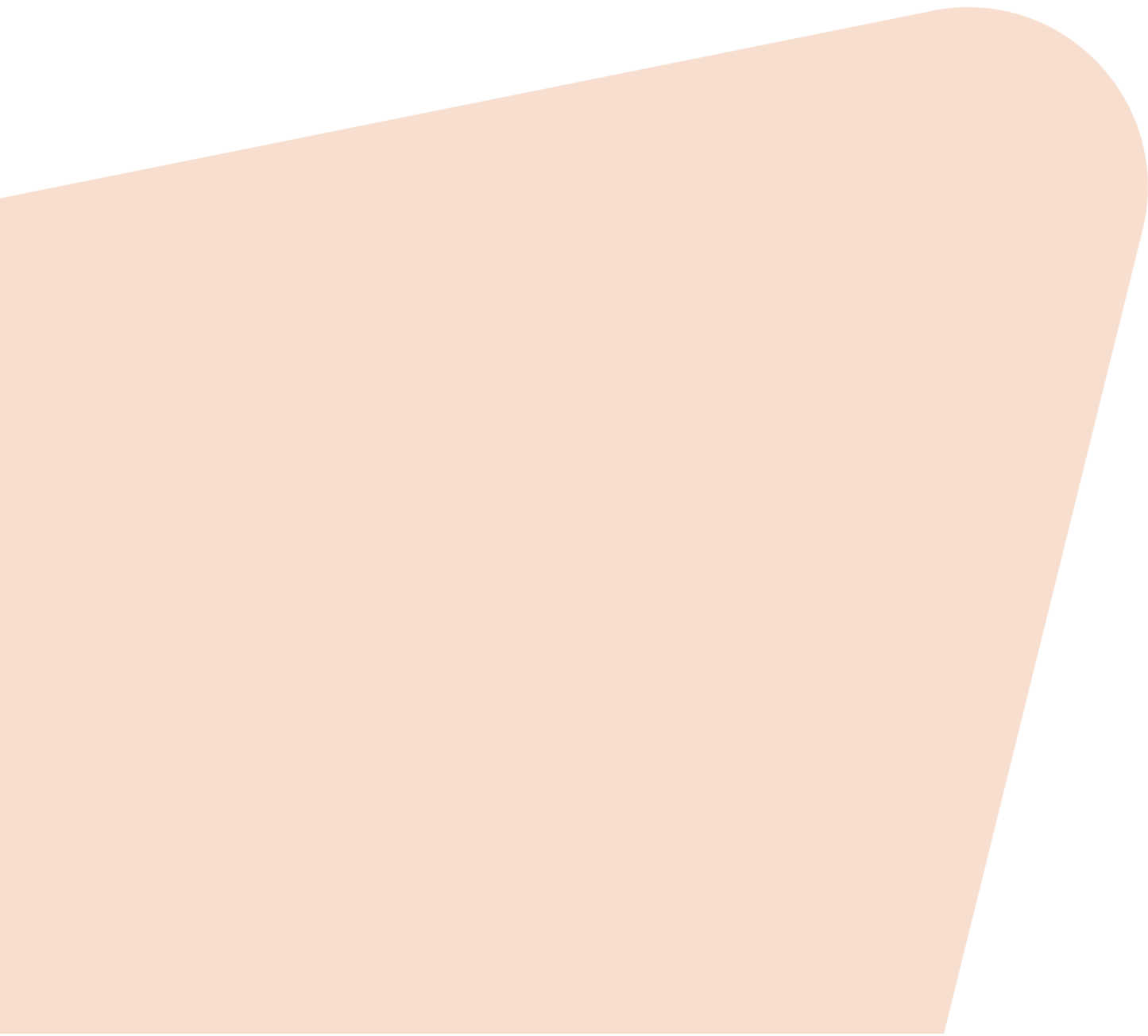




Guidance for review panel members

Updated October 2024



This document outlines our generic guidance for review panel members. We also have funding scheme-specific guidance documents for each of our response-mode funding schemes.

Our Review Panels are made up from The Expert Review Network (TERN), our independent group of experienced researchers, health care professionals and people affected by MS. We invite the most appropriate members to attend for each funding round. Our panels include researchers and people affected by MS (lay panel members).

[Read more about TERN, including the Terms of Reference for members, on our website.](#)

Invited TERN Review Panel members must critically assess the application and reviewer comments. And combine these with a judgement of how relevant the project is to MS in the UK. The purpose of the TERN Review Panels, led by the Chair, is to provide recommendations to us on the funding of research projects.

