proposals/final reports will I be asked to review?

As a College member you can expect to review up to eight proposals/final reports per year (normally no more than two per quarter) across ESRC schemes in your area of expertise, however, exceptionally you may be asked to review more proposals. If a

higher workload is anticipated through a particular call, you may be approached to review extra proposals within a shorter timeframe.

[Back to Top](#)

3.3 If I work part-time will the number of reviews expected of me as a College member be reduced?

Yes; the number of reviews will be proportional to the amount of FTE that you work. If you work part-time and have any queries about the number of reviews you have been asked to review please contact the Peer Review College team at peerreviewcollege@esrc.ac.uk.

3.4 Will I be asked to undertake reviews on behalf of other Research Councils?

It is not uncommon for the Research Councils to receive proposals that span across the remit of more than one Research Council. In these cases, the Council processing the application will seek reviewer suggestions from the appropriate Council(s), to ensure fair and rigorous assessment. If you are asked to complete a review on this basis (i.e. approached by another Council but asked to review a proposal from an ESRC perspective) then the review will count towards your agreed number of reviews. However, if you are selected by another Research Council to undertake a review on their behalf this will **not** contribute towards your 8 reviews.

Please note that in some cases where ESRC has a collaborative arrangement with equivalent organisations overseas then you might be asked to review proposals submitted to that organisation under a co-funding agreement. As, in these cases, you will be asked to comment from an ESRC perspective, your review(s) will also count towards your agreed number of reviews.

[Back to Top](#)

3.5 How will I benefit from being a member of the Peer Review College?

Being a member of the Peer Review College offers a number of benefits including:

- Personal development as a researcher and as a 'good citizen' of the social science research community through the chance to scrutinize a diversity of research proposals in a broad area of enquiry and provide developmental anonymised feedback to applicants.
- The opportunity to attend briefing sessions for College members which provide up to date information about peer review, research funding policies, and use of the Research Council Joint Electronic Submission (Je-S) System.
- Exposure to the peer review process, which provides the opportunity to monitor the

development of research in your area(s) of expertise and in conjunction with briefing sessions will help to improve the quality of a College member's reviews.

- A degree of recognition. For example, we hope that ESRC College membership would be included in the Research Excellence Framework (REF) as a measure of esteem. (NB: However, the Research Excellence Framework and ESRC's Peer Review College have been developed independently from each other and so there is no direct link between the two.)
- An understanding of the application process as a reviewer which should improve your chances of drafting better applications for funding to the ESRC.

[Back to Top](#)

3.6 Will I be paid for my role on the Peer Review College?

Unfortunately, except in very exceptional circumstances, we are unable to pay reviewers/College members.

[Back to Top](#)

3.7 What is the period of my appointment?

Peer Review College membership is normally for a period of up to four years. Continuation beyond this period or earlier withdrawal of membership will be at the discretion of the ESRC. The membership of the College will be monitored closely with expansion/reduction as necessary.

[Back to Top](#)

3.8 What should I do if I will be unavailable to review proposals for a given period of time?

If you are unable to provide reviews for a given period of time – e.g. you are intending to go on sabbatical, are ill or on maternity leave - please contact the RCUK Shared Services Centre (SSC) at esrcgrants@ssc.rcuk.ac.uk, telephone 01793-867125, so that you can make a request for your membership to be suspended. We will not ask you to do any reviews during that period.

[Note: if you are unable to undertake College business for a period of time (e.g. you are on research leave) your membership will be temporarily suspended but your period of appointment will remain the same.]

[Back to Top](#)

3.9 Who should I approach if I wish to request a temporary suspension of membership?

Please contact the RCUK SSC at esrcgrants@ssc.rcuk.ac.uk, telephone 01793-867125, in the first instance.

[Back to Top](#)

3.10 What if I need to leave the College before the end of my appointment?

Whilst we hope all College members will serve on the College until the end of their appointment, College members may stand down from College membership at any time. In addition, ESRC reserves the right to discontinue membership where individuals fail to observe the Peer Review College [Standards of Service Agreement](#).

[Note: if you are moving overseas we would still appreciate you remaining a member of the College.]

[Back to Top](#)

4. Reviewing proposals

4.1 What sort of review am I expected to provide?

College members are asked to provide a confidential review using the following broad headings:

- Originality; potential contribution to knowledge
- Research design and methods
- Value for money
- Outputs, dissemination and impact
- Overall assessment (grade and overall conclusions on proposal, including strengths and weaknesses).

They are also expected to make an informed judgement of the applicants' ability to carry out the proposed programme of work.

Scheme specific guidance, including review criteria, is available via the Je-S system review pages and is known as helptext. This will detail what points you should address under each of the headings. You will also need to assign each proposal a grade as shown in the guidance.

College members are expected to abide by the ESRC [Peer Review Code of Practice](#).

