

ESRC Secondary Data Analysis Initiative Peer Review Guidance

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Introduction

The UK has world-leading data resources for social and economic research, providing a huge opportunity for comparative analysis into some of the most pressing challenges facing society in the UK and internationally.

Whilst SDAI proposals are being processed alongside our research grants scheme, it is essential that you familiarise yourself with the specific requirements of SDAI before undertaking your assessment. Please see our website for the call specification: <https://esrc.ukri.org/funding/funding-opportunities/secondary-data-analysis-initiative-sdai-open-call/>

Aims and objectives

The main aim and focus of this call is to deliver high impact, policy and practitioner relevant research through the deeper exploitation of the major data resources created by the ESRC and other agencies.

Related to this, the call further aims to develop the capacity and skills of the social sciences communities in using large and complex secondary data and encourage partnerships with non-academic stakeholders to ensure impact on policy and practice.

The open call is not thematically driven: proposals are welcome in any area of social and economic research that can deliver high-quality research, knowledge exchange and policy and practitioner impact. From time-to-time there may be highlight notices in operation on this scheme. In those instances, applicants would also need to demonstrate how their proposal fits with the aims of the highlight notice.

Please note primary data collection is not permitted as part of this call and cannot be funded under any circumstances. Data preparation work such as digitisation, anonymisation, etc, which is necessary to the conduct of the research project, can be carried out but must not be the focus of activity. Projects must be research driven and designed to answer substantive research questions.

Proposals must include at least one dataset in order to be eligible for this call, this considered as part of your assessments:

Dataset use

The inclusion of a relevant dataset will initially be checked by the Office but reviewers should consider the extent to which that dataset is essential to the delivery of the project. If it appears that one of the datasets has only been included to meet the eligibility requirements of the scheme this should be reflected in your score.

Applicants are required to engage with data owners prior to submitting their proposal where they are utilising resources which are not routinely available for research use as part of established processes through the UK Data Service or elsewhere. This includes where data is being accessed through the Big Data Network Centres (BDN2), or data is being used which is not normally available for research purposes or where such data is being linked.

Letters of support are required from the relevant approvals panel, data owner or data controller where such data is being exploited. This is to provide clarification where there are ambiguities surrounding access to the dataset(s) and in order to offer assurances that if a proposal is successful the dataset(s) will be accessible (subject to subsequent negotiations). You should take the content of any such letters into account during your assessment in relation to confirmation or risk relating to the proposed access to and use of these data.

Where proposals are creating new datasets through for example data linkage they are required to include a data management plan as part of their proposal. Specific guidance for the assessment of these is available at <https://esrc.ukri.org/funding/guidance-for-grant-holders/research-data-policy/>

Highlight notices

Where applicants are submitting a proposal specifically relating to a highlight notice they should clearly articulate this in their proposal. They must also demonstrate how their proposal fits with the aims and themes of the highlight notice. Further information on highlight notices can be found on our website: <https://esrc.ukri.org/funding/funding-opportunities/secondary-data-analysis-initiative-sdai-open-call/secondary-data-analysis-initiative-highlight-notices/>.

Procedure

The SDAI operates on an open date basis and proposals will be processed alongside those submitted to our research grant open call. Each proposal will be reviewed by three academic peer reviewers and, where relevant, a non-academic or user reviewer.

Proposals where the average reviewer grading is below a minimum threshold are normally rejected without referral to the Panel. Therefore reviewers' grades and comments are vital to the assessment process. Proposals that receive supportive review will be forwarded to one of the ESRC Grant Assessment Panels (GAPs) and final funding decisions will be made by the Grants Delivery Group (GDG).

Peer review form on Je-S

You have been invited to undertake this peer review through the Joint Electronic Submissions System (Je-S). You will be asked to complete a brief section on your knowledge of the applicant, a self-assessment section, and to allocate a grade on a number of categories, as outlined in this document. You will then be asked to allocate an overall grade for the proposal and provide comments in support of this grade.

We do realise that everyone we approach is already very busy but a timely response from reviewers is crucial. If insufficient reviews are received by the due date we have to approach additional reviewers. Therefore, if you feel that you would like to comment but cannot meet the requested deadline, please contact us as soon as possible to see whether it is feasible to extend the deadline.

If you are unable to review the proposal, please decline the Je-S invite as soon as possible to enable the office to select an alternative reviewer. If you feel you are unable to help us in this instance any recommendations you may have for alternative expert reviewers would be greatly appreciated.

Please ensure that your overall grade reflects your written comments.

