

PRE-AWARD ASSESSMENT PROCESS FOR THE SUSTAINABLE MARINE BIORESOURCES PROGRAMME

BACKGROUND AND GUIDANCE FOR REVIEWERS AND SCIENCE ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Introduction

This document provides background and guidance for reviewers and the Science Advisory Committee conducting pre-award assessment of applications for funding through the Sustainable Marine Bioresources Programme. The programme is jointly funded by the major UK funders of marine and fisheries science, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) through the Strategic Ocean Funding Initiative, the Scottish Executive Environment and Rural Affairs Department's marine laboratory Fisheries Research Services (FRS) and the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) in Northern Ireland.

Further information on the Sustainable Marine Bioresources Programme and this Announcement of Opportunity can be found on the NERC website <http://www.nerc.ac.uk/research/programmes/marinebioresources/>

The running of the Programme will be overseen by a Programme Management Group, composed of representatives of the funding bodies. NERC is managing the review process and will be awarding grants on behalf of the Sustainable Marine Bioresources Programme. The guidance notes refer to NERC criteria and this reflects the fact that NERC is running the review process however, the criteria have been agreed by the Programme Management Group.

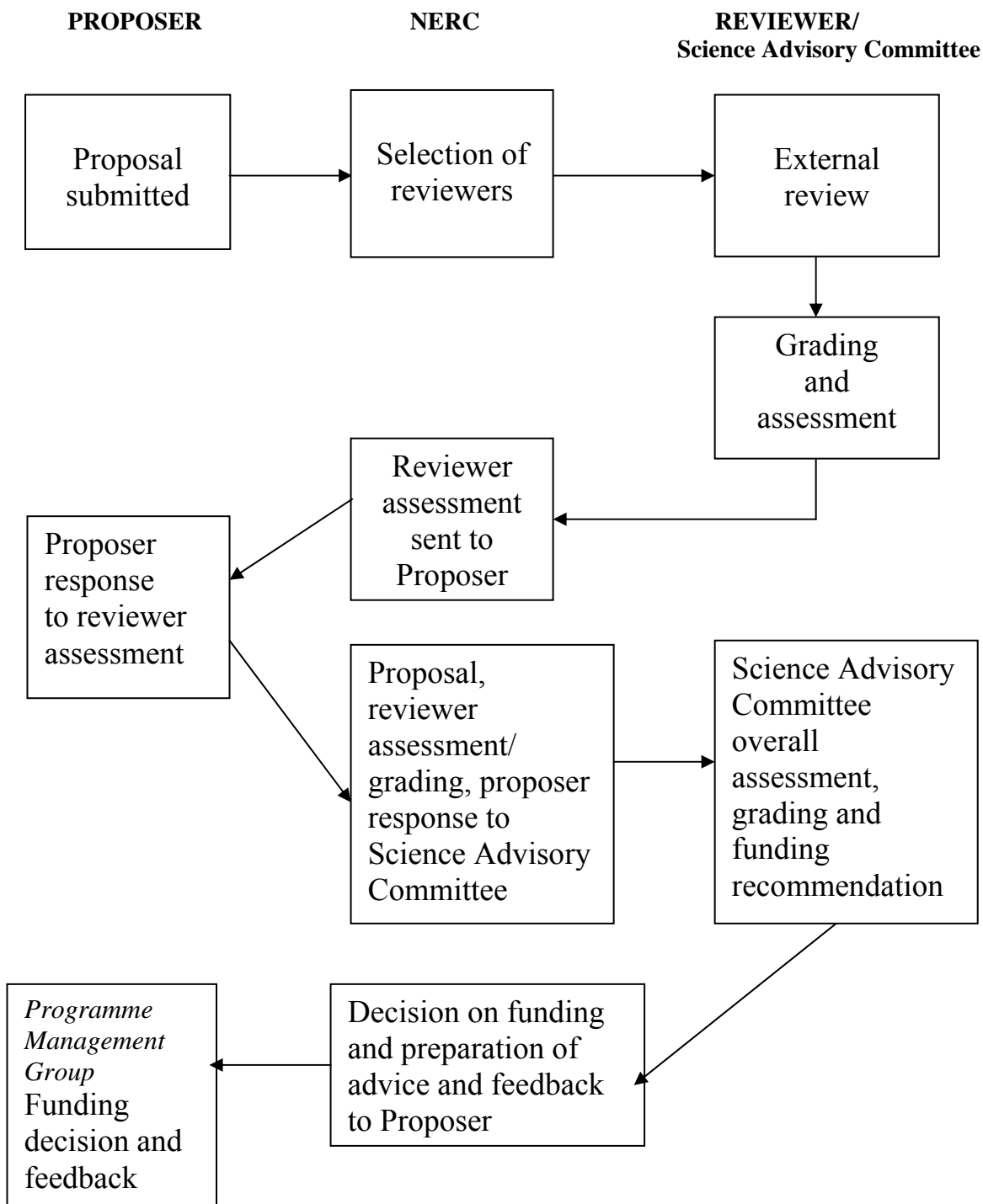
Overall Process

The process consists of two stages:

- **External Review.** External peer reviewers are asked to assess and grade the proposal according to the Assessment Criteria. All comments and gradings arising from external peer reviews are sent to the Science Advisory Committee.
- **Science Advisory Committee.** The Committee will receive the full proposal, any additional background information provided the Programme Management Group, external peer review grading/assessment, and the proposer's responses to reviewers' assessments. The Science Advisory Committee is responsible for providing a final grading and commenting on the proposal in a form that can be made available to the proposer. The Science Advisory Committee is also responsible for providing recommendations for funding, commenting on the justification of resources and where there are competing proposals, make recommendations on priorities in the context of the funding available.

