



**Research
Network**

How to lay review research funding applications

This Research Network training will equip you with the skills and knowledge you need to be a lay reviewer.

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1. How to use this training pack

This training will help you develop the skills and knowledge you need to review a research award application. This training pack is split into the following sections:

How do we decide what research to fund?

In this section you will learn:

- Why all research award applications to the MS Society must be rigorously reviewed
- Why peer and lay review are both essential to the review process
- What our review process looks like from start to finish
- About the different types of funding offered to researchers by the MS Society
- What we expect from our lay reviewers, and what you can expect from us

What to think about when you review an application

This section explores the questions you'll be asked to think about when you review an application. We also provide some guidance on how to decide on your final overall score.

Practice reviews

You will have received a separate document containing some example applications. This gives you a chance to practice what you've learned by reviewing these applications.

Send your completed practice reviews back to the Research Involvement and Inclusion Manager, who will give you feedback and answer any questions you have.

Email: researchnetwork@mssociety.org.uk

Before you get started...

Is lay review compulsory for Research Network members?

No, it isn't! There's a lot to read in this training pack, and lay review is an activity which requires a fair amount of reading.

If you don't enjoy this, you don't have to continue. Lay review is optional, and there are many other ways for Research Network members to be involved in research.

2. How do we decide what research to fund?

Every year, the MS Society receives a high number of applications from researchers requesting funding for new projects. We can't fund them all.

We only want to fund research which is of the highest scientific quality, and which people affected by MS feel is a top priority.

Therefore, we ask peer and lay reviewers to comment on and score applications. This ensures that the review process is fair, independent and transparent, and that we fund the best applications.

What is the difference between peer and lay review?

Who is a peer reviewer?

A researcher who has relevant expertise in the same field as the applicant. Peer reviewers assess the scientific merit of the applications we receive.

Peer reviewers tell us:

- Is the application likely to produce results that advance our understanding of MS?
- Is the work original? Does it address a gap in existing knowledge?
- Do the applicants have the expertise to undertake the project? Do they have a strong track record?
- Is the amount of time and money requested necessary and realistic?

Who is a lay reviewer?

In health research, a 'lay' person is someone who may not have professional knowledge of research, but is personally affected by a health condition. This personal experience is what you need to be a lay reviewer.

Lay reviewers tell us:

- Does the application address important priorities for people affected by MS?
- Does the application ask the right questions? Does it measure the right outcomes?
- If people with MS will be taking part in the project as participants, will they have a good experience? Or is the research too burdensome?
- Have the applicants done a good job of involving people affected by MS in the planning and design of the study? Do they have good plans to continue their patient and public involvement in the delivery of the project?
- Are the results likely to lead to tangible benefits for people affected by MS?

We're not asking you to tell us whether an application is of a high scientific quality - that's a job for the peer reviewers. Lay reviewers offer a complementary perspective to peer reviewers, which is equally important in our decision making.

As a lay reviewer, we ask you to:

- Read and assess the applications using the guidelines in this training pack.
- Complete your reviews by the deadline, or let us know in good time if you'll be unable to complete them.
- Keep all applications confidential.

In return we will:

- Provide you with feedback on the practice reviews you complete as part of this training.
- Run optional Question & Answer sessions during the lay review period. These online sessions are attended by our Research Involvement and Inclusion Manager and members of our Award Team. You can ask us any question about the lay review process or using Grant Tracker (the web platform you will use to complete your reviews, full details below).
- Support your development by giving you feedback on your first few reviews of real applications
- Inform you of the final funding decisions as soon as we can.

MS Society research award review process



Types of funding offered by the MS Society

Who can apply for MS Society funding?

Any researcher from a UK university or NHS institution can apply for our funding.

What types of funding do we offer?

