Tips for writing a great research award application

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We're written this guide to help you submit the strongest possible application to one of our funding schemes.

Our research funding is highly competitive. And we only fund applications of high scientific quality and relevance to people affected by MS in the UK. We've compiled the list of tips in this document from:
- Feedback from our review panels, including from our Chairs
- Common things our Awards team see in submissions
- Feedback from people affected by MS

If you have any questions about preparing your application, you can email research@mssociety.org.uk.

Read the applicant guidance

We can't stress this enough! You should read the applicant guidance document for the scheme you're applying to. We know it's a long document. But all the information in there will help you in preparing your application. It includes things like:
- The purpose and scope of a funding round
- Who's eligible to apply
- What you can apply for (including guidance on eligible and ineligible costs)
- What you should think about and include when preparing your application
- The funding criteria used by our reviewers to score applications

We update the guidance documents annually. As well as all relevant information on our website. There's also plenty of guidance in our online application form to help you.

If you're applying for our Early Career Fellowships, you should also read and consider our Early Career Researcher Assessment Framework.

Consider our funding criteria

Every applicant guidance document contains funding criteria relevant to the funding scheme. Our reviewers and panel members use this when considering applications for funding. **You should read the guidance relevant to the scheme you're applying for.**

Broadly, these are what we look for in applications:
- A tangible benefit for people affected by MS. Or a project increasing our scientific understanding of MS.
- Research team: is there the right expertise to deliver the project?
- Quality of the research design
- Meaningful involvement of people affected by MS
- Pathway to impact: is this realistic for the scope of the proposal?

- Quality of the proposal writing: is it well-written and clearly structured?
- Value for money: are the costings specific and reasonable for the scope of the project?

Meaningfully involve people affected by MS

Meaningful patient and public involvement (PPI) is one of our core funding principles. PPI in research is when people with personal experience of health conditions work in active partnership with researchers or research funders like us.

Involvement isn't the same as recruiting participants to your study or sharing information with people through public engagement events. Involvement is about working in partnership with people affected by MS to shape, design and oversee a project. It ensures projects are relevant to the experiences of people affected by MS. As well as being designed and implemented in a way that considers their needs.

In your application you need to:
- Write a clear lay summary describing your proposed research
- Outline how you've involved people affected by MS in the development of the proposal
- Outline how you'll involve people affected by MS throughout the project if it's funded

People affected by MS review all applications submitted to us. And sit on our funding panels. They'll comment on and score the quality of your lay summary and involvement plans.

Your application is very unlikely to be funded without a good quality PPI plan. We offer support in developing your PPI plans and writing the lay summary for your proposal. We strongly encourage you to use these opportunities. Or use the PPI support available to you from your institution. You can find more information about PPI in our applicant guidance documents. Or on our website.

Demonstrate the relevance and potential impact of your research

You should consider how your research aligns with our organisational and research strategies. You'll need to explain how your project will help us meet these aims. You should also consider our top ten James Lind Alliance research priorities. These were developed in partnership with people affected by MS and the MS research community.

We don't exclusively restrict our funding to these priorities. We continue to support research into the causes of MS, and all aspects of treatment and care for people affected by MS. However, we do favour applications that specifically address these priorities.

Novelty and innovation is important, but our reviewers also look for applications that appropriately balance ambition and feasibility. You should have a clear and realistic pathway to impact. Your application should also be focused and achievable within the proposed time frame and budget.

Show us that the proposal is well-designed

One of the most common reasons for applications not being funded is problems in the experimental plan. Or lack of detail in the experimental plan. Your application will be reviewed by experts with relevant expertise who will scrutinise the scientific details.

The concerns they flag up vary depending on the nature of the application but may include issues with the techniques involved, area of focus (e.g cells or participant group), sample size, follow-up period or concerns regarding bias. You should work with your team of co-applicants to make sure that the research design is clearly articulated. And that any potential risks have a clear plan for mitigation.

You could make use of the free NIHR Research Design Service which provides design and methodological review services to improve your application.

Make sure you've properly justified your chosen methods and statistical approach

Related to the design of your proposal is justifying why you've designed it this way. You should explain and justify **every** method, sample size and analysis technique you use. We expect to see power calculations included in your application. These details will help our reviewers to understand how scientifically sound and feasible your proposal is, as well as indicating value for money.

Get the right team together

You should have all the relevant experience in your applicant team to do the proposed research. In the team you should have expertise in MS as well as other expertise relevant to the project (for example, statistical or digital skills). There should also be experience of managing grants in your team. You shouldn't assume that the panel will know your area of expertise. And you must make it clear what **each** team member will be doing.

You don't need to have all the relevant expertise yourself. But you need to make sure that across your co-applicants and collaborators you can carry out the proposed project. And demonstrate this to our reviewers.

For Early Career Fellowships, we also assess additional skills which are detailed in our Early Career Assessment Framework.

Justify any legal or ethical concerns

Any ethical and legal considerations **must** be acknowledged in your application. For example, if you're working with animals or recruiting people as research participants. Have you got the relevant ethical approvals in place?

You should think about any particular risks that your participants may face, and how you will safeguard against this. This is especially important if you plan to work with particularly vulnerable groups such as children or those at the end of their life.

 If you're working with animals, you **must** justify their use. And there is a section in the application form for this. Our researchers must address the 3Rs when submitting funding applications:
- Reduce the number of animals used to the minimum necessary for a valid result
- Refine experiments to minimise any pain, suffering or distress
- Replace animal experiments with alternatives wherever possible.

There's more information about ethical considerations in our applicant guidance documents.

Make sure the application makes sense before submission

We see lots of applications with poor spelling and grammar. Or inconsistent details which make them difficult to understand. We can tell when applications have been rushed and haven't been proof-read before submission. And our reviewers also comment on this as part of their feedback. Your application submission should be a team effort so you should ask all co-applicants to thoroughly review it for spelling and logical flow before submission. You should get feedback from people outside your applicant team as well. They might be able to spot things you've missed as they're not as close to the project.

Properly justify all the costs you're requesting

You must justify every single budget item you request in our application. We're a charity with limited funds, so value for money is important for us. Plan your research budget realistically, but don't ask for the upper funding limit if you don't need it! It's better to be specific with your costings, rather than using ballpark figures.

We have plenty of information about what costs are eligible in our applicant guidance. We'll remove any ineligible costs before funding projects.

If you're preparing a resubmission, make sure you've addressed any previous feedback

If you're resubmitting an application, you must make sure any comments or considerations from reviewers or panel members have been adequately responded to. If they can't be resolved, you need to justify why. This includes written review comments and/or panel feedback. Reviewers will have access to your previous application and review comments. You also need to summarise any substantial changes to the application in your resubmission. If you don't include these, your application won't be eligible for re-review. And we'll automatically reject it.

Ask us if you're not sure!

If you're unsure about anything related to preparing your application, get in touch! We're really happy to help. You can email us on research@mssociety.org.uk.

Useful links

Throughout this document, we've made reference to other information or guidance documents. Most of these can be found on our website.
- Read more information about our funding schemes, including applicant guidance documents
- Read more about PPI in research and the support we can offer
- Watch our 2023 webinars about preparing applications and what our funding panels look for on our ECR Hub