

2021 Peer Review Guidance

**A detailed guide for reviewers
of proposals to the MS Society**

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1. The importance of peer review

Thank you for agreeing to complete a peer review for the MS Society. Your expertise is vital to help the MS Society invest donated funds in the highest quality research, to help improve the lives of people affected by MS by delivering our [Research Strategy](#).

Effective peer review ensures research proposals are scrutinised by independent experts working in the relevant field to assess, for example: feasibility, scientific quality, relevance to people affected by MS and cost-effectiveness.

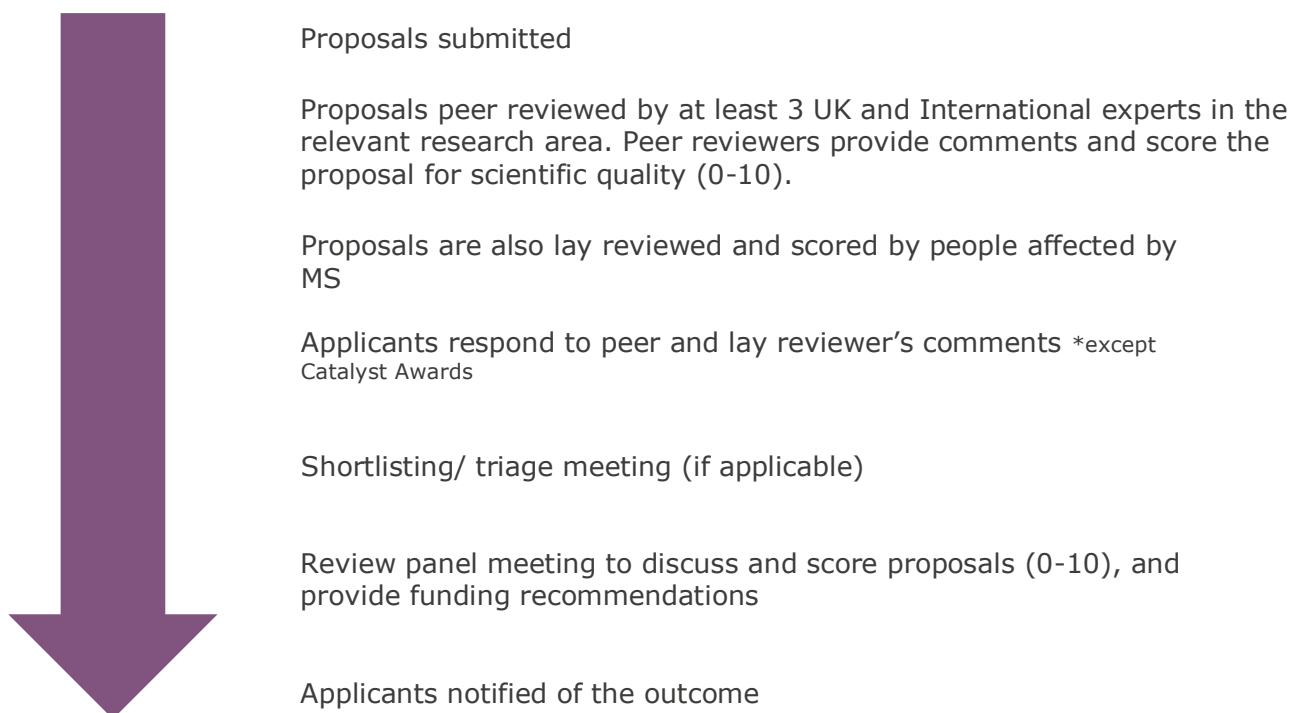
Comments the peer reviewer agrees to make public may be shared with the applicant to improve scientific quality of applications. The MS Society's Review Panels draw on the peer reviewer's comments when making funding decisions. Peer review private comments and scores remain anonymous from the applicant, but are open to the Review Panel.

By accepting our invitation to review, you agree to abide by our reviewer code of conduct (appendix II).

The objectives of peer review are to:

- Ensure the MS Society funds projects of the highest scientific quality and relevance to people with MS
- Obtain value for money and ensure effective and efficient use of resources
- Provide a fair balance of experience and research disciplines for the Review Panel members to draw from

2. Funding process



3. Conflicts of interest

It is important that all reviewers are seen to be completely impartial at all stages of the review process.

The MS Society endeavours to identify conflicts of interest and will not select you as a reviewer if there is a clear conflict. However, not all conflicts are obvious from the information we have available. Therefore, if you consider you may have a conflict of interest you must contact the MS Society before proceeding with the review.