In our annual Award Round, there are six different types of research funding available:

| Award Type | Remit | Length | Amount |
|-----------------------------------|---|---------------|--|
| Catalyst Award | Small scale pilot or proof of concept projects exploring new ideas. These may be 'high-risk, high-reward'. Two rounds per year. | Up to 1 year | Up to £60,000 |
| Project Grant | Projects designed to answer a single research question, or a small group of related questions. | Up to 3 years | No upper or lower limit. Researchers tend to request £150,000 - £300,000 |
| PhD Fellowship | Graduates embarking on a research career in MS. The PhD student is supervised by an experienced researcher. | 3 years | Typically around £125,000 |
| Early Career Fellowship | Talented scientists who are in the early stages of their careers (after a PhD). Early Career Fellows are supervised by an experienced researcher. | Up to 4 years | Typically around £280,000 - £320,000 |
| Data Discovery Award (DDA) | For projects seeking to use data from the MS Register as part of their research. | Up to 2 years | Up to £100,000 |

Which areas of research does the MS Society fund?

We welcome applications that are relevant to people affected by MS, and which align with our Research Strategy. Our 2025-2029 Research Strategy sets out our three priority areas for research (detailed below), which will help us reach our ultimate aim of a future free from MS. All our funding decisions consider how well research proposals address these priorities. [Read more about our 2025 – 2029 Research Strategy here.](#)

Manage the impact of MS

Focused on improving well-being and quality of life by managing the impact of MS in a way that focuses on the whole person. This could include research that:

- Supports mental health and wellbeing
- Explores non-drug approaches to symptom management like lifestyle changes
- Look at new ways to support rehabilitation and make it part of everyday care
- Develop digital tools to make sure everyone can access support
- Finds new routes for research to be turned into real-world services

Stop MS getting worse

Our aim is to find treatments that can slow, stop, and one day even reverse, the build-up of disability in MS for everyone.

We'll support research that deepens our knowledge of the mechanisms of progression. And develops and tests new approaches to slowing or stopping progression. This could include research that:

- Expands our understanding of progression, including that independent of relapses
- Studies the effect of ageing, and the role of female hormones, on progression
- Gets the right treatment to the right person at the right time
- Delivers combinations of treatments that work on different aspects of MS
- Looks at non-drug approaches, like managing other health conditions and lifestyle changes
- Identifies signals in the body (called biomarkers) for use in clinical research

Prevent MS before it starts

We want fewer people to develop MS in the future. To make this a reality, we first need a better understanding of who's at risk of MS and why. And how we can act on those risk factors. We'll support research that:

- Gives us a clearer picture of how people affected by MS feel about risk
- Identifies early signs that someone has a higher risk of MS
- Works out how to support people who are at risk of MS to take part in studies
- Helps us understand what we need to do to run successful prevention trials

Some research projects fit exclusively in one stream. But, more often, researchers are working on projects that address aspects of both biomedical and care and services research

3. How to review an application

You'll be able to see the full award application, but you don't need to read it all. You should focus on the Lay Summary and the Lay Involvement sections.

The Lay Summary section

The lay summary must be understandable to everyone regardless of education or professional experience. It should read as a standalone piece. The summary must provide enough details for you to understand the project's purpose and so you can provide meaningful feedback.

Researchers must address the following questions in their lay summary:

1. What's the aim of the project?

Applicants should set out the aims of the project, and focus on why they are important and relevant to people affected by MS.

2. How does your project address the priorities and needs of people affected by MS?

Applicants should describe why the aim(s) of their project are important and relevant to people affected by MS. They should make it clear what the specific benefits to people affected by MS this project could potentially bring. They should also explain how their project address any of the strategic priorities from [the MS Society 2025 – 2029 Research Strategy](#).

3. What's the reason for this study?

Applicants should explain the rationale for the project. What is already known from past research? How is this project different? What do they hope to find out?

4. How will this project be carried out?

Applicants should describe the methods that will be used, and explain why they are appropriate. If people with MS will be participants, the applicants should explain how they will be recruited, and how their needs will be taken into account.

5. Where could your research findings lead next?

Applicants should explain what could happen as a result of the findings from this study. For example, will it lead to a bigger study, a new treatment option or a change in clinical practice?

