



BIOMEDICAL RESEARCH GOVERNANCE OVERVIEW

Application Process

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1 Introduction

The MND Association's vision is a World free of MND.

A published [Research Strategy](#) highlights the mechanisms through which research funding programmes are being developed 2018-2021, to deliver significant and measurable advances in understanding and treating the disease. To ensure the excellence of the research funded by the MND Association, applications for funding of research projects are evaluated by peer review.

For biomedical research the peer review is carried out by a committee of experts - the Biomedical Research Advisory Panel (BRAP). Relevant grant applications include projects that aim to increase understanding of the causes of MND, the mechanisms of motor neurone degeneration and to develop potential new therapeutics. These projects are usually laboratory-based. The members of this panel are neuroscientists and clinical neurologists with particular expertise in MND research. BRAP members are appointed by the Board of Trustees of the MND Association on the recommendation of the director of research development. The director of research development may consult the current and previous members of the BRAP and the wider MND scientific community regarding suitable candidates.

The purpose of this document is to inform applicants and members of the BRAP about relevant MND Association policies and procedures in relation to research funding.

2 General Considerations

The Panel has no responsibility for decisions concerning the size of the research budget. This is fixed annually by the Board of Trustees, which has ultimate responsibility for the allocation of funds.

2.1 Governance and Decision Making

The BRAP is responsible for the assessment and rating of applications for research funding. The BRAP makes a recommendation to the Board of Trustees, based upon its considerations. The Board of Trustees is responsible for the allocation of funding and for making the formal offer of a grant to applicants.

2.2 Research Practice

The research institute where the grant is awarded is responsible for the research practice of each research grant. It is responsible for ensuring that the necessary legal and regulatory requirements are met by the grant holder and approvals obtained before the commencement of the research grant and during the full research grant period. The research institute must have in place formal procedures for handling allegations of misconduct.

2.3 MND Association Funding Opportunities

The MND Association funds research through open awards schemes.

Funding opportunities are announced each year. In general, the same policies and procedures are followed for all types of research funding, unless otherwise specified in the funding opportunity.

2.4 Recommendations from Biomedical Research Advisory Panel (BRAP)

A prime responsibility of the MND Association BRAP is to evaluate applications submitted for a particular competition, to rate them so that they may be ranked in order of priority, and to recommend appropriate applications to the MND Association Board of Trustees for consideration for funding.

2.4.1 The BRAP members are asked to flag applications that raise special concerns, for example, ethics issues (human or animal), laboratory safety, eligibility of applicant or institution, overlap with other funding, compatibility with the published MND Association Research Strategy etc. Such concerns, however, must not prevent the panel from evaluating an application and, unless they directly affect the scientific merit, must not influence the rating. Issues of ethics will be taken up with the research institution whether or not the project is funded; if funded, the grant will not start until all issues are resolved.

2.4.2 When an application has not been recommended for funding by the BRAP, the applicant is not, as a general rule, invited to re-submit. However, the BRAP may provide feedback on what would strengthen the application. If applicants do decide to resubmit their application for a future round, it will be considered as a new application in direct competition with other applications received in that round.

2.5 Confidentiality

By agreeing to become a member of the BRAP, an individual undertakes not to use or disclose any information obtained in the course of their membership for any purpose other than considering the relevant research or application under review, without the written consent of the MND Association. The Association will seek the consent of any concerned party prior to providing such written consent. This clause does not apply to any information already in the public domain prior to its disclosure via the BRAP. No copies shall be made of any information obtained via the BRAP and any documents (including electronic copies) obtained via the panel shall be returned to the Association upon request. The supply of any information to panel members by the Association does not create any licence, title or interest in respect of any intellectual property rights. Panel members must not discuss with applicants or reviewers any information relating to the review of a specific application, or offer opinions on the chances of success or failure. All requests for information on an application or a reviewer report should be referred to staff in the Association responsible for research grants management.

Applications involving industrial partners may contain confidential and commercially sensitive information. In order to make such information available to members of the BRAP, to assist in the evaluation process of applications, the director of research development may sign a Confidentiality Agreement on behalf of the Association. Panel members must hold such information in strict confidence and not make use of the information other than for the purposes of evaluating a funding application.

