

“The viewing system in Je-S is not user friendly, PDFs are not accessible, and a more interactive process would be better.”

“I would say that comments on Scientific Excellence & Timeliness and Promise are most important and relevant to all applications, and not all reviewers are aware of BBSRC strategic priorities - and may not want to devote time to finding out about them. I wouldn't be surprised if many people are put off by the prospect of having to enter comments in all the sections.”

“More discussion with the applicant would increase everyone's workload, and Je-S is getting more bureaucratic.”

It is useful to have specific feedback on this, and we are considering how to simplify the BBSRC review form. As Je-S is a cross council resource, any changes need to be agreed at this level. We would welcome new ideas on document presentation, and are watching the NIH process, where technology is used more extensively, so that reviewers can see what effect their comments have, and there are even anonymous discussions with the applicant. We also welcome any suggestions for an alternative to the current digitised paper system.

Would it be possible to streamline the online process, eg through centralised CVs, or a triage process?

In principle, we could further exploit the potential of the electronic system, rather than using 'digital paper.' However, this would necessitate significant changes to the peer review process, and would require the sharing and storing of a large volume of confidential information.

Introducing a triage stage based on reviewer's scores would be possible, but it would take place after the majority of effort and time had been expended, saving time only in the Committee Meeting itself.

Introducing Outline or Intentions to Submit would increase the time for funding from idea to award, and would increase the workload of the Committee significantly. It could also raise expectations.

Is there a fund for getting pilot data?

It is possible to put a 12 or 24 month grant into Responsive Mode, asking for funding for preliminary work.

Why do applicants have to wait so long to learn of funding outcomes?

A formal decision can only be made after the Committee Chairs meeting and a funding budget decision. Budgetary sign off can often be a little more complex than expected.

After a decision has been communicated, the award of a grant often requires several iterations between the office staff, the SSC and the applicants.

It's not easy to assess the Impact or International Competitiveness of a grant, or even all aspects of the proposal.

We try and make sure that we get reviewers that cover all areas. Not all reviewers can comment on every aspect. If you can't assess something when we ask then just say so. We try to have industrialists on the Committees serving on the Committee to provide a more informed judgement on impact.

Reviewing is not considered a high-value exercise by institutions, perhaps carrot-and-stick, eg financial incentives and not being able to apply would help encourage participation.

There are difficulties associated with introducing conditions on being able to apply, as you don't know everyone's circumstances (and it won't affect reviewers from industry or international reviewers). Individual incentives do sometimes improve response rate, but not always the quality of the reviews. We are considering reporting to ROs on the review rates, and would welcome ideas on incentives to institutions to value reviewing more highly.

Applications are very complicated and hard to fill in, and there are too many trivial rules, such as font sizing.

The application process is under review across RCUK to see if it can be simplified. A lot of the forms are standardised across all Research Councils so any changes need to be decided at a cross-council level. Simplifying applications would not necessarily reduce work load, as applicants would need to be even more accurate when providing information, such as costings. Institutions should be checking applications before submission, and rules such as font size are clear – it's not too much to ask that they are followed. At the moment the office is lenient in allowing applications through with errors, and going back to applicants for corrections. We may get to a point though where we can't be as lenient as incorrect applications are time consuming for the office to fix.

It would save time to rank on the science, and then ask for the impact statement.

Thinking about the impact of research is integral to the application, and not an afterthought. Although the primary factor in judging any grant application is and always will be the quality of the science, in relation to the pathways to impact statement there are a number of points:

- we do not expect applicants or peer reviewers to be able to predict the economic or societal impacts that research will achieve.
- we want to encourage applicants to consider and explore, in ways that are appropriate given the nature of the research they are proposing to conduct, potential pathways to impact, for example through engagement or collaboration with partners

The key point is that we never reject an application because it has a poor pathway to impact. If the proposal is recommended for funding we will work with the applicant to improve the Ptl before the award is made.

We should all bear in mind that we are spending taxpayers' funds and given the great pressures on funding we need to be able to be demonstrably accountable and this contributes to that.

Has the recent introduction of reviewer scoring been helpful?

Reviewer scoring was introduced as a harmonising measure across the RCs and is of some help in the conduct of joint funding exercises. However, at present there is a proportion of responses where the score and the narrative comments are discrepant, which is not helpful.

What weighting is there on the different assessment criteria, eg the team and the location?

Many factors are considered during the assessment, and there is no set formula or formal weighting. The primary concern is excellent science, but the Committee will also rank based on strategic and industrial relevance, value for money, etc. Further details can be found [here](#).

What proportion of reviewers come from industry?