The relative weighting of the Assessment Criteria varies depending on the Funding category. A Grading Matrix is used as an illustrative tool by the Science Advisory Committee for applying weightings. (Annex II).

**NERC Pre-award Assessment:
Summary of process**



NERC Pre-award Assessment Criteria

In selecting proposals for funding the programme is seeking to meet a number of strategic objectives including excellence. These are reflected in the pre-award assessment criteria that will be applied to any proposal for funding. As well as determining the priority for funding, the criteria will also be used to guide evaluation of outputs from funded projects. The pre-award assessment criteria are;

Excellence. This criterion is used to judge the excellence of the proposal. Importantly, this criterion is applied in context and the grading table (Annex I-A) reflects the emphasis for this type of funding.

Fit to Programme Priorities. When assessing research grant applications within a Directed Programme type funding round the fit to the Programme's priorities should be assessed (Annex I-B).

i) *Meeting strategic needs.* (Annex I-Bi) Proposals should have a strong element of potential application and address priority gaps in our current knowledge of how best to manage fisheries sustainably. The principal focus for research will be the waters, fish stocks, and ecosystems around the UK. Aquaculture is not included in this programme.

The general programme context is provided by Barange (2005)¹. For background information on fisheries management, potential applicants should refer to 'Securing the Benefits'² which sets out the UK response to the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit Net Benefits report³ on the future of the fishing industry in the UK.

Defra's publication 'Charting a New Course'⁴ details fisheries management priorities for England and Wales, and Defra's new Sustainable Marine Fisheries Programme of research can be accessed through the following link⁵. SEERAD's management priorities are set out in 'Sustainable Framework for Scottish Sea Fisheries'⁶.

ii) *Collaboration/Project Partner Involvement.* (Annex I-Bii) A fundamental aim of the programme is to develop and strengthen links between the three major science communities:

- Departments' marine laboratories (Cefas, FRS and AFBI);
- NERC's marine centres and associated bodies in the Oceans 2025 grouping;
- and universities.

Preferably all three of the above groups should be involved and proposals must demonstrate that they provide genuine collaboration. One of the government marine laboratories, Cefas, FRS or AFBI must be involved.

When project partners are named value added should be assessed. Value may be added through: tangible input by named partners e.g. cash or in-kind contributions; timeliness of the research; or increased potential impact and benefit to the research as a result of the partnership.

Risk-Reward. It is NERC's policy to fund the most rewarding science whilst minimising risk wherever possible. Most importantly, NERC believes that risk-taking is very often necessary in order to answer the challenging questions in environmental science. The risk-reward criteria seek to prioritise those proposals that offer the highest reward with the minimum risk exposure. As such, priority would be given to a proposal representing a lower risk if the rewards were deemed equal to other more risky proposals. Equally, lower risk proposals will not be given priority if their perceived reward is also lower. Risk and Reward are defined as follows for the purposes of this assessment and grading;

¹ <http://www.nerc.ac.uk/research/emergingops/bioresources/scopingstudy.asp>

² <http://www.defra.gov.uk/fish/sea/pdf/securingbenefits.pdf>

³ PMSU (Prime Minister's Strategy Unit) (2004) *Net benefits. A sustainable and profitable future for UK fishing.* Cabinet Office, 168pp. Online at www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/strategy/downloads/su/fish/pdf/NetBenefits.pdf

⁴ <http://www.defra.gov.uk/fish/sea/sfp/newcourse.pdf>

⁵ <http://www.defra.gov.uk/fish/science/pdf/smfrp.pdf>

⁶ <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/55971/0016066.pdf>

Risk. Risk is defined as the likelihood that the stated scientific and implementation objectives of the proposal will not be met. As such risk should implicitly include such factors as the appropriateness of the methods proposed to achieve the objectives, the ability of the scientific team proposed to achieve the objectives (this would include relevant track record as a risk minimisation factor), and the recognition of risk and proposals for mitigating action.

Reward. Reward is defined as the contribution to the Programme objectives achieved if the stated objectives of the proposal are met.

Risk and Reward are assessed separately and combined in a matrix (Annex I-C) to provide a Risk-Reward grading.

Cost Effectiveness. As a public funding organisation, NERC must ensure that funding is allocated on a basis that ensures best value for money. The Cost Effectiveness assessment and grading (Annex 1 - D) should be based on an assessment of the total financial resources requested against the outputs proposed. The assessment should implicitly consider factors such as relevant track record of proposers, leverage of investment already made in existing infrastructure/facilities, and benefits arising from co-funding e.g. jointly funded programmes, in-kind contributions, attraction of third party funding.