Under freedom of information legislation, applicants may have access to their own application files on request. Therefore, all written material used to evaluate an application may be made available to the applicants. The identity of the reviewers will not be revealed to the applicants.

2.6 Conflict of Interest

The Association must make every effort to ensure that its decisions are fair and objective and are also seen to be so. No panel member with a conflict of interest may participate in the review of an application. As a result, panel members who have an application under consideration shall absent themselves from the room when a proposal is being discussed. The discussion and scoring of such applications will be omitted from the individual panel member's copy of the minutes.

Guidelines for disclosing conflicts of interest include panel members who:

- Are from the same immediate institution (same department/unit) as the applicant, and who interact with the applicant in the course of their duties at the institution.
- Have collaborated, published or been a co-applicant with the applicant, within the last five years.
- Have been a student or supervisor of the applicant within the last five years.
- Are a close personal friend or relative of the applicant.
- Have had long-standing scientific or personal differences with the applicant.
- Are in a position to gain or lose financially from the outcome of the application (eg holding stock in an industry partner company or a competitor)
- For some other reason feel that they cannot provide an objective review of the application.

Panel members must declare a conflict of interest in advance of the meeting and leave the room when such a proposal is up for review. The chair of the panel is responsible for resolving areas of uncertainty.

The chair and scientific administrative staff are subject to the same conflict of interest guidelines as regular panel members.

All panel members must agree to abide by the above confidentiality clause (2.5) and the guidelines for declaring conflicts of interest when they join the panel. Members are asked to sign a form of agreement on appointment to the panel.

2.7 Types of Applications

New and 'resubmitted' (see point 2.4.2) applications are normally reviewed at the same panel meeting. They are to be considered on a 'level playing field' as the BRAP expects to apply the same criteria for all types of applications. In evaluating the likelihood of success of the proposed research, panel members are reminded to take stage of career and previous funding of the applicant into account and vary the emphasis placed on track record and training experience as appropriate. Resubmissions may contain a response to previous reviews of the application, and although this may be helpful, they are still to be rated relative to other applications in the competition and not on how the application may have improved relative to its previous submission.

2.7.1 Types of Grant Proposal

Research funding opportunities considered by the BRAP are awarded as four types of grant:

Project grants awarded for up to three years to allow an in-depth investigation of an area of research.

PhD studentships normally awarded for three years; they are a cost-effective means of conducting research, whilst ensuring high calibre graduates can undertake training for a PhD in MND-related research.

Non-Clinical Research Fellowships provide the opportunity for post-doctoral scientists with relevant experience to apply for funding as principal investigator.

Lady Edith Wolfson Clinical Research Fellowships are jointly funded by the Association and the Medical Research Council (MRC). They support clinicians (practising doctors) wishing to pursue scientific research and aim to strengthen the links between laboratory and clinic. These awards are administered by the MRC and will not normally be discussed and reviewed by the BRAP. The BRAP will be notified of the outcomes of applications under this scheme as part of its business.

3 Outline of Process for Reviewing Grant Applications

Funding opportunities and deadlines for the submission of applications are published on the Association website and may also be advertised by email and other social media, on external websites, in specialist journals and on grants databases

Research workers who are considering submitting an application are encouraged to read the guidelines and grant conditions on our [website](#). Please contact the research grants team with any queries.

3.1 Summary Applications

The first stage in the application process is the submission of an outline of the proposed research – the summary application. Summary applications should be submitted online via the MND Association website at www.mndassociation.org.

A decision will be made as to whether summary applications are sufficiently relevant to classical MND (ie ALS, PLS and PMA) and whether the project aims fit with the published MND Association Research Strategy:

- Find new causes of MND and develop new laboratory models
- Detect novel diagnostic and prognostic markers of the disease
- Identify emerging therapeutic compounds for clinical studies
- Develop a Clinical Research/Clinical Trials Network
- Expand scientific and clinical research expertise in the UK
- Establish and strengthen collaborative links with industry and other funders
- Improve communication between researchers and people affected by MND.

Summaries that are deemed unsuitable (this includes overseas applications that do not meet the overseas criteria) will not be considered by the summary review process outlined below. Applicants will be advised of this within two weeks of the deadline for receipt of summary applications.