[Read more about our research funding on our website.](#)

If you have any questions, you can email research@mssociety.org.uk.

Contents

1. Application review and scoring	3
2. Conflicts of interest	4
3. Unconscious bias	5
4. What happens during the panel meeting?	5
Appendix 1: Code of conduct	7
Appendix 2: Accessing Grant Tracker	8
Appendix 3: Generic scoring guidance for reviewers and panel members	10
Appendix 4: Criteria for peer reviewers.....	11
Appendix 5: Guidance for considering relevance to MS.....	12
Appendix 6: Ethical issues	13

1. Application review and scoring

You'll be allocated some of the shortlisted applications to discuss at the panel meeting. You'll be given access to the application documents and their written review comments and scores. You should critically assess these comments to help guide your own. You'll also have access to all shortlisted applications you don't have a conflict of interest with. We encourage you to read these for any questions or points you'd like to raise in the meeting.

All documents will be available at least two weeks before the meeting. They can be accessed using [your Grant Tracker Portal](#). You can find detailed instructions for using Grant Tracker in Appendix 2.

Researcher panel members will review applications for criteria including:

- quality of science
- novelty (originality)
- feasibility
- cost-effectiveness.

You must also consider the relevance of the applications to MS and our organisational and strategic priorities.

Lay panel members will review applications for criteria including:

- relevance to people affected by MS
- whether the research is feasible for participants
- Patient and Public Involvement (PPI) plans.

You should score each application between 1 and 5. Before the meeting, you should prepare your score and supporting comments, following the structure in section 2.1. We don't need your comments or score before the meeting. After the meeting we may ask for any confidential feedback you'd like to give the applicant.

You should also refer to the scoring criteria in Appendices 3 and 4. Both 'biomedical' and 'care and services' applications will be discussed by the same Panel. All panel members are asked to score all non-conflicted applications.

1.1. Guidance for structuring your review comments

Three panel members are allocated to each application with the wider panel invited to add comments afterwards if time allows. Structuring your comments is important to aid consistency of review and support your score. There will be **15 minutes** to discuss each application. You should keep in mind that multiple panel members have been appointed to comment on each application.

Researcher panel members should structure your comments as follows:

- Lead researcher panel member to provide a **brief** introduction to the aims and approach of the project. The lead researcher for each application will be indicated on the meeting agenda.
- Quality of the research proposed, focusing on its top line **strengths** and **weaknesses**. Please take written peer review comments into account. You can use the guidance

provided to peer reviewers (Appendix 4) as a guide to focus on key strengths and weaknesses.

- Relevance to MS, taking into account our research strategy, the current research landscape and feasibility of the pathway to impact.

If one of your allocated applications falls outside your expertise, you should focus on the aspects you can assess. Such as the scientific rationale of the project, feasibility or pathway to impact.

Lay panel members should structure your comments as follows:

- How easy it was to review the application, based on the quality of the lay summary.
- How relevant and important the research topic is to the MS community, taking into account our research priorities (Appendix 5).
- The potential impact the project could have on the lives of people affected by MS.
- The quality of the patient and public involvement in the development of the application. And the ongoing plans to involve people affected by MS in the project.
- How well the applicant has thought about the burden on research participants and the likelihood of them finding willing participants (if applicable).
- How the application was scored by external lay reviewers and any comments or concerns they raised.

We've recently introduced sub-scores to the lay reviews. Lay reviewers now provide a score for each sub-section of their review, as well as an overall score. We've made these available to you in case they're helpful for more context to the overall lay review score. But you don't need to know all the sub-scores or discuss them at the panel meeting. You can mention them if they're helpful to support a point you're making about the application (for example, if an application scored very high or low in a sub-section).

1.2. Written feedback following the review panel meeting

After the panel meeting, we may ask you for some brief written feedback on your allocated applications for the applicant(s). This would be a few sentences on the key strengths and weaknesses of the application (particularly noting anything different to existing peer/lay comments). You can also comment on applications which weren't allocated to you if you wish. Applicants will receive your written comments as part of their feedback from the panel meeting.