A conflict of interest occurs for a reviewer when you:

- Are a personal friend or a relative of the applicant
- Are directly involved in the work that the applicant proposes to carry out and/or have assisted the applicant with their application for funding
- Have recently collaborated with the applicant, i.e. it has been less than five years since last publication
- Are currently employed at the same research organisation, or other institution, as the applicant
- Were the PhD Supervisor for the applicant
- Have submitted an application to the same round for which you are being asked to provide a review
- 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 for example if you are a member of an organisation that may benefit financially, directly or indirectly from any decision made.

***Please note the restrictions which apply to the lead applicant apply equally to co-investigators on an application**

If you do not feel that you are an appropriate referee for this application please inform us as soon as possible. Similarly, if you are unsure as to whether a conflict is actual or not, please contact us as soon as possible.

Reviewers must also agree that documents and correspondence relating to applications for funds are strictly confidential (please see appendix II for the MS Society's Code of Conduct).

4. Award types

Catalyst Awards (previously called Innovative Awards)

Catalyst Awards provide support for a short-term, small-scale pilot or proof of concept research projects to explore innovative ideas. These may be "high-risk, high-reward" type projects and should be hypothesis driven. It is intended that these awards will encourage established and more junior researchers from both within and outside the MS field to explore innovative ideas in MS research that, if merited, may lead to further support through the Society or other funding sources.

Support for innovative awards is provided for a maximum of 12 months and have an upper funding limit of £50,000.

Project Awards

The essential purpose of a project award is to provide support for a time-limited research project designed to answer a single question or a small group of related questions. Such questions must be directed towards our Research Strategy. Applications should be hypothesis driven.

Support can be provided for a maximum of 3 years. There is no specific limit on the amount of funding that can be requested for a project grant; however value for money is one of the criteria considered when funding decisions are made.

PhD Fellowships

PhD fellowships are designed to encourage the best science graduates to embark on a research career in MS. These awards provide practical research training leading to a doctorate, through a time-limited research project related to MS, under the direct supervision of a senior and experienced researcher.

Support for PhD studentships is provided over a three year period and will include a competitive tax-free stipend for the student, tuition fees (at home/EU rates) and the running costs of the project (up to £15,000 per year).

The research environment and the quality of the training provided are also important considerations for these awards.

Early Career Fellowships (previously called Junior Fellowships)

Early Career fellowships are aimed at attracting and retaining talented, post-doctoral scientists, early in their career in MS research. They aim to provide training in the principles and practice of academic research, through a time-limited research project related to MS, under the direct supervision of senior and experienced researchers.

Early Career fellowships are usually awarded to individuals after the first or second post-doc, but consideration will be given to outstanding candidates who do not fully fill this criteria. Applicants should demonstrate the ability to establish an independent research career and group. It is also recommended that applicants have had research experience in more than one research group and/or institution.

Support is provided for up to 4 years with an upper funding limit of £250,000. Value for money is one of the key criteria considered when funding decisions are made.

The quality of the candidate, the supervisor and the training plan and environment provided are also important considerations for these awards.

5. Completing your review

To complete your review, please follow the link provided in the email you received. You will be asked to score the application (out of 10) and provide comments on the strengths and weaknesses of the proposal to be considered in shortlisting applications and in funding review.

Providing reviewer comments

Please provide comments to support your score, focusing on the **strengths** and **weaknesses** of the proposal. Further guidance on things to consider when reviewing is on the next page.

Public comments

These comments will be used by the review panel and may be provided to the applicants anonymously as feedback either during the application process (where applicants are encouraged to respond to these comments) or to applicants after funding decisions have been made. Please give as much detail as you can in this section on the **strengths** and **weaknesses** of the application to assist the review panel in making funding recommendations.

Private comments

Please provide any extra comments that the review panel or MS Society should consider in review of this application. These comments will not be seen by the applicants at any stage of the process.

Things to consider when reviewing

Relevance

- Is it relevant to the needs of people with MS?
- Is it relevant to the purpose of the Award type?

Importance

- Does the research question(s) address an unmet need?
- How original is the research proposal?
- How likely is it to lead to significant new understanding?

Project design and methodology

- Are the aims and objectives clearly stated and realistic?
- Does the application fully address the research question?
- Does the application fully outline appropriate project design, methodology, analysis and ethical arrangements?
- Does the project have meaningful, well-supported involvement of people affected by MS?

Ability to deliver

- Does the team contain all relevant disciplines and the necessary levels of expertise?
- For Career Development Awards, is the research environment and the quality of the training provided appropriate and high quality?

Feasibility

- Does the project have the potential to meet the stated objectives within the timescale and the budget?

Impact

- Will this application lead to a significant impact on people affected by MS?
- What significance will the project outputs have on the route to patient benefit and stated clinical need?
- Is the pathway to achieving that impact clearly and realistically described?