6. How will you share your results?

The applicants should explain their plans for sharing their findings, both to the research community and to people affected by MS. This plan should include the use of communications routes accessible to lay people, so not just academic journals and conferences.

The Patient and Public Involvement (PPI) section

In this section, applicants are asked about their PPI plans. Here they should explain:

- How people affected by MS have been involved in the **planning** of their project and application. And how this has influenced its development so far
- How they'll continue to involve people affected by MS in the ongoing project **implementation**, if they are awarded funding.

We expect all applicants to have a well-thought-out **involvement** plan. We recognise that the approach will be different in biomedical research compared to care and services research.

Remember: Involvement is very different to Participation

Involvement is when researchers work in partnership with people affected by MS to plan, design and carry out research. For example, people affected by MS might influence the design of a project, offer their advice as members of a steering group, or help to develop information materials for participants in the project.

Participation is when people are recruited to take part in a study.

If you'd like more information about the differences between involvement and participation, have a look at our [Research Network Welcome Training](#) on our webpage.

Other sections

If you are interested in further information about the application, you could also read the Project Details section and the Finances and Costs section.

Completing your review

To review an application, you will be asked to:

- Answer six questions about the application and provide a score for each question
- Provide an overall score for the whole application

You must not put any part of the application into **Artificial Intelligence (AI)** tools, such as ChatGPT. It's not clear whether anything put into AI tools remains confidential. We're committed to maintaining confidentiality in our research funding processes. This is essential for safeguarding the sharing of scientific opinions and assessments.

Your scores and comments will help us decide which applications to shortlist and will be used as discussion points in the final panel meeting.

Full details of how to use Grant Tracker to complete your review are provided in the next section.

How to answer the questions

We'd like you to answer each question in around 200 words. We have provided follow-up questions and prompts for you to consider to help you answer each question.

Question 1: What do you think of the lay summary?

Lay summaries should be written in plain English. The language should be clear and straightforward, with explanations of any technical terms. Your feedback in this question could help the researcher improve their communication in the future.

To answer this question, please refer to everything written in the Lay Summary and Involvement section(s) of the application. If you're struggling to understand an application, try to be specific about which parts are difficult to grasp, and any unanswered questions you have.

Here are some prompts to help you answer the question:

- Did you find this lay summary easy to understand and well written?
- Does the information in the lay summary give a clear explanation of the project?
- Is the language used appropriate and clear? If not, what are the problems?
- Are scientific terms, abbreviations and jargon fully described? If not, which terms need an explanation?
- Could this summary be used on its own to describe the proposed project? If not, what further information is needed?

Lay summary score: 1 to 5

1 = From the lay summary alone, you don't understand the reason for their research. And you don't understand how the project will be carried out.

5 = You fully understand everything in the lay summary. You didn't have to look up the meaning of any words, acronyms or phrases. The summary provides all the information you need to adequately understand the plans for this project and why it should be funded.

Question 2: How important and relevant you think this area of research is, to both you personally and to the wider MS community, including family and carers?

Your comments about if a particular project is important (or not) can be very persuasive, adding context about the lives of people affected by MS and the potential of a project to improve quality of life.

To answer this question, please refer to the following sections in the application:

- “What’s the aim of your project?”
- “How does your project address the priorities and needs of people affected by MS?”
- “What’s the reason for this study?”

Here are some prompts to help you answer the question:

- What is the problem being looked at? Do you think the researchers have understood what this problem means for people affected by MS in the real world?
- Do you think the proposed research would benefit people affected by MS?
- How relevant do you think this area of research is to the priorities and needs of people affected by MS?
- Does the application fit in with the MS Society research strategy

Applicants are asked to explain how their research fits in with the [MS Society Research Strategy](#)

Importance and relevance score: 1 to 5

1 = The application indicates a basic misunderstanding of the way in which MS impacts people, and what would help improve their quality of life. The research does not address any of the research priorities set out in the MS Society 2025 – 2029 Research Strategy.