2. Conflicts of interest

It's important that our reviewers are seen to be completely impartial throughout the review process. We do our best to identify conflicts of interest. And won't choose you as a reviewer if there's a clear conflict. But not all conflicts are obvious from the information we have. **So if you feel you may have a conflict of interest, you must contact us.**

A conflict of interest occurs for a reviewer when you:

- Are directly involved in the proposed work and/or have helped the applicant with their application
- Have recently collaborated with the applicant. By 'recently', we mean it has been less than three years since you last worked or published together.
- Are currently employed at the same institution as the applicant

- Are a close collaborator with a co-applicant
- Were the PhD Supervisor for the applicant
- Have submitted an application to the same round that you're reviewing for
- Have been approached and agreed to be a member of a committee connected with the research project, for example an advisory group or steering committee
- Have a commercial or financial/pecuniary interest in the research. For example if you are a member of an organisation that may benefit financially, directly or indirectly from any decision made.

These apply equally to the lead applicant and any co-applicants or advisers on an application.

If you don't feel you're an appropriate reviewer for an application, you should contact us as soon as possible. Similarly, if you're unsure whether there is a conflict you should let us know.

You must also agree that all documents and correspondence relating to funding applications are strictly confidential (see Appendix 1 for our code of conduct).

3. Unconscious bias

Unconscious biases are implicit attitudes, actions, assumptions or judgements controlled by automatic evaluations. We all have unconscious biases but these can have wide-ranging effects. During the review process, they could influence your interpretation or evaluation of an application and result in scores that don't reflect its true quality.

We're committed to the objective, equitable and fair review of our funding applications. We ask all our panel members to recognise and minimise the influence of their unconscious biases. You can use the points below to re-evaluate your judgements for the influence of unconscious bias:

- Am I evaluating applications based on what's being presented? Or have I made assumptions based on the reputation of the institution or lead applicant?
- Have I used similar vocabulary for applicants from perceived diverse backgrounds?
- Have I assumed different probabilities of research success based on the perceived gender and potential family responsibilities of the applicant(s)?

4. What happens during the panel meeting?

All funding panel meetings are held virtually using a videoconferencing platform (Zoom or Microsoft Teams). You'll need to join the virtual meeting to take part in the discussion. And have your Grant Tracker Portal open to submit scores for each application. We'll provide guidance on how to submit scores through Grant Tracker at the start of the meeting.

- Each application is introduced by the Chair and considered in turn. If you have a conflict of interest, you'll be removed from the meeting during the discussion of that application. We'll invite you back into the meeting once the discussion has finished.
- Allocated panel members will present their comments for the application, following the structure in section 2.1. The lead researcher panel member will start with a brief summary of the application, followed by the lay panel member. The other researcher will close by focusing on any points not already raised.
- The rest of the panel are then invited to discuss the application.

- The allocated panel members give a verbal score from 1 to 5, reflecting their detailed review. All panel members enter their individual scores into their Grant Tracker Portal. You can find scoring guidance for panel members in Appendix 3.
- Once all applications have been discussed, we'll present a list ranked by mean panel score. The panel, except those with major conflicts, will discuss this list to agree on the ordering. At this stage, any queries for the applicant(s) or conditions of funding will be agreed.
- The panel will make a recommendation to the Board of Trustees on which applications are fundable, potentially fundable or not fundable.

4.1. After the meeting

We'll confirm the threshold for funding based on our provisional budget. We'll contact any applicants above this threshold and ask them to address the queries or conditions of funding. At this stage, funding is provisional based on their response to the panel conditions. Unsuccessful applicants will be provided with feedback from the panel.

Our Board of Trustees will consider the panel's funding recommendations. Following their approval, we'll communicate final decisions to applicants and the funding panel.

Appendix 1: Code of conduct

We aim for objective and impartial assessment of our research funding applications. An essential part of this process is review by those with appropriate expertise. Our Board of Trustees relies on the advice and recommendations given by members of the MS community through external review and our review panels to make funding decisions. You should be aware that the role of reviewers is advisory.

Our Code of Conduct outlines our commitment to impartiality and the integrity of our review process. If we believe that an external reviewer or member of a review group has breached our code of conduct, then we'll ask them to step down.

