The MRC peer review process: Video animation transcript

At the MRC we are given a budget by the UK government to fund scientific research aimed at improving human health.

Each year we receive around 1,800 proposals for funding. On average we are able to fund 23 per cent of these, but many more are internationally competitive.

Understanding how we allocate funding will help you better navigate the selection process and write a more successful proposal in the future.

Because we don’t have infinite amounts of money, we need to be sure that the research we are able to support is of the highest quality.

We need to make sure that the process is fair, rigorous and informed by the best and most up to date scientific knowledge.

To do this, and ensure high quality decision-making, we use a two stage, peer review process, where scientists review the work of other scientists.

**Step 1: External peer review**

We send each of the ideas we receive to independent experts working in the relevant field.

We aim to have a minimum of three experts to review each proposal and look for people with the right specialist knowledge.

We ask the reviewers, also called referees, to look at three core criteria:

- Firstly we ask them to assess the importance of the questions that are being addressed.
- Secondly we ask them to look at the scientific potential of the work. In other words, is the research asking questions that can be answered, and haven’t been addressed elsewhere? We want to see that what they plan to do is ethical, has good methodology and will be done in the right research environment with the right people.
- And finally we ask them to consider the finances and resources involved. Does the importance and scientific potential justify the amount of funding that has been asked for?

Based on the answers to these questions, the referees give their comments and an overall score from 1 to 6.

**Step 2: Internal board and panel assessment**

Depending on what has been applied for, some proposals may be assessed with a face to face interview, but most will be assessed on paper by a research board or panel.

Armed with the comments from referees, research board members examine the proposals in their own time.

They are asked to make sure that the referee scores given reflect the comments made, and, as experts in their own right, use the comments to provide a view on how competitive each proposal is for funding.

Close attention is paid to every proposal, as this is the first point in the process where we begin to sort which projects have the potential to receive funding or do not meet our criteria.

All proposals are discussed at a Triage Meeting, where they are shortlisted by a subgroup of up to four research board members, the chair and the deputy chair.

If a proposal is found to be uncompetitive, it will be declined. Anonymous referee comments will be sent to the applicant to help inform their future submissions.
Applicants with the highest quality proposals - those with the potential to be funded - are also sent anonymous referee comments and given an opportunity to respond to them in writing before the next stage of the process: a full board meeting with all of the members present.

To prepare, members review all proposals, plus referee and applicant comments. At the meeting, each proposal is introduced by up to three board members, and assessed against key criteria. Following a wider discussion with the whole group, each member gives a score from 1 to 10. This wider scoring range allows them to provide their own view on the full package of information.

Towards the end of the meeting, all proposals are ranked according to their median scores and considered in terms of their fit with strategic priorities and scientific portfolio balance.

Then depending on the budget we have available, the board will make a final decision about which proposals we are able to fund.

As an organisation we exist to evaluate ideas for scientific research submitted by scientists, and fund excellent research. We take pride in being fair, objective and transparent.

All of our board and panel memberships, meeting outcomes and funded proposals are published online.

We welcome you to visit our website to find out more.