5 = The application shows a high level of understanding of how MS affects people. It addresses an issue which is a priority for people affected by MS. And if relevant, proposes an acceptable intervention. It is clear from the application how the research aligns with our Research Strategy.

Question 3: Will this project require people affected by MS to take part as research participants? If it does, how well have the researchers thought about the participants' needs?

If there will be no people participating, please leave this question blank.

Here you need to reflect on the design of the project. And if the proposed plans are feasible. The key issue for you to consider is whether what is being asked of participants is reasonable.

To answer this question, please refer to the following section in the application: “How will the project be carried out?”

Here are some prompts to help you answer the question:

- Have the researchers thought sensitively about the needs of people participating? For example, have they considered the potential impact of MS symptoms such as fatigue or mobility issues?
- Do you think people would be willing to take part? Is there anything in particular that might put people off?
- Could the researchers change any part of their proposal to make it easier for people affected by MS to join this study?

Participation score: 1 to 5

1 = The application indicates little to no consideration of the needs of people living with MS. There is a high or unacceptable burden asked of participants.

5 = The application indicates an accurate and sensitive consideration of the needs of people with MS. The research is designed in a well thought-out manner, minimising the burden and impact of participating. This should lead to successful recruitment.

Question 4: How well has the researcher involved people affected by MS in the planning of their project so far?

Remember, this question is asking about involvement (or PPI) in research, not participation. All applicants must have involved people affected by MS in their planning so far.

To answer this question, please refer to the Patient and Public Involvement section in the application. Specifically, how they've involved people in the **planning** of their project so far.

Here are some prompts to help you answer the question:

- Have the researchers already involved people affected by MS in the project planning stages? What have they done beyond our Lay Summary Development scheme?
- Have they made sure their research plans are a priority for people affected by MS? How have they done this?
- Have they co-designed the project and its methods, to ensure that they are feasible for people with MS?

Involvement so far score: 1 to 5

1 = There's been no involvement of people affected by MS in the development of this project or application.

5 = There's been involvement of people affected by MS since the researcher started developing the research idea. This includes meaningful involvement in key elements of the research. Such as understanding how MS impacts people, refining the research focus and/or designing the methodology (where appropriate). This goes beyond taking part in our Lay Summary Development scheme.

Question 5: How well has the researcher planned to involve people affected by MS throughout the project, if it's awarded funding?

As well as working with people affected by MS to get their application to this stage, researchers must also have a plan for future involvement.

To answer this question, please refer to the Patient and Public Involvement section in the application. Specifically, future plans of how they'll involve people **throughout** their project.

Here are some prompts to help you answer the question:

- Does the researcher have plans to involve people affected by MS throughout their project, for example in the oversight of the project or the dissemination of the findings?
- Do they have clear goals and timelines for public involvement?
- Is the opportunity for people affected by MS to input into the research meaningful? Will they genuinely be able to influence the project?
- Has the researcher budgeted for involvement? For example, travel expenses or payments?

Involvement plans score 1 to 5

1 = There are no plans to involve people affected by MS in delivering or overseeing the research project. Recruiting participants as research subjects is not the same as involvement.

5 = There are detailed plans of how people affected by MS will be involved throughout the project. They demonstrate that a working relationship will be built with people affected by MS, and that they will have meaningful influence over the research.

Question 6: How much impact do you think this project could have for people affected by MS?

Impact is the benefit that research could have outside of academia. We want all of the research that we fund to have an impact on the lives of people affected by MS. But it's important to remember that the pathway to impact may be longer for some studies than others. This doesn't mean that research with a shorter pathway to impact should be prioritised over that with a longer pathway to impact.

To answer this question, please refer to the following section in the application: "Where could your research findings lead next?"

Some examples of how impact could lead to changes for the MS community include:

- improving treatments for people with MS,
- creating new processes and interventions,
- shaping and enhancing the effectiveness of public services,
- enhancing quality of life, health and well-being,
- influencing policies and legislation.