Code of Conduct

When accepting our invitation to review, or participate in a review panel, you are agreeing that documents and correspondence relating to applications for funds and funding are strictly confidential. Therefore:

- You shouldn't disclose that an applicant has submitted a funding proposal to anyone else.
- You shouldn't discuss any documents with anyone else during review, or either before or after the Review Panel meeting. Reviewers and/or panel members shouldn't discuss anything related to the applications except during the meeting.
- We will provide feedback to applicants (successful or unsuccessful). You shouldn't under any circumstances provide feedback directly to applicants.
- You shouldn't disseminate any documents provided to you for the purposes of review.
- Any materials on electronic devices, or any printouts, must be kept securely. You must permanently delete or dispose of these securely after the decision has been reached.
- If you have a vested interest (organisational, collaborative, personal or other) in the outcome of a grant application, you must tell us as soon as possible by emailing research@mssociety.org.uk.
- You mustn't use any of the application or review documents, or other information discussed at the meeting specifically relating to an application, for the benefit of yourself or others.
- You have a right to expect that your comments will be treated in confidence by us and other members of the review groups
- Grant applicants will receive anonymised feedback from the reviewers and review panel. The identity of external reviewers won't be shared with applicants or our review panels.
- Where conflicts of interest are identified, reviewers or review panel members with conflicts will be withdrawn from review of that application. They won't have access to any documents, identity of other reviewers and panel members, and won't provide a review or score for that application. They will be asked to leave the meeting while the conflicted application is discussed. Any details of the discussion will be removed from any papers the reviewer or review panel member receives.

While TERN membership details are publicly available, the identity of reviewers in relation to specific grants is kept confidential.

Appendix 2: Accessing Grant Tracker

All application documents, including review comments, can be accessed through [your Grant Tracker Portal](#). You'll also submit scores during the panel meeting through the Portal.

Once you've logged in, you can use the left-hand menu to navigate to 'My Reviews' then 'Panel meeting documents' and click on the name of the panel meeting. Or you can scroll down on the homepage to the 'You have...' section and click on the relevant panel meeting.

My Meetings

Applications for the following meetings are now available for you to review. Please click on the meeting to access the applications.

Meeting Name	Date	Panel	Number of Applications
2024 Project Awards conflict check	09/05/2024	2024 Project Awards TRP	14
2024 Project Awards TERN review panel meeting	11/06/2024	2024 Project Awards TRP	14

This will open a page showing all application documents for the meeting. You can access the application, review comments and the applicant's rebuttal by clicking 'View' under the 'Response' column. Or you can download the application form and an 'application pack' of the review and applicant's rebuttal by clicking on the icons in the 'Documents' column.

The scoring function won't be active until the panel meeting. When it's activated, you'll see a textbox in the 'Score' column which you can interact with.

If you have a conflict of interest with an application, it'll still appear on your Portal. But you won't be able to access its documents. And the download icons will be coloured in yellow.

2024 Project Awards TERN review panel meeting

Items List

Hide already submitted applications
 Show items where I'm a reviewer
 Highlight items with updates

