

Peer Review Procedures

Meningitis Research Foundation undertakes structured peer review of research applications submitted for funding. This process fulfils the Association of Medical Research Charities' rigorous peer review principles and those of the Irish Medical Research Charities Group. The Foundation has been awarded the AMRC's Certificate of Best Practice in Peer Review for the most recent audit in 2015. Our procedures are outlined below.

1) Timetable

Grant rounds open with a call for **preliminary proposals** to the research community, with a deadline of about two months later. After the deadline each pre-proposal is judged and scored by a minimum of four Panel members and we aim to advise applicants on whether to proceed to full application within 3-4 weeks. The deadline for full applications is then around two months after applicants have been invited to apply in full.

Before the final deadline, in consultation with the Chair and Vice-chair, applications are allocated to Panel members according to their areas of expertise, taking into account any **conflicts of interests** (see page 3). Panel members are also asked to suggest suitable **external referees**.

After the deadline and before the Panel meeting we send Panel members

- all applications,
- external referee reports and any Q&A exchanged with applicants
- a table allocating Panel members as first and second discussants, listing referees, and showing referee scores where available

Panel members read and **score** all grant applications and prepare to discuss in detail those that they have been allocated as lead or second discussant.

Panel meetings are scheduled for two to three months after the deadline for full applications and normally a week or two before the Trustee meeting where Panel recommendations are discussed and final decisions made.

2) Preliminary proposals

Prospective applicants submit a 3-5 page preliminary proposal summarising the work they plan to do, including a 10-line justification of the proposal explaining:

- how the work described falls within the Foundation's research strategy
- potential for clinical / public health benefit arising from the study
- why the applicant has chosen to apply to the Foundation for funding for their particular project.

Other specific questions relating to the priority topics may also be added.

Each preliminary proposal is screened by the charity's research administration staff and a minimum of four Panel members. The preliminary proposal stage exists as a screen to encourage the research that is most relevant to our stated aims, discourage applicants who probably have little chance of success, specifically ask for any issues that appear problematic in the pre-proposal to be

dealt with in the full application, and eliminate weak or irrelevant applications.

Two outcomes are possible

- a. Proposal within remit and of good scientific quality. **Invite full application.** This may also come with feedback or suggestions for improvement.
- b. Proposal ineligible, outside remit, insufficiently aligned with priority topics to compete with more closely aligned high quality proposals, unfeasible, or too similar to another project. **Reject proposal.**

In general, about half to two-thirds of applicants are screened out at the pre-proposal stage. This normally leaves about 20 full applications to consider.

3) External referees

Each full grant application is sent to a minimum of two external referees, who provide detailed written comments on the application, score it and suggest whether it should be funded, using a standard report form. The form permits referees to raise questions for the applicants to answer before their application is discussed at the Panel meeting, and these questions and answers are sent to Panel members, where possible before the meeting.

When a Panel member is connected with an application, the application is sent to at least three external referees. We also consult more than two external referees for bids that are close to our maximum funding level (£150,000).

External referees are drawn from a list of several hundred experts around the world, from additional names Panel members suggest in each round, from Pubmed searches, and from names suggested by the applicants themselves. To avoid apparent **conflict of interest**, no applicant in a grants round can referee in that round. Referees are seldom asked to review more than one application in a round.

Due to the potential for conflict of interest, applicants may request that a particular person (or persons) should not be approached to referee their application, and these requests are honoured. Applicants may also suggest particular individuals with specialist knowledge of their field as referees, and such suggestions may be followed. Applicants should only suggest individuals outside their institution who do not collaborate with them in the area of work covered by their application, and should not discuss their research application with anyone they suggest as a potential referee. For reasons of balance, it is unlikely that more than one referee suggested by an applicant would be chosen to review it even if several names are suggested.

Anonymised referee reports are sent to applicants when they are told the result of their application.

4) Scientific Advisory Panel assessment

- **Scoring** Panel members read and evaluate each proposal with the help of referee reports, and score proposals with an overall score out of five using the following assessment criteria:
 - ▶ Relevance
 - ▶ Clinical benefit
 - ▶ Design
 - ▶ Originality
 - ▶ Methodology
 - ▶ Ability of proposers to achieve objectives
 - ▶ Probability of completion within time frame
 - ▶ Ethical aspects/justification for use of animals

- ▶ Realism of costings.