Impact score 1 to 5

1 = There's no convincing evidence that the research could have an impact on our understanding of MS, or health outcomes. The impact mentioned is not relevant to people living with MS.

5 = There's a clear explanation of how this research will impact the lives of people living with MS. It could advance our understanding of MS, improve health outcomes or improve quality of life.

Question 7: Do you have any additional comments about the application?

This is a space for you to provide any other comments on the application or feedback to the researchers.

You don't need to score this question.

How to provide an overall score

You'll be asked to score the application to help us decide which applications to fund. You must consider your answers and scores from the previous questions.

Please do try to use the full scale when scoring applications as this will really help us whittle it down. As we can't fund all the applications, it doesn't help us to choose if every application is scored as 'prioritise for funding'.

- If you give an overall score of 5, we would expect to see a score of 5 for all of the lay review questions
- If you scored any of the review questions a 1, we would expect your overall score to be below 3

Please get in contact or attend one of our scheduled lay review Q&A sessions if you would like to discuss the scoring system further.

5 - Excellent: prioritise for funding

4 - Good: funding advised

3 - Acceptable: fundable with a few changes

2 - Below acceptable: only fundable with major changes

1 - Not suitable for funding: don't fund

How to use Grant Tracker to complete your review

Grant Tracker is our grant management system and it's where you'll submit your reviews.

Once you've accepted the invitation to lay review an application, you'll receive another email containing a link to access the review.

Application reference: [redacted]
Application title: [redacted]
Lead Applicant: [redacted]
Institution: [redacted]

For further guidance on how to review this application and to access the documents:

Click the following link
<https://research.mssociety.org.uk/rv8dxbt96brpe2ly6rew210epbw1/>

If the link doesn't work, select and copy the code below

8D XBT9 6BRP E2LY 6REW 210E PBW1

and paste in the textbox on the following URL

<https://research.mssociety.org.uk/RV/>

Clicking the link will take you to our online Grant Tracker system to complete your review. If this is the first time you've used Grant Tracker, you may be asked to accept our Terms and Conditions before you can access the review.

The first page you'll see contains a summary of the application and a link to download the application documents as a PDF.

Round Name
Applicant
Title
Reference
Contracting Institution
Review Required By 12/05/2022

Application Documents [ApplicationForm](#) (pdf, 0.57MB)
To Download all of the above files in a single ZIP file click... [here](#)

| Grant Contacts | Contact Name | Organisation |
|-----------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| Finance Officer | ms Judith Jolleys | UCL |
| Adviser | Professor V. Hugh Perry | University of Southampton |
| Co Applicant | Professor Karen Horsburgh | University of Edinburgh |

[Introduction to lay review](#) [How do I use Grant Tracker?](#) [How do I provide my comments and score?](#) [Conflicts of interest](#) [Your review](#) [Overall score](#) [Validation summary](#)

The tabs along the bottom of the screen contain information about using Grant Tracker and completing your review. We recommend reading through them before you start reviewing the application.

At the bottom of each tab there are buttons to help you navigate through the review



'Submit Form' - Submit the form when complete. This button is enabled when the form validates.

'Save and print' - Print a PDF of this form, empty or complete.

'Save and Validate' - Check the form for completion of fields prior to submission

'Save and Close' - Save your responses and close this page. You may return to complete this form at another time.

The two most important tabs are 'Your Review' and 'Overall Score'.

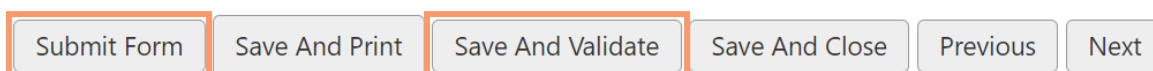
Your Review: Here you will be asked a series of questions about the application and asked to score each question (detailed on page 11 – 14 of this document). You should type your answers into the text boxes, and use the drop down list to select a score 1-5. We've provided prompts for you to think about when answering.