Within two weeks, relevant applications will be sent to three members of the BRAP as internal reviewers. Material arriving after the deadline date for summary applications will not normally be considered unless it relates to the acceptance for publication of previously submitted manuscripts, the outcome of related applications submitted by the applicant or the appointment status of the applicant.

The criteria used for the initial review of summary applications are weighted as follows and scored using an agreed template based on categorical descriptors.

The Five Criteria and their Weights in the Overall Score of Summary Applications:

Institution and Applicant		
Characteristics and abilities of the applicant	20%	
Project is a good fit within existing work and established methods in the applicant's laboratory/institution	20%	40%
Project		
Novelty and timeliness	30%	
Feasibility of achieving the work given the outline workplan and the submitted approximate cost and timescales	20%	60%
Potential clinical and/or translational relevance	10%	
		100%

In each application round a cut-off score will be set (denoted **X** below). Typically this has been 50%, but may be set slightly higher if the number of received applications is high.

A single decision is required of each of the three panel members at this stage:

Yes – suitable for consideration as a full application when the total score is $>X\%$

No – not suitable for consideration as a full application when the total score is $<X\%$

Panel members are asked to provide constructive comments on the proposal which can be fed back to the applicants, using the same categories as the rating criteria. Panel members are also asked to provide clarification if their scores are at odds with their comments eg a score above **X%** with comments that suggest a full application should not be invited or vice versa.

The applicants will be notified of the decision within six weeks of the deadline for receipt of summaries. Any comments from the initial review stage are fed back to the applicant.

- If the majority vote is **yes**, a full application is invited with notification of the deadline date.
- If the majority vote is **no**, a letter is sent to the applicant informing them that a full application is not being requested.

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3.2 Full Applications

All full applications received by the appropriate deadline date are entered into the competition. Material arriving after the deadline date will only be considered if it relates to the acceptance for publication of previously submitted manuscripts, the outcome of other applications submitted by the applicant or the appointment status of the applicant.

3.2.1 External review

Within three weeks of the submission deadline, the research grants manager will:

- Assign external reviewers to whom the application will be sent for written reviews, aiming for three written reviews per application.
- Provisionally assign the application to a panel member as internal reviewer, who will lead the review of the application at the panel meeting.

These assignments may take into consideration any suggestions made by the applicants for external reviewers, but are not bound by them. Internal and external reviewers receive full copies of the applications assigned to them.

The BRAP chair and director of research development may suggest that extra members be added to the panel for a certain competition, or to assist in the review of one or more specific applications, if there is not appropriate expertise among the regular panel members. A decision by the chair and director of research development that the panel should review an application is binding on the panel.

External reviewers will be asked to rate the applications according to the table below. (For more details on factors on the assessment, please see paragraph 5.2.)

Should be supported as research of high scientific merit that links closely with the MND Association research strategy; is of such quality or timeliness and promise to be likely to make a significant contribution to the understanding of classical MND.	6	<input type="checkbox"/>
	5	<input type="checkbox"/>
	4	<input type="checkbox"/>
Should be supported as research of high scientific merit that links to the MND Association research strategy; is worthy of support in principle and would add to understanding of classical MND but which is considered to be of lower priority and significance than above.	3	<input type="checkbox"/>
	2	<input type="checkbox"/>
Reject: Does not link to the MND Association research strategy OR is not relevant to classical MND OR is flawed in scientific or technical approach, repetitious of other work or otherwise judged not worth pursuing.	1	<input type="checkbox"/>
	0	<input type="checkbox"/>

They will also be asked to consider and provide written comments on the applicant's productivity, experience and training, the research proposed, the environment in which it will be conducted and the training environment (where this is applicable). Reviewers will also be asked if there are any specific concerns or questions they feel should be clarified prior to the application being considered by the BRAP. Applicants will be given the opportunity to respond, time permitting.

Each panel member receives a copy of all the applications to be discussed at least two weeks before the meeting (unless there is a conflict of interest) and has access to all the relevant external reviewer reports. After the meeting the panel's funding recommendations are communicated as soon as possible for consideration by the Board of Trustees.