Panel members send their scores to us before the meeting so that we can tabulate them. All Panel and Referee scores are anonymised and averaged in a table for the meeting.

•Scientific Advisory Panel meeting

▶ Screening The scoring system is used to eliminate applications from full debate if they do not reach the standard required or are too preliminary or peripheral to the charity's research strategy or priority topics. Before discussion starts, tabulated scores for those applications which have scored an average of less than 3 (and which don't involve a Panel member) are displayed. The Panel normally agrees to reject these without further discussion.

▶ Discussion Applications with divergent scores, medium/high scores, or which have a Panel member involved are then dealt with in turn. For each application discussed, the anonymised Panel scores, referee scores and average scores are displayed in turn. Those which involve a Panel member but which score less than 3 are rejected without further discussion while that Panel member is absent from the room.

For all applications not screened out, the Panel member acting as first discussant summarises the application and the external referees' reports, and gives his/her view of the application in relation to our assessment criteria. The second discussant then brings up anything else of relevance and gives his/her opinion. After general discussion amongst all Panel members, a decision is made on whether to recommend or reject the proposal.

Once all applications have been discussed, the Panel normally ranks recommended applications on the basis of scientific merit and relevance to the charity's research investment strategy to enable the Trustees to approve the most highly ranked studies. This is particularly helpful when the sum represented by recommended applications exceeds funding available for the round.

- ▶ Conflict of interest When a Panel member is connected with an application s/he must declare an interest and withdraw from any consideration of that application. We exclude Panel members from considering
 - a. their own applications.
 - b. applications where they are listed as a co-applicant or collaborator
 - c. applications where the applicants or co-applicants are from the same department as the Panel member (but not necessarily the same institution, since a Panel member might have no more involvement with a project at the same institution but a different department than with a project somewhere else entirely).
 - d. applications from someone who the Panel member has recently supervised or managed, or closely collaborates with on the same topic.
 - e. applications where a Panel member feels they have a conflict of interest.

The member does not receive documents pertaining to that application, learn the identity of its referees or receive referees' reports, and does not score the application or see the scores awarded it by other Panel members. He or she must retire from the meeting when the application is assessed.

Details of discussion of that application are expurgated from copies of the minutes sent to that member. These conditions also apply to the Chairman and in the case of the Chair having a conflict, the Vice-chair will take over chairing responsibilities for the relevant parts of the meeting. The Chair should not normally apply for funding, but if the chair applies (directly as principal or co- applicant; or would receive funding as a listed collaborator), he/she must not attend the meeting or appoint referees. In such case the Vice-chair will chair the entire meeting.

5) **Formal approval of grants**

All the applications recommended by the Scientific Advisory Panel are referred to the charity's Trustees for final decisions and formal approval.

6) **Monitoring and progress reports**

Panel members also play a crucial role in monitoring the Foundation's active research programme through the review of annual and final reports. Subsequent years' funding for a grant can only be released following the Panel's scrutiny and approval of progress reports. To ensure the timely monitoring of progress, each Panel member is allocated as a lead reviewer on projects corresponding to their area of expertise, guided by the projects on which s/he was lead or second discussant at the application stage. The chair then recommends continuing funding on the basis of the report, considered together with opinions of the expert reviewers.

Many projects will still be underway after Panel members have served their full term of office on the Panel. When this happens, responsibility as reviewer for each active research project will be allocated to 2 current Panel members with the most relevant specialist expertise.

Panel members are also specifically consulted when investigators propose major changes to existing projects, whether in direction, experimental design, or personnel.

7) **Role of the Chair and Vice-chair**

As well as the duties undertaken by all Panel members, the Chair, has additional responsibilities which the Vice-chair undertakes if the chair is absent or conflicted. For more information on the **Terms of Reference** for our Scientific Panel please contact our Research Officer Liz Rodgers on elizabethr@meningitis.org

8) **Other research-related issues**

Panel members, particularly the Chair and Vice-chair, provide MRF with general advice on other research-related issues including intellectual property and generally help to promote MRF's research profile.