

Peer Review Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

In this document we try to answer your questions about our peer review process. However, for a comprehensive overview of how we assess applications and the key information we are looking for from the peer review process we urge you to look at our Peer Review Training tool (<http://peerreviewtraining.esrc.ac.uk>).

ESRC peer review.....	2
What is peer review?	2
What types of ESRC reviewers are there and why?	2
Are the different types of reviewers treated in the same way/given equal weighting?	2
How are reviewers chosen?	2
How many reviews are required for a proposal?	3
How are proposals scored?	3
What specific criteria are used to assess a proposal?.....	3
How are decisions made?.....	4
Do you ask reviewers to reconsider their comments/scores if other reviewer comments/scores received differ substantially?.....	4
Does ESRC treat reviews from nominated reviewers differently?	5
What does ESRC do with poor quality reviewer comments?	5
Reviewing proposals.....	6
What sort of review am I expected to provide?	6
What should I look at when assessing value for money?	6
Who is the audience for my reviewer comments?	7
What is fed back to applicants?.....	7
Should I give a higher weighting to proposals specifically targeting ESRC Strategic Challenge areas?	7
How long might a review take to complete, and how long should my comments be?.....	7
How long will I have to review a proposal?	8
How do I receive, complete and return my review?	8
Is there any guidance on how to use the Je-S system to submit my comments?	8
Who should I contact if I have problems using the Je-S system?	8
What happens if I accept to undertake a review and am then unable to submit it by the due date?	8
What should I do if I am unable to undertake a review?	8
What if I do not feel sufficiently knowledgeable to review a proposal?	9
What if I feel there is someone else more suitable to review a proposal?.....	9
What should I do if I think I have a conflict of interest in reviewing a proposal?	9
What constitutes a conflict of interest?	10
What should I do if an applicant approaches me about a proposal to the ESRC?	10
ESRC's Peer Review College.....	11
What is ESRC's Peer Review College?.....	11

Why was the Peer Review College set up?.....	11
What is the role of a Peer Review College member?	11
What is the relationship between the membership of the Grant Assessment Panels and Peer Review College?.....	11
Is the College membership publicly available?	11
How are members of the College recruited?.....	11
Can I become a member of the ESRC Peer Review College if I am already a peer reviewer for another Research Council?.....	11
Is ESRC peer review exclusively carried out by College members?	12
Do College members get feedback on their performance?	12

ESRC peer review

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)

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:

- in-depth expertise of specific research areas
- expertise in interdisciplinary working
- 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.

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

Currently, ESRC treats academic and user reviewers in different ways (ie 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’ (ie 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.

How are reviewers chosen?

Reviewers are identified by ESRC staff (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 ESRC's Peer Review College (see section 3), personal knowledge, academic websites, learned society and online 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 2: What constitutes a conflict of interest?).

How many reviews are required for a proposal?

A minimum of three reviews is required, though more reviews may be sought if it is deemed necessary by ESRC, for instance if the proposal is interdisciplinary, crosses more than one Research Councils remit, or a significant and complex survey component on which we need particular expertise.. Note that this number refers to the actual number of reviews, not requests for reviews.

How are proposals scored?

The Research Councils have a harmonised set of numerical peer review scores.

Please see the following table to see the scores:

Score	Score description based on scientific quality <i>All assessment criteria should be considered before arriving at an overall score.</i>
6	The proposal is outstanding in terms of its potential scientific merit.
5	The proposal is excellent in terms of its potential scientific merit.
4	The proposal is important as it has considerable potential merit.
3	The proposal has significant potential scientific merit but is not of a consistently high quality.
2	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	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

All peer review forms 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 one to six.

What specific criteria are used to assess a proposal?

For ESRC Research Grant proposals the specific 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	Call specific – not used for the research grants (open) call
Assessment criterion 6	Call specific – not used for the research grants (open) call

For other calls please see the specific guidance.

How are decisions made?

In the case of our Standard Grants scheme proposals may be submitted at any time, and are sent to reviewers for expert comment. Proposals receiving an average reviewer score of below four (on the six point scale set out above) are normally not referred for further consideration by the Grant Assessment Panels (GAPs). All proposals with an average score of four or above are given the opportunity to provide a response to reviewer comments. We then forward this to the appropriate GAP for consideration in the decision making process. The GAPs meet three times a year to consider applications, typically in March, July and November.