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Applicants are informed of the results of the competition in three stages:

- An initial email will be sent as soon as possible informing the applicant of the decision on their application. This enables unsuccessful applicants to consider applying for funding elsewhere.
- Applicants will receive a copy of the anonymous referees' reports, together with feedback from the panel discussion (where appropriate).
- Once funding has been approved by the Board of Trustees, successful applicants are sent a grant offer letter, together with supporting documents (including: *Terms and Conditions*; *Acceptance Form*; *Activation form*; *Payment and Reporting Guidelines*). Negotiation may be required prior to the grant being formalised.

In the course of discussion at a BRAP meeting, some applications may be flagged for special attention (for example because of overlap, eligibility, ethics, consent, human stem cell research) and may be held as 'pending'. The applicant will be notified by the director of research development or research grants manager if further information is required. The additional information may be discussed with the panel chair and/or reviewers if necessary prior to a final decision regarding recommendation for funding.

4 Roles of Panel Members

4.1 Scoring BRAP members

Prior to commencing their term of office, panel members will be asked to sign a confidentiality agreement and to agree to abide by the Association's guidelines for declaring conflicts of interest (see paragraphs 2.5 and 2.6).

Panel members will assess research applications received by the Association using criteria set out elsewhere in this document (see paragraphs 3.1 and 6).

Three panel members will review each summary application received for consideration and will be asked to provide confidential, constructive comments to feed back to applicants. Full applications are invited or rejected on the basis of a two-thirds majority opinion.

Panel members will be nominated to present specific application/s at BRAP meetings. They should provide a written internal review on the specified application/s to a given deadline several days prior to the meeting (see paragraph 5.1 for more information). Potentially, panel members will have the opportunity to discuss all applications submitted for each round.

Panel members will be expected to attend all BRAP meetings whenever possible. In the event of a member not attending two consecutive meetings, the chair of the panel will discuss non-attendance with the member. In the event of the member not attending three consecutive meetings, membership will be reviewed by the Board of Trustees.

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4.2 Panel Chair, Director of Research Development and Research Grants Manager

Together, the director of research development, panel chair and research grants manager are responsible for ensuring that applications received by the Association are reviewed by the most appropriate panel members and external referees. On accepting an application for review, the director of research development, chair and research grants manager accept responsibility for ensuring that the panel performs a fair review.

On receipt of the full applications the director of research development and research grants manager:

- Identify external reviewers as needed for applications in consultation with the chair and panel members.
- Identify the panel members who shall review and lead discussion on each application.
- Propose additional panel members for a meeting to replace regular members who cannot attend the meeting, and/or if they feel that the panel does not have sufficient expertise for one or more applications. Invitees may attend the meeting in whole or in part, depending upon the number of applications they are asked to review and their availability.

4.2.1 Chair

Together with the director of research development, the panel chair is directly responsible to the Association's Board of Trustees for ensuring that the panel functions smoothly, effectively and objectively, according to MND Association policies and procedures.

In addition to the duties shared with the director of research development and research grants manager, the chair:

- Is a scoring member of the panel.
- Must be knowledgeable of MND Association policies affecting the procedures relating to research grant funding.
- Ensures that opinions expressed by external reviewers are fully integrated into the discussion of each application for which they have been solicited.
- Ensures the involvement of the entire panel with recommendations for each application.
- Works with the director of research development and research grants manager to summarise the discussion of each application.
- Ensures that specific concerns of ethics and of other governance requirements are addressed.
- Appoints a delegate as chair if they leave the meeting because of conflict of interest.

4.2.2 Director of Research Development

Together with the panel chair, the director of research development is directly responsible to the MND Association Board of Trustees for ensuring that the panel functions smoothly, effectively and objectively, according to MND Association policies and procedures.

In addition to the duties shared with the research grants manager, the director of research development:

- Ensures that proposals align with the published research strategy of the Association.
- Works with the research grants manager and chairperson to summarise the discussion of each application.
- Ensures that issues of ethics, eligibility, overlap and other concerns that need to be flagged for the attention of the Association are raised at the panel meeting.
- Supports the chair in his/her role during the panel meeting.
- On behalf of the directorate and/or Board of Trustees of the Association, brings relevant strategic items to the BRAP for discussion.