Any text box or drop down list with a red dot next to it must be completed before you can submit your review.

Overall Score: Once you've answered the questions, you should indicate whether you think the application should be prioritised for funding, using the drop down list (as detailed on page 14 of this document).

Once you've answered all the questions and provided an overall score, you should click 'Save and Validate'. This checks that you've completed all the required sections of the review.

Once you've completed all the required sections, you can click 'Submit Form' to send your review to us.



You don't have to complete your review all in one go. You can use the 'Save and...' buttons at the bottom of the page to save your answers so you can come back and finish them later.

If you have any problems using Grant Tracker, you can email research@mssociety.org.uk and we'll help you.

Top tips for completing your review

Some of our experienced lay reviewers share their top tips for completing a lay review.

Back up your views

Wherever you can, try to explain the reason for the score you've given. When you elaborate on your view, this provides really useful insights for the panel to consider when making the final decision on funding. For example:

- 'The design could be improved by...'
- 'Without xx, the risk is...'
- 'I'd like to know more about...'

This goes for projects you strongly support too. You should point out the parts you like and explain why. Such as if particular elements of the proposal are well thought through and clearly explained.

Researchers spend a lot of time and effort writing their research funding applications. So please be kind and keep criticism constructive.

Use the whole scoring scale

Most applications we receive are considered relevant and important. So sometimes you have to be a bit harsh with scoring in order for the exceptional ones to stand out. We ask you to score each question to help guide you with your overall score. So if you score one question poorly, this should impact the overall score you give.

Be honest – don't be afraid to say what you think and go with your instinct. There is no such thing as a bad question or dumb comment.

Think outside your own experience

Think outside of your personal experience with MS and consider how others affected by MS may benefit too.

Try and put yourself in the position of someone who may need a completely jargon-free lay summary, in order to make it as accessible and straightforward as possible.

Prepare

Give yourself time to do the review and make sure you are free of distractions. Some people suggest reading the proposal twice. The first time is to get an overall understanding of the project, and then the next time for analysis and feedback.

Biomedical research applications

Biomedical research applications can be more difficult to review. By biomedical, we mean research projects that happen mainly in a laboratory. Often they're looking at the biological causes and mechanisms of MS.

These applications may be a little more daunting to read, or you may struggle to see the relevance to people living with MS in the real world. However, it's still vital that people affected by MS are involved. All biomedical researchers must still consider the needs and interests of the MS community.

The below tips should help you when reviewing biomedical applications:

- **Do you understand the lay summary?** If not, include questions for the researchers if something is not clear or you think further information would help. If the application is shortlisted, your comments will be really helpful for the funding decision. Your comments will also be sent to the researcher to help them improve their future applications.
- **Do the researchers have prior experience in MS research?** If not, what knowledge base are they starting from? Whilst new ideas might be refreshing, what evidence is there to show the study has potential?
- **Impact.** How long could it take for the biomedical study to reach clinic and make a difference to people with MS? Have they described a definite path to this research reaching people with MS? Or is it a bit vague and needs more detail?
- **Lay involvement to date.** Have researchers engaged people affected by MS in a meaningful way? Have they influenced the design of the project in some way? If not, how do they know their proposed research is needed and relevant? We expect lay involvement in all biomedical research.
- **Future lay involvement.** Biomedical research projects should have a clear plan to continue involving people affected by MS in a meaningful way. Getting input and a steer throughout the project will help ensure its progressing in the right direction. Lay people can also be a great help with communicating updates and outcomes to the public in an accessible way.
- **Relevance.** You should consider the importance and significance of plans and decisions made by the researcher. "A proposal involving brain bank tissue samples suddenly meant a lot more to me when I thought - I don't want my brain tissue being used for this!"
- **Consistency.** It might sound obvious, but if you're doing several reviews for an award round, try to keep your scoring criteria consistent between them. Don't forget to save a copy of each of your reviews so you can check back. We'll also provide bespoke feedback after all your reviews are in, so it can be useful to reflect back then too.

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

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