

Impact Plan assessment for Standard Grants: guidance for referees and moderating panels

Background and introduction

Referees and moderating panel members are asked to read the following guidance notes relating to the assessment of Impact Plans submitted as part of a standard grant proposal.

All research grant proposals submitted to the Research Councils, including NERC, must now be accompanied by an Impact Plan. In considering what constitutes impact, RCUK (Research Councils UK) has provided a broad definition that includes environmental, social and economic aspects:

"Impact is the demonstrable contribution that excellent research makes to society and the economy. Impact [encompasses] all the extremely diverse ways in which research-related knowledge and skills benefit individuals, organisations and nations by:

- enhancing quality of life, health and creative output
- increasing the effectiveness of public services and policy, and
- fostering global economic performance, and specifically the economic competitiveness of the UK"

For NERC researchers already familiar with the Knowledge Exchange (KE) Plan, the Impact Plan replaces this and further encourages researchers to think about their work in the context of the wider community: who might benefit from, or make use of, it and how such outcomes might be achieved. The Impact Plan also provides the NERC research community with the chance to explore new and innovative methods for disseminating data / knowledge / skills as well as the more tried and tested approaches.

Assessment process

Impact Plans in standard grant proposals will be assessed using the normal process: initial review by members of the Peer Review College, sift, external review and finally, moderating panel meeting: see <http://www.nerc.ac.uk/funding/assessment/> for further information). Impact Plans will be sent for review along with the standard grant proposal and referees asked to comment on, and provide a grade for, the Impact Plan.

Responsive mode grant proposals will continue to be assessed and ranked primarily on the basis of science excellence; **the Impact Plan grading will be considered as a secondary criterion alongside risk/reward and cost effectiveness, which together with science excellence, will influence the final ranking of the grant proposal.**

During the moderating panel meeting, only those proposals graded α4L or higher will have their Impact Plan assessed and graded. Two Affiliate College members will be present at the panel meeting to provide additional comment on Impact Plans, each of whom will have been assigned half the proposals

under consideration. If a proposal is graded $\alpha 4L$ or higher, the panel will assign a final grade of High, Medium or Low (see below) for the Impact Plan, taking into account the views of the Affiliate College member and introducers, as well as the College and external reviewers. The panel (including the Affiliate College members) will be invited to scrutinise the costs associated with the Impact Plan and confirm that they are appropriate, justified and relevant for the activities proposed within the Impact Plan. If costs are not appropriate, justified or relevant, the panel should recommend suitable cuts.

A final grade will not be assigned for Impact Plans of proposals that are not sent to moderating panel meetings, or that are graded $\alpha 3$ or lower during the panel meeting.

Impact Plans will only be funded if the proposal they are associated with is funded. So a high-graded Impact Plan will not attract funding if the proposal is not funded.

Following the moderating panel meeting, Affiliate College members will be asked to provide written comments to NERC in addition to those on the affiliate introducer forms, concerning the overall quality and content of the Impact Plans that they have reviewed.

Eligible activities

NERC is keen to encourage flexibility in carrying out the most appropriate impact activities for the research proposed. For this reason, routine dissemination activities such as conference attendance, publications, communicating with other researchers (within the disciplines involved in the research grant proposal), and routine data management can be included as part of the Impact Plan. However since these activities are considered routine, unless the research grant proposal is of a very novel nature, such activities will only achieve a low grade. To achieve a higher grade, there would need to be additional activities included that have an end-user focus.

See Annex 1 for examples of eligible activities.

Assessment criteria

When assessing an Impact Plan, it is important to remember that impact is the outcome, whereas knowledge exchange is the process by which impact is achieved. Proposals should attempt to address both what the impact will be and how it will be achieved. Impacts can be local, regional, national or international in scale and impact activities are most effective where end-user engagement is sought early on and where the activities are included as an integral part of the research process.

Due to the wide range of research that NERC supports, the variability that is likely to be seen within Impact Plans, and depending upon their scale and nature, a range of different considerations will be used to arrive at a final grade for the Impact Plan. Reviewers should consider the following points when making comments and selecting a grade (high, medium or low) for the Impact Plan:

1. Is the Impact Plan appropriate for the research being proposed?

The Plan should identify end-users and beneficiaries, activities, and mechanisms for knowledge exchange that are appropriate to the research being proposed. For example, a proposal of a more applied nature may have a Plan that details more user-focused activity than a proposal that is extremely speculative or novel, which may contain more routine dissemination activities.

2. Have the likely users and beneficiaries been identified?

Does the Impact Plan include likely users and beneficiaries of the research, or have some of the most obvious ones been omitted? Has an attempt been made to identify a broader group of people who may have an interest in the science being communicated (i.e. those who have potential interest in the outcomes)? If the proposal is of a nature where the end-user community cannot be easily identified at this stage, have others with a potential interest been identified at the very minimum?