Assessment

Detailed below are the grading and assessment criteria to be used when reviewing the proposal. In addition, reviewers should note the following:

- Reviewers should not assess proposals with which they have a conflict of interest with the applicant(s) or Research Organisation (you should not assess proposals from your own institution). Please see below for further guidance.
- As a reviewer, you are not allowed to disclose to outsiders any information concerning proposal documents or evaluations, nor are you allowed to use this

confidential information to your own benefit or anyone else's benefit or disadvantage. In addition, you may not reveal to outsiders that you are assessing the research plans of particular researchers. Once the evaluation has been completed, you are required to destroy all proposal documents and any copies made of them. Confidentiality must also be maintained after the evaluation process has been completed.

- You should bear in mind that applicants to this scheme may include early-career researchers and academics at the start of their careers, and your assessments should take this into consideration.

Conflict of interest

The selection of reviewers is subject to certain constraints. We do not normally approach anyone with a current proposal in the same scheme or those who:

- are a personal friend or a relative of the applicant(s) or one of the collaborators;
- have submitted or are a named collaborator on a current proposal to the initiative;
- are directly involved in the work that the applicant(s) proposes to carry out;
- are a current member of staff or a Professor Emeritus/Emerita at the same institution as the applicant(s) or one of the collaborators;
- have worked closely with the applicant(s) or one of the collaborators in the recent past; or
- have a vested interest in any research proposed, for example are a general editor of the series to which the work that is the subject of the proposal will contribute.

If you feel you may have a potential conflict of interest please respond to esrcpeerreview@esrc.ukri.org as soon as possible to discuss this further.

Completion of the grading form

Please provide an assessment of the proposal you have been allocated and award the proposal an overall grade in accordance with the criteria below. Please note these vary to our research grants scheme.

Peer reviews are invited from both the social science research community, who are invited to address the social scientific and methodological issues presented, as well as members of the research user community and will feel able to assess issues relating to this.

We recognise and value the different areas of expertise which reviewers bring to their comments. Review comments will be used to inform discussions at a meeting of our Grant Assessment Panel. By seeking multiple reviews we aim to provide our Panel with a comprehensive basis for their funding recommendations. This section sets out the shared requirements of academic and user reviewers, while the following section elaborates specific guidance applicable to each category of reviews.

Scoring

Academic peer reviewers for all schemes use a harmonised numerical scoring scale for reviewing proposals. The review form has a scoring scale with descriptors that cover the

breadth of Council activities, whereby the score range is 1-6, where score 6 represents an outstanding proposal. Please see the following for full details:

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 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.

Non-academics, or users, are invited to indicate overall judgment of the research proposal using the following scale:

High	Research of high importance to users of research, ie of such novelty or timeliness and promise that a significant contribution to policy or practice is likely.
Worthy	Research that will add to understanding and is worthy of support but which may not be of such relevance or urgency as to have a significant influence on policy or practice.
Reject	Research which is flawed in its proposed contribution to policy or practice or is repetitious of other work.

Reviewer comments

In reviewing a proposal, you are asked to include all relevant comments you have, including any comments against the specific assessment criteria outlined below. Non-academic reviewers ('users') are encouraged to look at the whole proposal in making their assessment but your attention is particularly drawn to the sections on impact. If you wish to make confidential comments (either to the ESRC or to the Grants Assessment Panel), please do so in the 'comments' box and **mark them as confidential**. Applicants will receive an anonymised copy of the reviewer's comments and will be invited to provide a response to them.

Academic reviewer assessment criteria

All academic peer review forms now have four core criteria, set out below with guiding questions to consider in reaching an assessment against each criterion. The scores for each criterion are also on a scale from 1 to 6, where 6 is 'Outstanding'. If you feel unable to assess a proposal against a particular criterion, you can also indicate this by ticking 'Unable to assess'.

The table below maps SDAI's six core criteria against the four core criteria found on the peer review form you will receive.

SDAI Criterion	Peer Review Form Criterion
Originality, innovation and potential contribution to knowledge	Originality; potential contribution to knowledge
Research design and methods	Research design and methods
Potential for capacity-building	Outputs, dissemination and impact
Project management and research partnerships	Research design and methods
Outputs, dissemination and potential for impact on theory, policy and practice	Outputs, dissemination and impact
Value for money	Value for money

Peer review and assessment criteria

Proposals will be peer-reviewed by a minimum of two expert academic reviewers and one user reviewer. Peer-reviewers will be selected by the office.

