

Conflicts of interest guidance

The Research Councils have adopted a code of practice for all those who assist in the work of the Councils which embraces the "Seven Principles of Public Life" drawn up by the Nolan Committee and endorsed by Parliament. These Principles refer to selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership.

An important aspect of this code is the avoidance of any conflicts between personal interests and the interests of the Research Councils to ensure the integrity of the decisions made by the ESRC and its representatives. In the context of peer review of research proposals, a conflict of interest might arise as a result of direct or indirect, personal, academic, financial or working relationships. ESRC accepts that it is likely that academics who work in the same field may know each other, and this in itself does not necessarily constitute a conflict, providing that objectivity can be maintained when reviewing a proposal. Most of our peer review forms contain a confidential section on 'knowledge of applicant', where this information can be declared.

The acid test is whether a member of the public, knowing the facts of the situation, might reasonably think the judgement could be influenced by the potential conflict of interest.

When invited to do a review

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

ESRC officers endeavour to identify conflicts of interest and will not select you as a reviewer if there is a clear conflict. Not all conflicts are obvious from the information we have available. **If you consider you may have a conflict of interest you must contact the ESRC before proceeding with the review.** It is important that you ensure you are eligible to review the proposal before undertaking the review. A list of conflicts that exclude you from reviewing a proposal is included below. This is not an exhaustive list: if you are in any doubt about whether or not you should assess a proposal, please contact who has approached you for this review.

When invited to sit on a panel

It is vital that Panel members are seen to be completely impartial at all stages of the review process. You should not take part in the moderation of any proposal where a conflict of interest could be construed. If you think you might have a conflict, please inform the staff member responsible for your panel at the earliest possible opportunity.

You may still serve on the panel but you will be required to leave the room whilst the proposal(s) for which you have a conflict is/are being discussed. You are permitted to be present for the ranking of all proposals and it will be the responsibility of the chair to ensure that such proposals are not discussed again in detail, to ensure fairness and avoid any potential embarrassment.

You should not be involved in any way with a proposal prior to its submission or once a decision has been taken, e.g. you should not comment on, or help colleagues in preparing a proposal. If you are in any doubt as to whether you have a conflict of interest, you should consult staff working on your panel. If you are approached by applicants to discuss their proposals in any way – whether it be before, during or after the assessment process – you should decline. You are free to talk to applicants about the Council's structures, policies and modes of operation, so long as the information is in the public domain (e.g. in the Research Funding Guide or on the website). You must not divulge information about individual awards or application statistics, unless the information is already in the public domain (via press release, Annual Reports, etc.).

Examples of conflicts of interests

Examples of instances where a conflict of interest could occur for a reviewer or panel member are given below. This

is not an exhaustive list, and if you are in any doubt about whether or not you should assess a proposal due to a possible conflict of interest, please contact who has approached you for a review. Please note that the types of conflicts of interest which apply to the Principal Investigator also apply equally to any Co-Investigator(s) on an application.

Relationship with applicant(s)

- Have a close family relationship (e.g. spouse, partner, parent, sibling, child, in-law) or share a household with any individual named on the proposal;
- Have an existing business or professional relationship with any individual named on the proposal;
- Have had a PhD/PhD Supervisor relationship with any of the applicants in the last ten years.
- Have collaborated on a research project and/or have co-published with any individual named on the proposal in the last three years;
- Are directly involved in the work that the applicant proposes to carry out and/or have assisted the applicant with their application for funding;

Organisational conflict

- Are a current member of staff or a Professor Emeritus/Emerita at the same research organisation as any individual named on the proposal;
- Are at a past research organisation or have recently moved from the current research organisation of any individual named on the proposal;
- Are at the same research organisation as another reviewer on the proposal;
- Are at a research organisation that is named as a project partner on the proposal or is the same organisation as that of a visiting researcher on the proposal;
- Have a vested interest, or stand to gain a financial or professional advantage from a particular outcome for an application which they are asked to review;

Current involvement with the ESRC

- Are intending to submit or have already submitted a proposal to the same competition as the application which they have been asked to review. For schemes which operate without closing dates, if they have or are intending to submit a proposal within 3 months of being asked to provide a review;
- Have been unsuccessful within the last 3 months in the same competition as the application being reviewed;
- 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.
- Are invited to sit on a panel which will moderate an application for which they have already submitted a review.

ESRC staff

ESRC staff may also have connections with applicants that constitute a conflict of interest. Although their opportunity to influence outcomes is in practice limited, it is important that any such connection is identified to ensure impartiality of assessment. Under such circumstances staff should not be involved in reviewer selection or any decision stage for proposals where such a conflict can be recognised.