

Supporting Letters

Many different types of organisation might support a Follow-on Fund application, and so provide a supporting letter. For example, a project with the potential to improve river water quality may be supported by a potential manufacturer of new technology, an end user of that technology (maybe a water company, or a subcontractor to them), a regulatory body, organisations with an interest in water quality (fishermen, conservation groups, landowners, etc), and/or trade associations for any or all of these.

Supporting letters can act as an indicator of a proposal's quality and the wider 'team' that has been assembled. The following points are among those that NERC's Assessment Panel suggests a good supporting letter may include. Not all will be applicable in every case:

1. An indication that the supporting organisation has a good understanding of the academic's work. It will be helpful to mention and previous collaborations, but there will be some good applications where collaboration hasn't taken place, which is fine.
2. A clear explanation of why the supporting organisation believes the project is important, and the potential benefits they see resulting. It will, for example, be helpful to see an outline of the advantages of any products/services that may result, and their scale of demand, compared to existing products/services. (Note: NERC's Assessment Panel recognises that confidentiality issues may prevent firms disclosing too much detail about internal operations or future plans.)
3. A clear statement of how the supporting organisation plans to assist in conducting the project. This may involve a contribution of resources to assist with the project's technical workplan, but it could equally involve specific advice on the likely requirements of end users of any new product or service, and some level of support for marketing and the commercial workplan.
4. If appropriate, a more general discussion of how the supporting organisation may be able to assist in 'commercialising' the project's results. Some organisations may be potential licensees, while others may help by advising on commercial partners, or provide evidence of end-user demand for any new products/services. For legal reasons, supporting organisations may be unwilling to make anything that could be construed as a binding commitment but it is reasonable to expect a non-binding indication of potential future support.
5. At the time of the application, the Assessment Panel would not wish to see supporting organisations having any broadly defined monopoly rights (for example a pre-agreed exclusive license) to project results, as this might raise questions about of the appropriateness of NERC funding for a project. However, it may be that the research institution decides at a later date that an exclusive license is the most appropriate way to commercialise the project results.