Proposals will be assessed on the basis of six core criteria:

Originality, innovation and potential contribution to knowledge

- Is the proposal innovative in terms of identifying problems or formulating research questions to address stated issues?
- Will the proposal lead to new understanding, insights, advice or solutions to the stated problems?
- Does the proposal offer to address shortcomings in the current state of knowledge and understanding?
- Is the proposal novel and timely?

Research design and methods

- Is there a clear understanding of the issue addressed through this research?
- Is the conceptual framework of the proposed research appropriate to address the issue?
- Is there clarity and coherence in the research design between research questions, research methods and anticipated intellectual outcomes?
- Is the proposal methodologically innovative?
- Are the research questions clearly set out?
- Are the research methods clearly specified, robust and appropriate to the stated questions?
- Are issues of data validity and reliability appropriately addressed?
- Are plans for data linkage feasible, and will they deliver the proposed objectives?
- Do data management plans follow best practice, and adhere to ESRC data policy?
- Has appropriate considerations been given to ethics issues arising from this project?

Potential for capacity-building

- Has the eligibility of the early career researcher been clearly articulated and will they make a substantive contribution to the project?

Project management and research partnerships

- Are the project management plans and configuration of roles and responsibilities reasonable, appropriate and credible for the proposed project?

- Are the credentials of the investigators and host institutions appropriate to deliver the project?
- Have project partners been fully involved in the design of the research, and do they have a clear and meaningful role in future activities?

Outputs, dissemination and potential for impact on theory, policy and practice

- Does the project have real potential for impact on theory, policy and/or practice?
- Does the proposal demonstrate that there is effective demand for the research from policymakers and other non-academic stakeholders beyond the academic community?
- Are the stakeholders or potential users of research outputs properly identified, and the processes and means for engaging with them appropriate, at all stages of the research process?
- Are there clear plans to make findings available to target audiences and to maximise potential research impact?

Value for money

- Is the budget appropriate and reasonable for the proposed programme of work, including all staff costs, travel, data analysis tasks, and knowledge exchange and impact activities?
- Are there any components of the project costs which appear excessive? (Estates and indirect costs should not be commented on)
- Time commitments of research participants:
 - Are staff doing the appropriate level of work?
 - Is the amount of senior staff time on the project appropriate?
 - Is the mix of the team right?
 - If consultancy costs are claimed, is this the most appropriate mechanism of staffing and are the rates reasonable?

Individual aspects of resourcing the proposal

- Are the specific funding requests in the following areas essential and sufficient for the proper conduct and exploitation of the research proposed?
- The amount of time to be devoted to the project by the proposed PI and Co-Is.
- The level of the proposed PI and Co-Is.
- The amount of time for research, technical and support staff proposed.
- The level of appointment for such staff.
- The equipment, consumables and other directly incurred costs such as travel and subsistence. Where equipment has been requested please comment explicitly on the viability of the arrangements described to access equipment needed for this project, and particularly on any university or third party contribution.
- Costs of collecting, establishing, providing or organising the necessary data and research materials.
- Resources devoted to maximising the scientific, societal and economic impacts of the proposed research.
- Access to institutional research facilities.
- The overall length of time for the project.

Some costs are agreed as true economic costs between research councils and other relevant bodies, and are not under the control of the applicants. You should therefore **not** comment on:

- 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.

Non-academic or user reviewer assessment criteria

Please select on a scale ranging from outstanding to poor to indicate your assessment according to the following criteria. Detailed comments in support of these grades should be provided in your overall assessment comments for the proposal. If you feel unable to assess a proposal against a particular criterion, you can also indicate this by ticking 'Unable to assess'.

Likely importance of research to potential users

- Does the proposal have the capacity to make a significant impact on policy or practice?
- Does the proposal show appropriate awareness of issues important to potential users?
- Does the planned activity engage with appropriate people and/or organisation?

Timeliness of the outcomes for potential users

- Are the issues addressed in the proposal timely? Will the results be available at an appropriate time to contribute to policy or practice?
- Effectiveness of plans for involving potential users and disseminating results to them:
 - Are the plans to engage with users of the research during the course of the research appropriate?
 - Are the proposals for the communication of the results to users appropriate?
 - Have adequate plans been made by the applicants to disseminate the results of the research?
- Is the planned output of the research appropriate?

Scientific merit

If you feel confident in judging the scientific merits of the proposal, please provide a grade according to the grading scale for academic reviewers (above). If you feel that you are unable to assess the scientific merit of the proposal then please select the 'Unable to assess' grading option. The form will not validate unless you select one of the options.