Prior to consideration by the GAPs, each proposal 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. Applications with the highest Introducer scores are also allocated to ‘Readers’ (other Panel Members who familiarise themselves with the proposal and associated comments) to ensure that they can also actively participate in the panel discussion.

At the GAP meetings, members discuss proposals and classify them by overall score, providing funding recommendations to the Grants Delivery Group (GDG). The GDG is made up of the chairs of each of the three GAPs plus an independent member, drawn from our Research Committee. The GDG ensures the GAPs are working in a consistent way and moderates scores and rankings where that is necessary.

Further information about the assessment process for the ESRC research grants (open) call can be found on the ESRC website (<http://www.esrc.ac.uk/about-us/governance-and-structure/advisory-committees/research-committee/responsive-mode-grant-assessment-process/>). It is also covered in module three of our Peer Review Training Tool (<http://peerreviewtraining.esrc.ac.uk>)

We also run specific calls on particular topics with fixed closing dates. These may have an outline stage which shortlists proposals and then a full proposal stage when funding decisions are made. These decisions are normally taken by specially constituted commissioning panels made up of a mix of academic and user experts. At the meeting itself the decisions are typically based on the same scoring and ranking system as that used for GAPs

Do you ask reviewers to reconsider their comments/scores if other reviewer comments/scores received differ substantially?

No, we do not normally ask reviewers to reconsider their scores once these have been submitted. However, we do reserve the right to return the comments for amendment if the case officer feels the comments do not accurately reflect the score they have given. In the instances where scores do differ substantially, case officers will seek one or two additional

reviews from other peer reviewers. If the score and comments of reviewers differ substantially we will bring this to the attention of the Panel members.

Does ESRC treat reviews from nominated reviewers differently?

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

What does ESRC do with poor quality reviewer comments?

We do sometimes receive reviews which are not very useful or informative. If a comment is deemed unusable we approach further reviewers, until we are satisfied a proposal has been fully reviewed.

Reviewing proposals

What sort of review am I expected to provide?

Peer Reviewers 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.

Call 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 score as shown in the guidance.

Peer Reviewers are also encouraged to refer to the checklist for an effective review. This is designed to ensure that reviews are fully informative for ESRC Introducers and assessment panel members and developmentally useful for applicants.

We would also strongly advise all those commenting on ESRC proposals to access module 2 of our Peer Review Training Tool (<http://peerreviewtraining.esrc.ac.uk>), which explains what we judge good set of comments should look like and how they are most useful to Panel members

For information on ESRC's funding rules, such as the inclusion of international co-investigators and ESRC's policy for resubmissions, please refer to the ESRC Research Funding Guide (<http://www.esrc.ac.uk/rfg>).

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.

Within this criterion you are being asked to consider if the overall cost of the proposed research is good value for money. 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 costs involved.

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

The following costs are specific to individual Research Organisations and therefore comments should not be provided on these:

- the level of estate costs in different research organisations
- the level of indirect costs
- charging rates of institutional or other research facilities which are not open market provisions
- specific salary levels in individual research organisations.

Who is the audience for my reviewer comments?

The primary audience for reviewer comments is the Grant Assessment Panels, or specially constituted Commissioning Panels for directive mode (strategic calls in highlighted areas) and annual competitions.

Your anonymised comments will be fed back to applicants and their Research Organisations to demonstrate that the process of assessment 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.

What is fed back to applicants?

The comments for applicant(s) section of the form, overall scores you assign, and those given for different assessment criteria are fed back to the applicants.

Thus overall scores you assign should be consistent with your comments.

Nevertheless, reviewers should be assured that ESRC's peer review process is strictly anonymous.

If you feel that there is something that does need to be brought to the attention of the office which is of a confidential nature we would encourage you to email esrcpeerreview@esrc.ac.uk

Should I give a higher weighting to proposals specifically targeting ESRC Strategic Challenge areas?

No. As most proposals you review will be submitted through the research grants (open) call allowing proposals 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 calls (strategic calls in highlighted areas) you would need to adhere to any call specific reviewer guidance.

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, as it depends on a number of factors for example: how experienced the person is

at undertaken peer reviews, how familiar the person is with the subject area, how much information they would like to include in their review (see paragraph below). Therefore, a review might take anything between a hour to half a day to complete.

There is no set length for reviewer comments. We would prefer that you summarise your views concisely, but 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 are very useful to a Panel (as well as to applicants). Long, rambling and unfocused comments must be avoided. The average length of a review is usually between half a side and two sides of A4. 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.

