

NERC (ENV) Internal Review of Grant Proposals: Procedure

Background

In 2013, all universities were required by NERC to institute a demand management procedure. ENV's procedure offers a pre-submission review of all responsive mode ('Discovery') grant proposals to NERC, covering the *physical sciences* - climate, marine science, atmospheric science and earth science etc. It has worked in parallel with a separate NERC panel in BIO (covering *life sciences* - organisms, population, ecology and conservation).

From July 2015, institutes whose success rate (by *number* of standard grant applications, not value) falls below 20% will have their future applications capped, until it meets the threshold. The data will be re-calculated annually using the most recent six rounds – to be known as the 'six round 20% number'.

In 2017, UEA's success rate dropped to 18% and a cap was introduced at 9 applications per round. In fact, the cap is not particularly restrictive. UEA is only one of 16 institutes that have caps above 5. It compares favourably to Oxford (8), Reading (8), Southampton (8) and Leeds (9). In recent years, UEA has submitted less than nine proposals per round. Hence:

- The ***focus remains on submitting very high quality Standard Grant proposals***, whilst also respecting other important goals (supporting early career researchers, promoting gender equality etc.).
- **Continue to plan ahead** - RIN and the SCI Faculty Office would like at least 12 weeks notice before any proposal is submitted in order to facilitate planning and effective support.
- ***The cap does not affect other NERC funding streams – e.g internal reviewing of Strategic Research proposals (for Programme Areas, Highlight Topics etc.) is still not formally required.*** But applicants are strongly advised to organise their own informal review to improve the quality of their proposals. NB Please contact RIN (cc DoR), so it is aware of what is happening.

The internal procedure

In order to achieve these things:

- ***Existing deadlines will be brought forward*** – to allow more time for proposers to receive and benefit from constructive feedback, and thus produce much more competitive proposals. Proposers that miss deadlines risk having their proposals deferred.
- ***the Main ENV and BIO Panels will be co-chaired by representatives from ENV and BIO.*** Decisions (including written feedback) will be given after (rather than at) meetings, in view of the possible need to allocate the number of permitted applications across the two schools.

- **Internal reviewers will be asked to grade all aspects of proposals according to formal NERC criteria, using a modified NERC peer review form.**
- **All proposals submitted to the Main Panel must be reviewed by at least three internal referees, one of which should be a non-specialist.**
- **For standard grant applications only, there will be a new requirement to submit an outline to a new, Outline Panel at a much earlier stage in the process (12 weeks before the NERC deadline).**
- **For standard grants only - where UEA is a co-applicant, a separate JeS form for the UEA part of the proposal should not be used. Instead, a combined JeS proposal should be submitted by the lead HEI.**⁴
- **Proposals costing less than £65K must be submitted via the lead research organisation, and thus be added to its J-Es form.**⁵

Coverage

With some differences (see summary table below), **ENV's procedure will cover all responsive mode applications made under the Discovery Science scheme** (i.e. Standard Grants, Large Research Grants and Urgency Grants), even though it is only the standard grants that are included in the calculation any capping limits.

Proposals (i.e. for Discovery grants) that are not led by UEA (i.e. when UEA does not submit its own, separate JeS form (but see above)) **will not require a formal internal review**. But applicants are strongly advised to organise their own informal reviews to improve the quality of their proposals. NB Please contact RIN (cc DoR), so it is aware of what is happening.

Organisation

The **Outline Panel** will be chaired by the Director of Research ENV and include the HoS etc. To reduce the burden on referees, there will be no internal peer review. Decisions will be made by the panel based on the outline proposal. PIs are not required to attend. Proposals will be allocated to one of three categories:

- **Green** – ‘cleared to proceed’ to Main Panel, with recommendations on revisions to be made;
- **Amber** – ‘proceed with caution’ – e.g. interesting idea but proposal not currently competitive - Main Panel will expect very significant changes to be made; or e.g. recommendation to defer to a later round.
- **Red** – ‘do not proceed’ – e.g. requires a lot of work - defer until a later round; e.g. not suitable for Std Grant funding - think about another funder.

The **Main ENV Panel** will be co-Chaired by ENV (Director of Research) and BIO (Chair of NERC panel). It will work in a similar fashion to a NERC Panel i.e. round-table discussion of each proposal, based on written referee reports (including a summary grade); a decision (cleared

to apply, defer, reject etc.) and feedback (written) will be given to the PI shortly after the meeting. Proposals will be allocated to one of three categories:

- **Green** – ‘cleared to proceed’ to submit, with recommendations on any revisions to be made;
- **Amber** – ‘proceed with caution’ – e.g. still not competitive – perhaps better to defer to a later round.
- **Red** – ‘do not proceed’ – e.g. requires a lot of work - defer until a later round or consider another funding stream.

NB - The Head of School / Deputy Head of School will only formally sign-off on a proposal that has been approved by the Outline **and** the Main panels.

Benefits of the system

Applicants will benefit from receiving additional (and earlier) feedback on their proposals, which will hopefully increase success rates, but the extra reviewing will feed through to higher workloads.

Every effort will therefore continue to be made to ensure that the increase is minimised where possible, e.g. by employing a college-like system to spread the refereeing; frequently adjusting the membership of the Outline and Main panels; using familiar NERC-like referee forms; relying on a RIN Project Officer to administer the process.

Summary timeline

Weeks before NERC submission deadline	Standard grants	Other Discovery grants (Large, Urgency³ etc.)
At least 12 weeks	<i>Inform RIN of submission to submit (Outline - title, objectives etc. on JES)</i>	<i>Inform RIN of submission to submit (Outline - title, objectives etc. on JES)</i>
At least 11 weeks	<i>Submit Outline to RIN via outline proposal form (Inc.2 page proposal, explanation of fit with NERC/std grant scheme, names of 3 possible reviewers, one a non-expert¹).NB Resubmitted proposals should include feedback received from NERC + how the new proposal has been amended accordingly.</i>	<i>Inform RIN of internal reviewers – i.e. the names of 3 possible reviewers, one a non-expert.</i>
10 weeks	Outline Panel meeting: after the meeting, written feedback and decision (proceed to Main Panel / deferral to next round / reject)	N/a
4 weeks	Submission of completed proposal ² to RIN, followed by peer review; all proposals then ranked	Submission of completed proposal to RIN; ² sent to reviewers for review
2 weeks	Main Panel meeting: after the meeting, written feedback and a decision (submit /	Decision by Director of Research / HoS

	deferral to next round / reject)	
3 working days	Final submission to RIN	Final submission to RIN

¹ To be used at the Main Panel stage only.

² A 'completed proposal' = everything complete – Je-S proforma, costings, case for support, pathways to impact, justification of resources, CVs etc. – i.e. as if the proposal were ready to be submitted to NERC.

³ The timetable below is indicative only, given the nature of this funding stream. Consequently, (and ASAP) please contact RIN (cc DoR) so it is aware of intention to submit.

⁴ This has been implemented to avoid grant applications where UEA is only a CoI counting towards any cap on UEA. Please contact RIN if you are unsure of what to do.

⁵ Proposals where the UEA is not the lead and UEA is not submitting a separate J-Es form will not need to be internally sift. Please contact RIN if you are unsure of how this applies to your proposal.