They are also encouraged to refer to the [checklist for an effective review](#), designed to ensure that reviews are fully informative for ESRC introducers and assessment panel

members and developmentally useful for applicants.

For information on ESRC's funding rules, such as the inclusion of overseas applicants (Co-Investigators only) and ESRC's policy for resubmissions, please refer to the [ESRC Funding Guide](#).

[Back to Top](#)

4.2 What should I look at when assessing value for money?

In looking at value-for-money it would be helpful if you could focus on: overall value for money and individual aspects of resourcing the proposal.

In terms of overall value for money, you are being asked to consider if the research proposed overall is good value-for-money for the total cost involved? The key issue here is whether the core potential of the research, and the likely contribution to the advancement of knowledge, understanding and/or methodology which it will make, either narrowly within its particular focus, or more broadly across its particular discipline or the sciences more generally, is likely to be sufficient to justify the inevitable costs involved.

Guidance for individual aspects of resourcing the proposal is available in the Je-S helptext.

[Note: the costs of particular resources are for resolution as to true economic cost between the Research Councils and other relevant bodies. You should not comment therefore upon: the level of estate costs in different institutions; the level of indirect costs; charging rates of institutional or other research facilities which are not open market provisions; specific salary levels in individual institutions.]

[Back to Top](#)

4.3 What will the reviewer form look like?

Most reviewer forms contain three sections:

1. Self assessment
2. Application assessment
3. Feedback for applicant(s)

When composing your feedback for the applicant(s), please bear in mind that your comments will be forwarded on to the applicant and should not, therefore, disclose your identity.

For further guidance on how to complete the reviewer form you should refer to the scheme specific guidance and the Je-S help text provided when you are asked to

undertake a review.

[Back to Top](#)

4.4 Who is the audience for my reviewer comments?

The primary audience for reviewer comments is the GAPs (or specially constituted Commissioning Panels for directive mode (strategic calls in highlighted areas) and annual competitions). It is also important to remember that the applicants are your secondary audience. Your anonymised comments will be fed back to them to demonstrate that the process has been fair and to support their learning by reinforcing what they have done well and indicating how they could improve applications in the future.

For some schemes, including from February 2011 all Standard Grant proposals through responsive mode, comments are forwarded onto the Principal Investigator for comment. These comments are then forwarded on to the Panel for consideration, along with other documentation relevant to the application such as the reviewer comments. The ESRC recognises that doing this can enhance the quality of the information that a Panel has in front of it in order to make a decision, while at the same time increasing the transparency of the process.

[Back to Top](#)

4.5 Are there any sections in the reviewer form where I can include confidential comments for ESRC that would not be fed back to applicants?

Whilst the primary audience for reviewer comments is the ESRC (via the GAPs), in the interest of transparency, and for the benefit of the applicants we do not want to encourage a comments section that is not be fed back to applicants. Nevertheless, reviewers should be assured that ESRC's peer review process is strictly confidential. The comments for applicant(s) section of the form is the only part of the reviewer form that is fed back to the applicants, and this is done so anonymously. Thus overall grades you assign, and those given for different assessment criteria, remain confidential to the ESRC. But applicants will see your associated comments, which should be consistent with your grading.

[Back to Top](#)

4.6 Considering the large number of applications that the ESRC receives, if a proposal is not assigned a score of 6 does this mean that the proposal will not be funded?

No. Whilst the competition is high, we encourage reviewers to be honest and impartial when assigning scores to proposals, and receiving lower than a 6 does not mean that the

proposal will not be funded. Your review will be one of several that GAP members take into account when considering applications.

The primary purpose of reviewer comments is to inform ESRC's decision making process and therefore, as a reviewer, it is important for you to be aware of the full range of scores and descriptors at your disposal, and ensure your comments fully justify and reflect the score given. It is also important for you to give a clear assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the proposal, and identify the extent to which these are minor or major.

In some cases College members may feel that a proposal would merit a higher rating if a number of clearly specified amendments were made to it. In such cases members could give the proposal the appropriate score but clearly state in their comments the conditions which they believe should be attached to any award.

[Back to Top](#)

4.7 Should we give a higher weighting to those proposals specifically targeting ESRC Strategic Challenge areas?

No. As most applications you will be asked to review will be submitted as Standard Proposals through an open call allowing applications in any area within ESRC's remit, proposals need not be relevant to ESRC's Strategic Framework and should be given equal weighting regardless of topic. However, if you are reviewing a proposal under one of our directive mode schemes (strategic calls in highlighted areas) you will be asked to identify whether the proposal fits within the remit of the call.

[Back to Top](#)

4.8 How long might a review take to complete and how long should my comments be?

In terms of how long a review might take to complete, it is difficult to provide a definitive response to this as it depends on a number of factors (including how experienced the person is at undertaken peer reviews, how familiar the person is with the subject of the application, how much information the reviewer would like to include in their review (see paragraph below), etc. Whilst this entirely depends upon the reviewer and the amount of time the reviewer chooses to put in, as a guideline, a review might take anything between an hour to half a day to complete.