It depends on the scheme but in the Research Committees (RM) it is between 10 and 20%

Given the breadth of science areas covered by each Committee, it must be difficult for all members to be involved in the discussion of all grants.

We have a wide pool of Committee members, and the final composition at each membership is finalised after submissions have been received. This allows us to tailor the expertise and get a bespoke focus. This can be difficult for specific areas with small communities.

Does BBSRC have any process for reviewing the performance of the Committees, or thoughts on the impact that the size of the Committees has on decision making process?

BBSRC has not formally reviewed Committee performance since 2010 ([link if published](#)), but it is something which is monitored continuously by staff on an ad hoc basis. Decision making is important in BBSRC Committees, and there is a tension between Committees as moderators of reviewer comments and active participants. We believe that the BBSRC model that encourages active participation in decision making is the most effective method of assessment for bioscience research ([link to reasoning?](#))

As around 90% of responsive mode applications to BBSRC are rated as Internationally Competitive (potentially fundable), the Committees must find it hard to rank the mid-range proposals. Wouldn't a system of randomisation be fairer for applicants below a certain threshold?

The Committees are excellent at identifying the best and worst applications, and still have a big part to play in ranking applications which fall between these poles. There are difficulties in any type of peer review, but we endeavour to make the process as fair as possible. The system is robust, and the Committees believe in the decisions that are made. We refresh the Committees to limit any 'memory effect,' and continuously explore the development of new funding mechanisms (initiatives, etc) especially for research where BBSRC is the only funding body.

[In relation to the comments on application forms] has BBSRC considered revising its position on allowing resubmissions? Or at least increasing the frequency with which they are invited by the Committee?

The BBSRC policy is very clear: Invited resubmissions, as determined by Committees or Panels, are for specific cases where the addition/removal/rethink of one key aspect of a

proposal would elevate it to the point where it would have a reasonable chance of being funded. We do not allow resubmissions because when we did previously, success rates were poor. They were rarely scored better, and often ranked lower than the original. Unsuccessful proposals can be developed and submitted again, as long as they have undergone significant changes. Please contact the office before submission for guidance in these cases.

Is BBSRC able to assess applications that overlap with the remit of other Research Councils, or do these proposals fall between two stools?

The Cross-Council agreement ensures that no application will be rejected unless another council has agreed it is within remit. Unfortunately, this can delay the assessment of a proposal. Applicants who are unsure should contact the office in advance.

Feedback rarely explains why something wasn't funded, and it takes a long time.

Sometimes very good proposals fall just below the cut-off for funding, and whilst the science is good, there just is not enough money. We provide the Committees comments, and remind members that feedback is important. We are trying to speed up the feedback process.

Fundable but not funded is important for the RO as well as the PI to know. Does this happen?

A limited amount of information goes into the reject letter and this will go to the RO. This is a sensitive issue, but for responsive mode applications, this information may be available if requested by the PI with their feedback. We advise as to whether the application was internationally competitive, and this is a more consistent measure across rounds.

Since success rates increase when there is a decline in submissions, are there plans to introduce demand management?

We have been very successful so far with light touch demand management, and quality has increased significantly. The vast majority (find percentage!) of proposals we receive are Internationally Competitive. This may be due to the CEs letters to institutions informing them of success rates. We are comfortable with the current level, and don't anticipate introducing demand management measures in the near future.

In our view the peer review system is not effective in delivering a balanced portfolio of high quality science if the success rate falls too low or rises too high, and is best kept in the 20-30% range (by number or value – the figures are seldom different if the sLolas are factored out). Obviously, the factors enabling us to maintain this are not all under our control.

What effect are the new capital funding rules having?

This is currently under review, which has not published yet. We know that equipment requests have gone down, which could be because researchers are making use of existing infrastructure, or because the change in threshold means more is now in consumables.

Why do we have to use ROS, and submit final reports as well?

We recognise this is frustrating which is the nature of a period of transition - we all want to move to a position as soon as possible where final reports are no longer required but ROS is not quite there yet. We are aware of some data loading issues and are on the case but for its part the community has to use ROS and help us to make it work – it is going to provide us with great evidence that we can use to make the case for the biosciences which is to **all** our benefit.

At the moment under 20% of BBSRC award holders have provided data. We are also in the process of adding data from our own system. The next major push on collection for all five participating Councils will be Jan to March. By then we should have sorted out the main system problems and addressed the current backlog in the quality assurance process. We already have additional resource both in BBSRC and cross-Council to support data collection and we will have a big push on comms towards the end of this calendar year. A ROS User Forum has been set up - led by ARMA - with a first meeting being arranged in early November, probably at UCL. We really should therefore be able to switch off final reports by the end of this financial year at the latest.