How long will I have to review a proposal?

The exact timeline for each review will be provided when you are asked to review a proposal, but in general you will have three weeks from the date of invite, depending on the call for which you are providing a review.

How do I receive, complete and return my review?

For almost all of our calls 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.

Is there any guidance on how to use the Je-S system to submit my comments?

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

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 at jeshelp@rcuk.ac.uk, and are available from 9.00 to 17.00 Monday to Friday.

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 ESRC (email esrcpeerreview@esrc.ac.uk). 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.

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

If you are unable to meet a review request, please notify ESRC as soon as possible, by declining via the Je-S system at least within five working days of the request, so that an alternative reviewer can be sought without delay.

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 ESRC (email esrcpeerreview@esrc.ac.uk), 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 five 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. To ensure confidentiality, please do not approach the individual yourself.

To help us avoid sending you reviews that do not match your area of expertise, we urge you to complete and keep up-to-date your interests and areas of expertise on your Je-S account.

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 ESRC (email esrcpeerreview@esrc.ac.uk), who will arrange for the proposal to be sent to the suggested reviewer electronically if appropriate.

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

It is vital that reviewers are seen to be completely impartial. You should not, therefore, take part in the review of any proposal where you perceive there is a conflict of interest.

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 ESRC (email esrcpeerreview@esrc.ac.uk), 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.

What constitutes a conflict of interest?

ESRC aims to ensure that proposals are not forwarded to you 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
- if you have submitted a proposal to the same round of the competition for which you are being asked to provide a review (for calls with 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 (for schemes without closing dates)
- 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 Research Office as any of the investigators
- if you have worked closely with any of 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.

We would urge you to access Module 2 of our Peer Review Training Tool (<http://peerreviewtraining.esrc.ac.uk>) to find out more about conflicts of interest.

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 ESRC (email esrcpeerreview@esrc.ac.uk) 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 our 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.

ESRC's Peer Review College

What is ESRC's Peer Review College?

We require over 3,500 referee reviews per year. To help reach this target we have established a Peer Review College. Our Peer Review College consists of approximately 2,000 independent academic experts drawn from across the social sciences.

Why was the Peer Review College set up?

The College was established in 2010 to improve reviewer response rates - which had dropped to well below 50 per cent - to ensure more consistent peer review standards and also to reduce processing times - enabling applicants to get a faster decision on their proposal.

What is the role of a Peer Review College member?

The key role of a college member is provide up to eight informed, objective, and timely reviews in any rolling 12 month period. Further information on the role of the College can be found on the ESRC website (<http://www.esrc.ac.uk/funding/guidance-for-peer-reviewers/peer-review-college/>)

What is the relationship between the membership of the Grant Assessment Panels and Peer Review College?

There is no direct relationship between the membership of these two bodies. Members of the Grant Assessment Panels, whose role it is to assess proposals submitted through the research grants (open) call, are not drawn from members of the Peer Review College but through a separate application and nomination process.

Is the College membership publicly available?

Yes, the College membership is publicly available on the ESRC website <http://www.esrc.ac.uk/funding/guidance-for-peer-reviewers/peer-review-college/>

How are members of the College recruited?

Members of the College are recruited on an annual basis through a nomination process. ESRC also automatically enrolls all active ESRC grant holders onto the College. We advertise when we are recruiting new members through the nominations process on our website.

Further information about membership and our nominations process can be found on the ESRC website: <http://www.esrc.ac.uk/funding/guidance-for-peer-reviewers/peer-review-college/>

Can I become a member of the ESRC Peer Review College if I am already a peer reviewer for another Research Council?

Yes, you can, as we are keen to ensure that the College has the breadth to cover proposals that are at the interfaces with other parts of the science base.

Is ESRC peer review exclusively carried out by College members?

No. Our aim is that the College will cover the majority of our peer review needs. However, in addition to using members of the College, we will continue to draw upon the wider academic and user communities to conduct peer review assessment if we cannot find the relevant expertise within the College membership. Our first priority is to ensure that we match as effectively as possible a proposal with expert peer review

Do College members get feedback on their performance?

Yes. Each year College members receive a short report summarising their peer review activity over the previous 12 months. This will include information on the number of reviews they have undertaken and how their grade compares to those from other reviewers on the same proposal. The report will also include details of response times. It will capture data on other Panels that members may have sat upon on behalf of the ESRC during the period. This will be sent to you during the autumn of each year.