There is no set length for reviewer comments - you may be able to summarise your views concisely, or you may wish to comment on a number of specific aspects of the proposal in detail. Relatively short comments that are clearly stated, well justified and constructive will be more useful to any Panel (as well as applicants) than long rambling unfocused ones. It may help to know that the average review is between half a side and 2-sides of A4 in length. After a decision on the proposal has been made, you will receive an

anonymous copy of all the comments made by reviewers on the proposal, which is intended to help in inducting and developing effective reviewers.

[Back to Top](#)

4.9 How long will I have to review a proposal?

The exact timetable for each scheme will be provided when you are asked to review a proposal, but in general you will have three weeks, depending on the scheme/programme for which you are providing a review. If the first person approached declines the request it is inevitable that the timeframe for subsequent reviewers will be shorter. All requests for providing reviews must be returned within the period specified to ensure that final funding decisions are made by the dates indicated to applicants.

[Back to Top](#)

4.10 How do I receive, complete and return my review?

For almost all of our schemes you will receive reviewer requests via the Research Councils' Joint Electronic Submission (Je-S) System (in the form of an automated email). You will also need to complete and submit your review via Je-S.

[Back to Top](#)

4.11 Is there any guidance on how to use the Je-S system?

Some FAQs and a step by step guide to completing a review in Je-S can be found on the ESRC website ([Je-S Electronic Peer Review](#)).

In addition, help text within the Je-S system displays the guidance notes for completing the review form.

[Back to Top](#)

4.12 Who should I contact if I have problems using the Je-S System?

If you need any assistance or advice in using 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, and are available from 9.00 to 17.00 Monday–Friday.

[Back to Top](#)

4.13 What happens if I accept to undertake a review and am then unable to submit it by the due date?

In the first instance please contact the RCUK SSC at esrcgrants@ssc.rcuk.ac.uk, telephone 01793 867125. If a review is received after the due date and you have not sought prior approval to submit it late, ESRC may not be able to use it.

[Back to Top](#)

4.14 What should I do if I am unable to undertake a review?

Whilst College members have agreed to undertake a number of reviews per year (and therefore, we would hope to keep decline rates down to a minimum), we appreciate there may be occasions where members are unable to undertake a review - eg during busy periods/periods of leave. If you are unable to meet a review request, please notify ESRC by declining via the Je-S system within 5 working days of the request, so that an alternative reviewer can be sought without delay. College members are also asked to notify ESRC of any prolonged period of absence (in excess of 4 weeks) in order that review requests can be suspended for an agreed period of time, or provide an alternative email and postal address to which requests can be sent.

[Back to Top](#)

4.15 What if I do not feel sufficiently knowledgeable to review a proposal?

When we select reviewers, we try to find individuals who can comment on a range of issues relevant to the proposal, including scientific merit, research design, the particular methodology proposed and the proposed data analysis. It may be that your interests match a very specific aspect of the proposal you have been sent. This can sometimes occur when dealing with interdisciplinary proposals, and if this is the case we would ask you to comment on the specific aspects of the proposal relevant to your area of expertise. If you are in any doubt, please contact the SSC at esrcgrants@ssc.rcuk.ac.uk, telephone 01793 867125, who will pass on your query to the most appropriate person to advise you further.

If you do not feel sufficiently knowledgeable to review a proposal, you should not undertake a review of the proposal. Please login to the Je-S system and decline the review as soon as possible and no later than 5 working days so that an alternative reviewer can be approached. It would also be helpful if you could suggest the name of an alternative reviewer. Please however, do not approach the individual yourself.

[Back to Top](#)

4.16 What if I feel there is someone else more suitable to review a proposal?

If you feel there is someone else more suitable to review a proposal either within or outside of the College, then we would be happy for you to suggest an alternative reviewer. However, if this is the case, please do not pass the application on to them. Instead, contact the SSC at esrcgrants@ssc.rcuk.ac.uk, telephone 01793 867125, who will arrange for the proposal to be sent to the suggested reviewer electronically if appropriate.

[Back to Top](#)

4.17 What should I do if I think I have a conflict of interest in considering a proposal?

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

We accept that it is likely that academics who work in the same field may know each other, and this doesn't therefore bar you from commenting on a proposal. Most of our peer review forms contain a confidential section on 'knowledge of applicant', where this information can be declared. However, if your knowledge/relationship with the applicant is such that you feel it would be difficult to be impartial when commenting on the proposal, then please get in touch with the SSC at esrcgrants@ssc.rcuk.ac.uk, telephone 01793 867125, to say that you would rather not comment on this occasion, explaining why this is the case so we can make a note of this for future reference if necessary.