ANNEX 1 – ASSESSMENT CRITERIA

Annex 1 – A. Excellence

Grade	Research
Directed Programmes	
α5	Outstanding: exceptional scientific merit and originality; expected to have major scientific impact; top 5%
α4	Excellent: at the forefront of field; will advance understanding; top 25%
α3	Very good: generally competitive science; top 60%
α2	Good: quality science, but not leading edge
α1	Of merit: modest advance in the field
β	Probably not advancing the field; new, useful knowledge
Reject	Flawed in scientific approach, repetitious or subject to serious technical difficulties

Annex 1 - Bi. Fit to Programme Priorities - Meeting Strategic Needs

Grade	Research
Directed Programmes	
A	Project demonstrates an excellent link to policy priorities in the management of marine bioresources. Addresses one or more important gaps in our current knowledge. Completely aligned with the Programme's objectives, as expressed in the specific AO/Call for proposals.
B	Project demonstrates a good link to policy priorities in the management of marine bioresources. Addresses an important gap in our current knowledge. Well aligned with the Programme's objectives
C	Project demonstrates a link to policy priorities in the management of marine bioresources. Addresses a gap in our current knowledge. Aligned with the Programme's objectives
D	Project demonstrates a limited link to policy priorities in the management of marine bioresources. Addresses a gap in our current knowledge to a limited extent. Limited alignment with the Programme's objectives
E	Project only weakly related to policy priorities and does not significantly address knowledge gaps. Not aligned with the Programme's objectives

Annex 1 - Bii. Fit to Programme Priorities – Collaboration/Project partner involvement

Grade	Research
Directed Programmes	
A	Each partner brings essential expertise to the project. Strong opportunities for knowledge transfer between partners. Collaboration makes project possible.
B	Each partner brings advantageous expertise to the project. Good opportunities for knowledge transfer between partners. Collaboration makes project possible.
C	Each partner brings expertise to the project. Opportunities for knowledge transfer between partners. Collaboration makes project possible.
D	Project mainly the work of a single partner with some input from others. Limited opportunities for knowledge transfer between partners. Collaboration not completely essential to the project.
E	Project the work of a single partner with only minor input from others. Minimal opportunity for knowledge transfer. Collaboration not essential to the project.

Annex 1 - C. Risk Reward

Risk-reward will be graded on a matrix as follows;

		Reward		
		Low	Medium	High
Risk	Low	1	2	5
	Medium	1	2	4
	High	1	1	3

The criteria for Reward and Risk are as follows:

Reward Criteria

Grade	Research Directed Programmes
High	Certain contribution to programme objectives regarding impact on knowledge, UK economic competitiveness, effectiveness of public services and policy, or quality of life
Med	Probable contribution to programme objectives regarding impact on knowledge, competitiveness, public services and policy, or quality of life
Low	Little probable contribution to programme objectives regarding impact on knowledge, competitiveness, public services, policy, or quality of life

Risk Criteria

Grade	Research Directed Programmes
Low	No discernible operational risk. Certain that the proponents can carry out the research and contribute to the programme objectives
Med	Some discernible operational risk. Certain that the proponents can carry out the research and contribute to the programme objectives
High	Risk that proponents cannot carry out the research and contribute to the programme objectives

Annex 1 - D. Cost Effectiveness Criteria

Grade	Research Directed Programmes
V	Excellent value for money. Possibly some of the full cost of the research borne elsewhere in external finances, or in-kind input
IV	Very good value for money. Possibly some of the full cost of the research borne elsewhere through external finances, or in-kind input
III	Good value for money. Possibly with some of the full cost of the research borne elsewhere through external finances, or in-kind input
II	Satisfactory value for money. Possibly limited cost of the research borne elsewhere. Little external financial, or in-kind input
I	Poor value for money. Possibly little cost of the research borne elsewhere. No external financial, or in-kind input

ANNEX II – GRADING MATRIX

(NB – for use ONLY by Science Advisory Committee)

The following Grading Matrices are to be used as a tool to guide the Science Advisory Committee on the criteria weightings under each Funding Mode.

Funding Mode: Research – Directed Programmes					
Assessment Criteria	Grading				
Scientific Excellence	$\alpha1/\beta$	$\alpha2$	$\alpha3$	$\alpha4$	$\alpha5$
Priority – Strategic needs	E	D	C	B	A
Priority - Collaboration	E	D	C	B	A
Risk-reward	1	2	3	4	5
Cost Effectiveness	I	II	III	IV	V

- **Red Zone.** The proposal would be assumed to be substantially flawed on this criterion such that funding was inappropriate with the proposal in its current form.
- **Amber Zone.** The proposal would be assumed to be acceptable for this criterion and subject to discussion as necessary during the Moderating Panel prioritisation.
- **Green Zone.** The proposal would be judged as excellent on this criterion. There is a presumption that a proposal in the green zone for all criteria would be funded subject to availability of funds.