Value for money

- Are the requested costs and support adequately justified?

Ethical issues

- Please consider carefully the ethical acceptability of the research proposal, particularly around the following:
 - Clinical trials
 - Proposals where consent cannot readily be given or is not going to be obtained
 - Proposals which entail using data or materials in ways that the donor may not have envisaged
 - Proposals in areas of public concern (e.g. genetics)

Animal research

- Reviewers are asked to consider whether:
 - Animals are needed for the proposed research
 - The potential benefit justifies the adverse effects on the animals
 - The numbers are appropriate
 - The species is justified
- Please see Appendix III for the MS Society's policy on animal research.

Duplication

- Reviewers are asked to consider whether the work is already being undertaken elsewhere. Note that the existence of competing groups elsewhere should not be seen as a reason for downgrading a proposal, unless the work proposed is a direct duplication of other work already being undertaken.
 - Research grants currently funded by the MS Society can be found here: <https://www.mssociety.org.uk/ms-research/research-we-fund>
 - Research calls currently open or in the process of external review can be found here: <https://www.mssociety.org.uk/research/for-researchers/funding>

Any additional comments/concerns not covered by the above.

Scoring

You will be asked to provide a score between 0-10 for the quality of the scientific proposal. Please be as accurate as you can. Your score will **not** be provided to the applicant, but will be used to help shortlist applications by their average review score, and by our panels during funding recommendation review.

10	- Exceptional	Highly Fundable
9	- Excellent	
8	- High quality	
7	- Good	
6	- Above average	Potentially Fundable
5	- Acceptable	
4	- Borderline acceptable	Not fundable
3	- Below acceptable	
2	- Many identified flaws	
1	- Serious scientific weaknesses or other major concerns	
0	- Definitely not fundable	

Please see Appendix I for further guidance on the **scoring criteria**.

6. Contact information

If you have any queries regarding your review please email research@mssociety.org.uk.

Appendix I – Scoring Criteria

Generic criteria	Project award specific	Catalyst award specific	PhD fellowship specific	Early Career fellowship specific	Rating	Score	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very important research questions; likely to result in significant benefit for people affected by MS or advancement in the scientific understanding of MS • Very strong team, containing all relevant disciplines • Very good value for money • Clear and well written proposal • Active involvement (PPI) & influence of people affected by MS at all relevant stages of project • Potential impact is highly significant and appropriate to grant type, with a clear and realistic pathway to impact 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Excellent, appropriate and highly feasible research design for a Project award (the design, methods and analyses are adequately developed, well integrated, well-reasoned and appropriate to the aims of the project) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Excellent, appropriate and highly feasible research design for a Catalyst award (the project develops or employs novel concepts, approaches, methodologies, tools, or technologies for the area) • Highly innovative, high-risk, high-reward research which, if successful, has great potential for further development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Excellent, appropriate and highly feasible research design for a PhD fellowship (the design, methods and analyses are well developed and the work is achievable within the timeframe of a PhD) • Excellent training and educational environment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Excellent, appropriate and highly feasible research design for an Early Career fellowship (the design, methods and analyses are well developed and the work is achievable within the timeframe of the fellowship) • Exceptional candidate; demonstrating high commitment to MS research, clear potential to establish an independent research career; experience in more than one research group and/or institution • Excellent training and educational environment for the candidate with high quality career and network development opportunities. 	Exceptional	10	Highly fundable
				Excellent	9		
				High quality	8		
				Good	7		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Important research questions, likely to result in benefit for people affected by MS or some advancement in the scientific understanding of MS • Team has relevant research experience and contains most of the relevant disciplines • Acceptable value for money • Elements of the application are unclear • Some elements of involving people affected by MS, where appropriate, but not well integrated or well supported • Project would only be fundable with some changes • Potential impact is significant and mostly appropriate to grant type, with a reasonable pathway to impact 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acceptable research design for a Project award (the design, methods and analyses are acceptable, they are only partially integrated, and further reasoning for how they fit with the aims of the project is required) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acceptable research design, appropriate for a Catalyst award (concepts, methodologies, tools, or technologies are not particularly novel for the area) • Innovative project which, if successful, has potential for further development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acceptable research design, appropriate for a PhD fellowship (the design, methods and analyses are acceptable and the work is achievable within the timeframe of a PhD) • Acceptable training and educational environment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acceptable research design, appropriate for an Early Career fellowship (the design, methods and analyses are acceptable and the work is achievable within the timeframe of the fellowship) • Good candidate; demonstrating a commitment to MS research, potential to establish an independent research career and a group: experience in more than one research group or institution. • Good training and educational environment for the candidate with good quality career and network development opportunities. 	Above average	6	Potentially fundable
				Acceptable	5		
				Borderline acceptable	4		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Irrelevant research questions • Key skills missing from the research team • Poor value for money • Unclear application • Involvement of people affected by MS inappropriate or limited/ lacking • Little or no potential impact or poorly described/not appropriate to grant type, with an unclear/unrealistic pathway to impact 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor/ flawed/ duplicative; serious scientific concerns, unsuitable for a Project award (the design, methods and analyses are not well developed, not well integrated, and requires further reasoning for how they fit with the aims of the project) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research design is unsuitable for a Catalyst award (concepts, approaches, methodologies, tools, or technologies are not novel for the area) • Not an innovative project, if success is achieved has no potential for further development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor/ flawed/ duplicative; serious scientific concerns, unsuitable for PhD fellowship (the design, methods and analyses are not well developed and the work is not achievable within the timeframe of a PhD) • Poor training environment and educational environment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor/ flawed/ duplicative; serious scientific concerns (the design, methods and analyses are not well developed and the work is not achievable within the timeframe of an Early Career fellowship) • Candidate lacking relevant experience; not committed to MS research, not demonstrating potential to establish an independent research career and a group • Poor training environment and educational environment for the candidate with poor career and network development opportunities 	Below acceptable	3	Not fundable
				Many identified flaws	2		
				Serious scientific weaknesses or other major concerns	1		
				Definitely not fundable	0		