You will also need to login to the Je-S system and decline the review, so that we can find an alternative reviewer as quickly as possible. It would also be helpful if you could suggest alternative reviewers who might have the appropriate subject expertise, but please do not approach them yourself.

[Back to Top](#)

4.18 What constitutes a conflict of interest?

ESRC aims to ensure that proposals are not forwarded to you for review where there is an obvious conflict of interest, but for information please ensure that you do not review a proposal:

- If you are a personal friend or a relative of the applicant.
- Schemes with closing dates - if you have submitted a proposal to the same round of the competition for which you are being asked to provide a review.
- Schemes without closing dates - if you are intending to submit, or have already

submitted a proposal within three months of the time that you are being asked to provide a review.

- If you are directly involved in the work proposed by the investigator(s).
- If you are a current member of staff or a Professor Emeritus/Emerita at the same institution as the investigator.
- If you have worked closely with the investigator(s) in the last five years.
- If you have a vested interest in the research, for example you are a general editor of the series to which the proposed outputs will contribute, or a curator of a gallery where the work will be exhibited.
- If you 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.

[Back to Top](#)

4.19 What should I do if an applicant approaches me about a proposal to the ESRC?

If an applicant approaches you about a proposal to the ESRC you should advise them to contact the RCUK SSC at esrcgrants@ssc.rcuk.ac.uk, telephone 01793 867125, in the first instance.

You may advise people within the subject area about applying to the ESRC and can talk to applicants in general terms about the Council's structures, policies and modes of operation. You must not, however, discuss with the applicant the content of any proposals you have reviewed, either during or after the round, or reveal any information that is not in the public domain.

[Back to Top](#)

5. Contacting the ESRC

5.1 Who should I approach if I am unable to review a proposal or consider that I do not have all the information in which to review a proposal?

If you have a query, or want more information concerning a proposal, please contact the SSC at esrcgrants@ssc.rcuk.ac.uk, telephone 01793 867125. 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), preferably within two working days** so that an alternative reviewer can be approached as quickly as possible. It would also be helpful if you could suggest the name of an alternative reviewer. Please do not, however, approach the individual

yourself.

[Back to Top](#)

5.2 Who should I approach if my contact details need updating?

We would be grateful if **you** would review and update your personal details through the Research Councils' Joint electronic Submission (Je-S) System. The reason for this is that Research Council staff are not normally permitted to make any changes to your Je-S account on your behalf once you have signed the Je-S Terms and Conditions.

To amend your details, please login to the Je-S System at [Je-S System Login](#) 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 & Organisation, will not be displayed until the details have been verified by the Je-S Helpdesk. If the information in your account is correct and does not need updating then we would welcome feedback to that effect. In future the system will prompt you, at regular intervals, to check and re-affirm your details.

For guidance refer to the System Help notes and the Maintaining Personal Details Tutorial at [Je-S Guidance](#). If you experience any difficulty using Je-S or have any questions regarding its use, please contact the Je-S Helpdesk. Email: jeshelp@rcuk.ac.uk; phone: 01793 444164 (out of hours: please leave a voice mail message).

[Back to Top](#)

6. Monitoring of performance

6.1 Will the ESRC monitor and review my performance?

Yes. We expect you to comply with the targets contained within the [Standards of Service Agreement](#), which you agreed to abide by 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 if you do not comply with these guidelines.

[Back to Top](#)

6.2 Will ESRC provide feedback on my performance as a College member?

ESRC is hoping to provide some form of feedback to College members on their performance as a College member, and is currently exploring ways of formalising this feedback. For example, providing members with an annual review summary, showing

them the reviews they completed in the last calendar year, the reviews assigned by the other reviewers, and the outcome of those proposals they reviewed.

[Note: at the present time it is too resource intensive to feed back Introducer comments to reviewers as well, however this may be something that we would consider in the future following the introduction of the new back office systems.]

7. Other responsibilities

7.1 Will I have any other responsibilities?

You may be invited to shape programme development, for example, through participating in discussion about potential strategic programmes and to represent the ESRC at events. Additionally, you may be invited to help train new members at future briefing events.

[Back to Top](#)

8. Applying to ESRC's schemes

8.1 May I apply to ESRC's schemes?

You may apply to ESRC's schemes but will not be permitted to review competing proposals in the round (for responsive mode schemes such as Standard Grants)/competition (for directive mode schemes) to which you intend to apply.

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 is 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 intend to apply to a scheme that operates without formal deadlines (ie responsive mode schemes), you may not apply to these schemes within three months of providing a review. This will ensure that your proposal is not reviewed within the same batch in which you have reviewed a proposal.

ESRC Peer Review College reviewers are free to apply for funding from other sources, including the British Academy and other Research Councils, subject to the eligibility requirements of these organisations.

[Back to Top](#)