

# Research funding application review

## Conflicts of Interest policy and Reviewer Code of Conduct

By accepting an invitation to review a research funding application for the MS Society, you're agreeing to abide by our Conflicts of Interest policy and our Reviewer Code of Conduct. This applies to any review you complete, including written reviews and verbal reviews in funding panel meetings.

### 1. Conflicts of interest policy

- 1.1. It's important that all reviewers are seen to be completely impartial at all stages of the review process. We do our best to identify conflicts of interest and won't select reviewers or panel members if there is a clear conflict. However not all conflicts are obvious, and there may be circumstances we're unaware of that give the impression of a conflict of interest.
- 1.2. Before accepting a review, you should consider whether there are any potential conflicts of interest. This isn't limited to conflicts of interest between reviewers and applicants. But also includes circumstances that might give the impression of a conflict of interest. Conflicts of interest aren't unethical, but we must make sure that they're recognised and dealt with accordingly. **If any reviewer or panel member feels that they are conflicted, they must tell us as soon as possible.**
- 1.3. You'll have a better understanding of whether your work or duties outside of reviewing may represent a conflict of interest. You could ask yourself, "Will I benefit either directly or indirectly if this grant is awarded or not awarded?" If you're not clear in any circumstances, you can discuss with us by emailing [research@mssociety.org.uk](mailto:research@mssociety.org.uk).
- 1.4. A conflict of interest occurs for a reviewer when you:
  - Are a close friend, patient or relative of the applicant(s).
  - Are directly involved in the work the applicant proposes to carry out and/or have assisted the applicant with their application for funding. Such as being named as a co-applicant. Or providing constructive feedback on applications prior to submission, including Patient and Public Involvement prior to submission.
  - Have worked closely with or have recently collaborated with the applicant(s)
    - For example: if you were the PhD supervisor/student of the applicant.
    - For example: if you've published with, or held a research grant in collaboration with, the applicant(s) within the last three years.
  - Are located at the same department as the applicant(s).
  - Are currently employed at the same organisation as the applicant(s). This includes honorary positions and contracts.

- Have been approached or agreed to be a member of a committee connected with the research project.
    - For example: an advisory group or steering committee (including PPI advisory groups).
  - Have submitted an application to the same round for which you're being asked to provide a review.
  - Have a commercial or financial/pecuniary interest.
    - For example: if you are a member of an organisation that may benefit financially, directly or indirectly from any decision made.
  - Have a personal or family interest relating to both financial/pecuniary and non-pecuniary interests.
    - For example: if you have connections with bodies which have a direct financial interest, or from being a business partner, or being employed by a person with such an interest. Or any benefit or favour in kind including rising from membership of clubs or other organisations.
  - **These restrictions apply equally to the lead applicant and any other members of the research team, including co-applicants, advisers and named collaborators, on the proposal.**
- 1.5. Before being asked to review applications and all funding panel meetings, you'll be asked to declare any conflicts of interest. If you don't feel that you're an appropriate reviewer for the application, you can discuss with us by emailing [research@mssociety.org.uk](mailto:research@mssociety.org.uk). Similarly, if you're not sure whether there is a conflict or not, you should contact us.
- 1.6. Where conflicts exist, you won't take part in the review process of the application you are conflicted for.
- You won't have access to the application or review documents.
  - You'll be asked to leave the room, or put in a virtual waiting room, during any discussion for that application.
  - You won't know who else has reviewed the application or read the reviewers' comments
  - You won't score the application. Or contribute to recommendations or decisions affecting the application.
  - You won't be given details of the discussion regarding that application after the meeting.
- 1.7. If our Review Panel Chair has a conflict of interest, they'll be asked to leave the room, or put in a virtual waiting room, during any discussion for that application. The Vice Chair will chair that application instead.
- 1.8. All conflicts of interest, and any decisions related to these, will be recorded in the meeting minutes. The Chair is responsible for making sure this is done.
- 1.9. If you have any concerns about someone else's potential or actual conflicts of interest, you should raise this with the panel Chair (in private, if possible). This includes any issues concerning MS Society staff.

## 2. Reviewer Code of Conduct

## 2.1. Background

We aim to ensure that research proposals are assessed objectively and impartially. An essential part of our decision making process is review of applications by external reviewers and members of our trusted, independent review panels. 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.

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

## 2.2. 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:

- 2.2.1. You shouldn't disclose that an applicant has submitted a funding proposal to anyone else.
- 2.2.2. 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.
- 2.2.3. We will provide feedback to applicants (successful or unsuccessful). You shouldn't under any circumstances provide feedback directly to applicants.
- 2.2.4. You shouldn't disseminate any documents provided to you for the purposes of review.
- 2.2.5. 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.
- 2.2.6. 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](mailto:research@mssociety.org.uk).
- 2.2.7. 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.
- 2.2.8. You have a right to expect that your comments will be treated in confidence by us and other members of the review groups
- 2.2.9. 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.

- 2.2.10. While membership of The Expert Review Network, who form our funding panels, is publicly available, the identity of reviewers in relation to specific grants will be kept confidential.
- 2.2.11. 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.

If you have any questions about our Conflicts of Interest policy or reviewer Code of Conduct, please email [research@mssociety.org.uk](mailto:research@mssociety.org.uk).