4.2.3 Research Grants Manager

In addition to the duties shared with the director of research development, the research grants manager:

- Supports the chair in his/her role during the panel meeting.
- Presents points raised by the external reviewers that have not been raised by the internal reviewers.
- Takes notes of the discussion as it is proceeding which will be sent to applicants with their letter of decision.

4.2.4 Research Grants Manager Notes

The purpose of research grants manager notes is to tell the applicant what the determining factors were, from the point of view of the panel in the rating of the application. The notes provide the applicant with insights into the panel discussion of the application, which are not available through the comments of the external reviewers.

The notes may include:

- The major strength(s) or weakness(es) of the application as raised in the discussion
- Any pivotal point(s) determining the rating, eg
 - importance, impact, relevance to classical MND
 - originality/innovation/novelty of concept or approach/clarity of objectives
 - potential clinical or translational relevance
 - research plan/procedural issues/feasibility/validity of model/efficiency
 - expertise and track record of investigator, co-investigators
 - environment, collaborators
 - quality of literature review
- Salient aspects of the panel discussion, eg
 - level of enthusiasm
 - level of agreement among panel members
 - resolution of reviewer disagreement (which view expressed in the reviewers' reports did the panel favour?)
- Explanation of significant recommendations to 'prune' a project
- Encouragement or discouragement in relation to resubmission as applicable, with details of how the applicant could improve the proposal if this was discussed.

Not all these points need to be covered in every note. Only those which had the greatest impact on the evaluation or where the panel has important advice for the applicant need be included.

The notes should not include:

- A summary of the proposal
- Repetition of internal or external reviews
- A recommendation for funding
- The rating of the grant (number or descriptor).

If required, the research grants manager may read back a draft summary of discussion for validation and to obtain further possible input from the panel before the panel ranks applications. Material from the notes will also be incorporated in the minutes of the meeting.

4.3 Trustee Member of BRAP

MND Association trustee members of BRAP are trustees of the Association who have a demonstrated interest in health and science, but who are not currently active in the field of MND research. The trustee members provide a mechanism for public accountability and transparency of the peer review process, ensuring Association funding is in accordance with its strategic objectives. They also ensure that the panel considers the relevance of the proposed research to people affected by MND and the likelihood of tangible benefits arising from the funding.

Trustee members are non-scoring members, but are expected to play a full and active role in the discussion and to contribute to the consensus rating of applications (see paragraphs 6.1-6.11). The duties of a trustee member include:

- Ensuring that the proposed research has a clear focus for people affected by MND.
- Commenting on the standard of lay abstracts, specifically the extent to which the intent and importance of the proposed research is well explained and written in language clear to members of the Association and the general public.
- Providing feedback on the general process of the meeting such as the quality, quantity and variety of work reviewed by the panel, the structure of the discussions, the objective nature of the discussions and any other general comments.

Following the BRAP meeting, trustee members will provide assurance to the full Board of Trustees that all funding discussions and recommendations were conducted according to 'due process'.

4.4 Research Grants Co-ordinator

The MND Association research grants co-ordinator:

- Is responsible for ensuring the integrity and quality of the peer review process.
- Keeps notes on procedural aspects of the panel functions.
- Records the consensus rating and recommendations made by the panel for each application.

- Records concerns raised by the panel on issues requiring later attention, for example overlap of funding, ethics, eligibility etc.
- Maintains a full written record of activity for the purposes of research governance and review.

5. The Assessment of an Application

The MND Association's objective is to support research which will lead, directly or indirectly, to finding a cure for MND. Evidence of originality, clear thinking and the potential for high quality and/or high impact publications is sought in preference to elaborations on existing knowledge, lack of focus or large numbers of low impact papers.