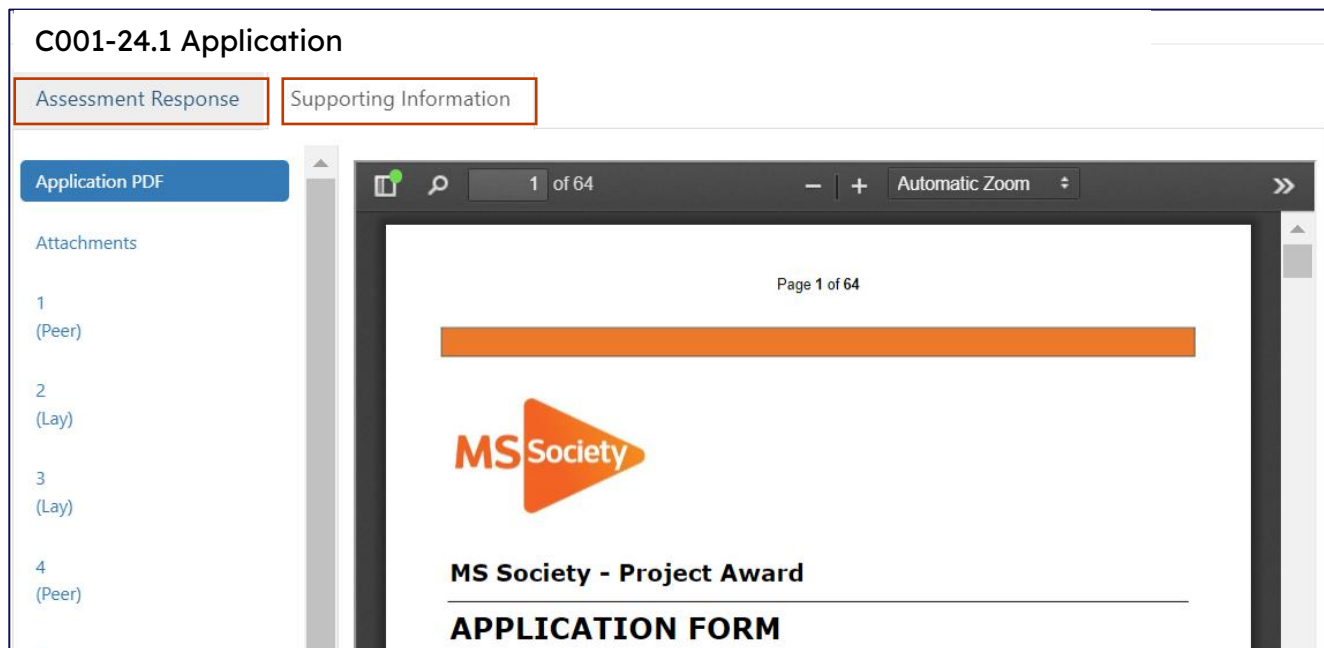
Search

[Download all 7 Packs](#)

RO	Details	Applicant	Score	Documents	Response
	C001-24.1 Application	Applicant 1			View
	C002-24.1 Application	Applicant 2			View
	C003-24.1 Application	Applicant 3			View

We advise using the 'Response' column to view applications so you don't need to download the documents.

You can view all the review scores together using the 'Assessment Response' tab. And read the application form, review comments and applicant's rebuttal ('Review Responses') in the 'Supporting Information' tab.



If you download any documents you must delete these from your device once the meeting has finished.

Appendix 3: Generic scoring guidance for reviewers and panel members

We also have funding scheme-specific scoring criteria. This can be found in the scheme-specific applicant guidance, reviewer guidance and panel member guidance documents.

Rating	Generic criteria
<p>Highly fundable</p> <p>(scores above 3.5)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research question(s) are likely to result in significant benefit for people affected by MS. And/or advancement in our scientific understanding of MS • Research team is very strong, containing all relevant disciplines to deliver project outcomes • Very good value for money • Proposal is clear and well written • People affected by MS are actively involved and influencing project at all relevant stages (PPI) • Proposal has a clear and realistic pathway to impact. Potential impact is highly significant and appropriate to grant type. • Research design is excellent, appropriate and highly feasible for the Award type.
<p>Potentially fundable</p> <p>(scores between 2.5 and 3.5)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research question(s) are likely to result in benefit for people affected by MS. Or some advancement in the scientific understanding of MS • Research team has relevant experience and contains most of the relevant disciplines to deliver project outcomes • Acceptable value for money • Some elements of involving people affected by MS, where appropriate, but not well integrated or well supported • Elements of the application are unclear • Project would only be fundable with some changes • Proposal has a reasonable pathway to impact. Potential impact is significant and mostly appropriate to grant type. • Research design is acceptable for the Award type
<p>Not fundable</p> <p>(scores below 2.5)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research question(s) are irrelevant with no tangible benefit to people affected by MS. • Key skills missing from the research team • Poor value for money • Unclear application • Involvement of people affected by MS inappropriate or limited/lacking • Pathway to impact is unclear and/or unrealistic. Little or no potential impact or poorly described/not appropriate to grant type. • Research design is unsuitable for the Award type.

Appendix 4: Criteria for peer reviewers

You should consider the following when reviewing your allocated application(s).

Design and methodology

- Are the aims and objectives clearly stated, realistic and relevant to the current state of the field?
- Does the application fully address the research question?
- Are appropriate project design, methodology, analysis and ethical arrangements fully outlined?
- Does the project have meaningful, well-supported involvement of people affected by MS in its design and delivery?
- Is the research feasible and realistic within the proposed timescale and budget? Will the stated objectives be met?

Relevance, importance and impact

- How relevant is the proposal to the needs of people affected by MS?
- Is it relevant to the purpose and scope of the award type?
- How relevant is the application to our research priorities and strategy?
- Will the research lead to a significant impact on people affected by MS?
- How original is the research proposal?
- Will the proposed research lead to significant new understanding?
- How will the outputs of the project benefit people affected by MS and address a clinical need?
- Is the pathway to achieving that impact clearly and realistically described?