Appendix II – Code of Conduct

The MS Society aims to ensure that research proposals are assessed objectively and impartially. Review by an appropriately constituted group is seen as an essential element of the decision making process. The Board of Trustees relies heavily on the willingness of members of the MS community to give time to participate in external review and on review groups and appreciates their willingness to do so.

External reviewers and members should be aware that the role of reviewers is advisory. As part of its commitment to impartiality and the integrity of the review process, the Society has set down the Code of Conduct printed below.

If the Society has reason to believe that an external reviewer or member of a review group has breached this Code of Conduct, then he or she may be asked to step down as a reviewer, Panel member or Strategic Advisor.

Code of Conduct

As a condition of participation, reviewers agree that documents and correspondence relating to applications for funds and funding are strictly confidential and therefore:

- Should not be discussed with anyone else during review, or either before or after the Grant Review Panel meeting. No discussion should occur between reviewers and/or Panel members except during the business of the meeting.
 - Feedback to candidates (successful or unsuccessful) will be provided by the Society alone, to avoid confusion. External reviewers and Grant Review Panel members should not, under any circumstances, provide feedback directly to the candidate.
 - Should not be disseminated
 - Any printouts should be kept secure and disposed of securely after the decision has been reached
 - Should a reviewer have a vested interest (organisational, collaborative, personal or other) in the outcome of a grant application they should declare it using the Society's Conflict of Interest form
 - Reviewers have a right to expect that their comments will be treated in confidence by both the Society's staff and other members of the review groups
 - Grant applicants will receive anonymised feedback from the reviewers
 - While membership of each Grant Review panel will be publicly available, the identity of reviewers in relation to specific grants will be kept confidential.
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Appendix III – MS Society Policy Position on Animal Research

Research into MS is essential for developing new therapies and ultimately a cure. There is still a great deal which we do not understand about MS and so it is vital that research occurs to increase our knowledge of all levels of the condition. This means following MS from its onset and through its progression.

While the ethics of using animals in medical research are not universally accepted, there is currently no way of accurately predicting the complex response of the body except in a living animal ('in vivo'). Non-animal data allows identification of possible targets for drug development, but it is only in a living animal that the combination of genes, body chemicals and systems and environmental influences work together. At the moment, it is impossible to investigate this accurately using any other system.

Research using animals has contributed significantly to our understanding of MS and the in the development of therapies, specifically in relation to our understanding of the immune system, inflammation and communication within the central nervous system. The recent development of beta interferon, Copaxone and Tysabri was only possible through animal research.

The MS Society's policy on animal use in research is in accordance with UK law and the best practice standards set by the Association of Medical Research Charities (AMRC). The AMRC guidance stipulates that the minimum number of animals be used that produce a valid result; that experiments must be designed so as to minimise pain, suffering and distress to the animals; and that alternatives be used wherever possible. The MS Society also refuses to support any research which uses primates.

The MS Society understands that some people may not agree with this policy and we respect their views. However, our responsibility is to people with MS and finding the most effective ways for supporting research into the condition. Any of our donors who do not wish to fund research which may involve the use of animals have the option of requesting that their contributions are not used in this way. Once made, the Society is legally bound to respect any such request.

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

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Multiple Sclerosis Society.
Registered charity nos. 1139257 / SC041990.
Registered as a limited company by guarantee
in England and Wales 07451571.

 **Let's stop MS together**