3. Have likely outcomes and impacts been identified where possible?

The most likely impacts from the research should be identified; this will determine the activities that should be undertaken to ensure engagement and dissemination in the most effective manner for relevant users and beneficiaries. Is there a broad awareness of how different sectors might be affected by the knowledge generated by the grant?

4. Have the most appropriate activities and methods been proposed for impact activities?

The activities that can be undertaken to ensure engagement and dissemination are broad and diverse. However they should support and complement the needs of the users. Activities that are suitable might be quite routine and might only ensure that dialogue between different parties takes place. In other situations, more bespoke activities may be required.

5. Are the most appropriate people undertaking impact activities?

A range of different people could be used to develop and deliver impact activities. Have the most appropriate people been selected for the activities proposed? It may be appropriate for research staff to carry out activities where scientific knowledge is vital, whereas other specific expertise may need to be bought in for activities such as technology translation, communication or web design.

6. Are the costs appropriate to the activities proposed?

Do the costs attributed to the proposed activities look realistic? Have they been justified?

Grading of Impact Plans

The activities proposed in the Impact Plan must be appropriate to the science put forward in the research proposal.

During the moderating panel meeting, the panel will consider and provide a final grade only for those Impact Plans linked with proposals graded α4L or higher.

Impact Plan grade	Standard of Impact Plan
High	All the obvious beneficiaries and end-users, as well as the likely impacts, have been identified. Activities proposed are appropriate to this and demonstrate a clear understanding of the needs of the user community and the ability to deliver. Excellent plans will demonstrate that engagement has already taken place and that the research may answer a particular user need.
Medium	Routine impact activities ¹ are proposed but are unlikely to go far enough to result in significant impact within the end-user community. Some attempt to outline likely beneficiaries and non-routine activities has been made, but the most appropriate beneficiaries or activities may have been missed. For proposals of a very novel nature it may be that few impacts, activities and beneficiaries can be identified at this time – this is regarded as acceptable and the plan can be graded medium.
Low	Little or no attempt has been made to go beyond routine impact activities ¹ where non-routine activities would clearly be possible. Any activities or users that have been identified are not appropriate to the research described in the proposal. For proposals of a more applied nature where there is potential for a range of activities and possible beneficiaries, this is not acceptable and NERC reserves the right to request that the plan be revised.

¹ Routine activities include conference attendance, communication to researchers within the discipline(s) involved in the proposal, research journal publications and routine data management; these are all usually funded through a research grant and so represent the minimum input to an Impact Plan.

Annex 1: Examples of activities that can be undertaken and outlined in an Impact Plan

The list below illustrates activities that could be included in an Impact Plan.

This list is by no means exhaustive and activities need not be restricted to these examples. However many of these methods are tried and tested and have delivered good results.

Examples of users: policy-makers, NGOs, charities, government agencies, industry, other public sector organisations, schools, museums, professional / amateur associations, media.

Examples of activities: workshops, websites, publications, conferences, public lectures, networks, freeware (data) tools, new methodologies, exhibitions, roadshows, media, training, commercialisation, technology, on-line databases.

The following might be included in an Impact Plan:

- **Special data management:** substantial amounts of data are generated from research and often published in ways that are not easily available, accessible or meaningful to potential users. An activity to convert the data into a form that could be readily used could be part of an Impact Plan.
- **Networks:** formation of a network made up of researchers and members of the end-user community, which would enable the exchange of people, skills and knowledge and could allow identification of new research directions.
- **Website:** Setting up a website with information written in a user-friendly and accessible way to ensure data could be used..
- **Knowledge exchange translators/facilitators:** employing a facilitator to move between the research base and user community, and to act as a focal point for a range of activities. The facilitator enables the user community to easily access information in a meaningful manner from a wide range of sources. .
- **Special publications:** producing targeted publications to enable the exchange of knowledge in a format that encourages uptake and use: data and knowledge are often held in research journals and other formats that are not easy for end-users to access. To ensure this will be successful, there needs to be evidence that the researchers have some knowledge of the needs of their user community or a way of engaging with them to ascertain this.
- **Workshops:** the involvement of end-users in the exchange of skills and techniques is key to the success of workshops as impact activities.

Workshops inviting only researchers from within the disciplines involved in the proposal would not be effective impact activities. Workshops including researchers from disciplines not involved in the proposal are more acceptable, but do not constitute a really strong impact activity.

- **Secondments, fellowships and interchanges:** exchanging staff between the research base and end-user community enables an increase in understanding of common issues, access to skills and knowledge, and can facilitate future collaborations. Such activities could also involve users in collecting data, carrying out experiments, or interpreting results.