Additional criteria

- Ability to deliver: does the team have the necessary skills and expertise to carry out the proposed work?
- Value for money: are the requested costs and support adequately justified?
- Ethical issues: does the proposed research raise any ethical concerns?
- Animal research: if the proposed research is using animals, you should consider whether the species is justified, the numbers are appropriate, the potential benefit justifies the adverse effects on the animals and if animals are needed for the research. [Read our policy on animal research on our website.](#)
- Duplication: you should consider whether the work is already being undertaken elsewhere. The existence of competing groups elsewhere isn't a reason for downgrading a proposal, unless the work proposed is a direct duplication of other work already being undertaken. [See our research Award calls that are currently open or under review.](#) Or [read more about our currently funded research Awards.](#)

Appendix 5: Guidance for considering relevance to MS

You should consider our research priorities, as well as our organisational strategy, when reviewing applications.

Our research priorities

We completed a James Lind Alliance (JLA) partnership to identify the research priorities for MS that are important to people affected by MS and healthcare professionals. These priorities complement our [2018-2022 Research Strategy](#) and [2023-2024 Research Strategy Extension](#). The top 10 research priorities identified were:

1. Which treatments are effective to slow, stop or reverse the accumulation of disability associated with MS?
2. How can MS be prevented?
3. Which treatments are effective for fatigue in people with MS?
4. How can people with MS be best supported to self-manage their condition?
5. Does early treatment with aggressive disease modifying drugs improve the prognosis for people with MS?
6. Is Vitamin D supplementation an effective disease modifying treatment for MS?
7. Which treatments are effective to improve mobility for people with MS?
8. Which treatments are effective to improve cognition in people with MS?
9. Which treatments are effective for pain in people with MS?
10. Is physiotherapy effective in reducing disability in people with MS?

Our organisational strategy

We have an [Organisational Strategy](#) to guide our work from 2020-2024. This strategy has three overarching goals with associated delivery strategies:

1. Effective treatments and preventing MS
 - a. Deepening our understanding of progression
 - b. Accelerating clinical trials
 - c. Improving our understanding of risk factors
2. People living well with MS
 - a. Empowering and supporting people living with MS
 - b. Ensuring everyone can access high quality treatment, care, and support
 - c. Supporting carers, families, and friends
3. Connected communities, powerful voices
 - a. Connecting the MS communities
 - b. People leading change
 - c. Improving society's understanding of MS

Appendix 6: Ethical issues

Medical research raises a number of ethical issues, often relating to the use of human or animal subjects in research. Many of the ethical issues raised in funding applications received will have been addressed by independent research ethics committees. But we also need to be satisfied that the proposed work is acceptable.

We ask all panel members to consider the ethical acceptability of the research proposal. You should highlight areas that we should consider and identify any potential wider or future implications of the research.

Research using human participants or tissue

You should consider the ethical acceptability around:

- Clinical trials – these should include detailed protocols
- Proposals with potentially novel risks that need to take into account public and scientific perception
- Proposals where consent can't readily be given or isn't going to be obtained
- Proposals which involve using data or materials in ways that the donor(s) may not have imagined
- Proposals in areas of public concern (such as genetics) where the relevance to health may not be immediately obvious

If you think there are particular ethical considerations around a proposal, you should raise these so they can be considered by the panel.

Animal research

Researcher panel members should consider whether applicants have taken into account [our policy on animal research](#).

You must also assess if applicants have addressed the **3Rs** (replacement, reduction and refinement) in their proposal. And provided justifications for the following:

- The relevance to humans and why there's no alternative to the use of animals in the project
- The species and number of any animals that could be used
- Any refinement procedures to minimise any pain or distress
- Measures taken to avoid bias (e.g. blinding, randomisation)
- Number of experimental and control groups and sample size in each group
- How the sample size was calculated, showing power calculations and including justification of effect size
- Overview of the planned statistical analyses
- Frequency of measurements and interventions to be used

We're the MS Society.
Our community is here for
you through the highs, lows
and everything in between.
We understand what life's
like with MS.

Together, we are strong
enough to stop MS.
mssociety.org.uk

Contact us

MS National Centre 020 8438 0700
info@mssociety.org.uk
MS Helpline Freephone 0808 800 8000
(weekdays 9am-9pm)
helpline@mssociety.org.uk

Online

mssociety.org.uk
facebook.com/MSSociety
twitter.com/mssocietyuk

MS Society Scotland

0131 335 4050
msscotland@mssociety.org.uk

MS Society Northern Ireland

028 9080 2802
nireception@mssociety.org.uk

MS Society Cymru

mscymru@mssociety.org.uk



Multiple Sclerosis Society

Registered charity nos. 1139257 / SCO41990
Registered as a limited company in England and Wales 07451571
Registered office: Carriage House, 8 City North Place, London, N4 3FU