5.1 The Internal Reviewer Report

- 5.1.1 The internal review should briefly outline the aim(s) and description of the project, the purpose of the proposal, the hypothesis to be tested or question to be addressed, the objectives to be achieved, the approach proposed, the progress made in this general area by the applicants and other researchers to date.
- 5.1.2 This is followed by an assessment of the application (see section 5.2). It should be clear and concise, using objective language. The reviewer should state his/her opinions with justification. The review should also include comment on the external reviews, pointing out areas of agreement and disagreement. This might have to be done very shortly before the meeting since not all external reviewer reports will be available at the time the review is initially written. It is not necessary to repeat the statements of the external reviewers, but if the panel member disagrees with them, reasons for doing so should be clearly stated.
- 5.1.3 The review should contain an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses, the originality and potential impact of the research described in the application, the appropriateness of the research plan, the past productivity of the applicants and the suitability of the research environment – which is an important aspect for studentship applications. The most useful reviews are those which provide constructive advice to the applicant, enabling him/her to improve the quality and efficiency of the proposed research.
- 5.1.4 The review should include comments on the budget requested and a formal recommendation which is consistent with the scientific recommendations. If budget cuts are recommended, there should be clear and detailed reasons for the cuts.
- 5.1.5 If necessary, the reviewer may comment on such factors as the ethical acceptability of the research. It should be noted that the MND Association does not require copies of ethical approvals *per se* as part of the application. The Association may wish to ensure that certain details have been considered by the relevant ethics committee, or that appropriate licences in relation to work on animals, or in respect of genetic manipulation, are held. If a grant is awarded, the MND Association may withhold funding until it is certain that such issues have been addressed.

5.2 Factors in the Assessment

The following questions are among those which should be considered. It is understood that reviewers and the panel may weigh these questions differently from one application to another.

The Applicant's Productivity, Experience and Training:

- How appropriate is the training or track record of the applicant(s) to the research proposed?
- How important, productive and original is the recent work of the applicant(s)?
- Is there confidence that the applicant(s) can do the work proposed?

The Proposed Research:

- How important and/or original are the hypotheses or the questions to be addressed? How clearly are they formulated?
- How does the proposal fit with the MND Association Research Strategy? Does the proposal align clearly to an area(s) in the published Research Strategy?
- How important and original are the contributions expected from the research proposed? What is the potential for important new observations or knowledge that will have an impact on classical MND?
- How well do the proposed experiments address the hypotheses or questions? How appropriate are the methods to be applied and the proposed analyses of data? How will the applicant implement new methods which are to be introduced and/or explored? Have the applicants anticipated potential difficulties in their approach and considered alternatives?
- Is the proposed timescale and budget suitable?
- Is the rationale for the proposal well-grounded in a critical review of the pertinent literature?
- Depending on the type of research, does the applicant have a plan for the dissemination of the research findings so that they can be eventually translated into a benefit for people with MND?

The Research Environment:

- Are the facilities and personnel that are required to do the work available?
- Is the applicant able to commit the amount of time that is required to do the research well?
- Are appropriate collaborations in place?

The Training Environment (where applicable)

It is the MND Association's policy that awarding of PhD studentship positions should carry a high weighting on the basis of the quality of the training environment. The panel's judgement of the quality of training will be influenced by such factors as:

- Are facilities and personnel available to provide a sound research training?
- Is the applicant able to commit the amount of time that is required to deliver training and supervision?
- Are appropriate student supervisory systems in place?
- What is the track record in student supervision?

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6 The Panel Review Process

It is expected that the BRAP will work in a more consistent manner if members follow defined procedures.

- 6.1 Any panel member with a conflict of interest with a particular application will leave the room before that application is discussed. They will not have received any paperwork related to that application and a record of the discussion will be omitted from their copy of the minutes. If this applies to the chair of the panel, they will appoint a delegate as chair in their absence.
- 6.2 All panel members should be familiar with the main objectives of the project and the applicant's experience, as well as with the external reviewer reports. Internal reviewers therefore need only briefly summarise these during their five to six minute presentation of an application.
- 6.3 At the panel meeting, the assessment of each application begins with the internal reviewer announcing an initial rating of **A, B or C**, based on the 'scoring and rating research grants criteria' (see below). If the internal reviewer's rating is **C**, then the panel is given the option of not discussing the application further. If any panel member objects, the application must be discussed. If an application is not discussed, the applicant will receive a copy of the internal and external reviews, but there will be no other feedback. C rated applications are not scored. Typically this process streamlines the panel meetings and allows panel members to devote more time to discuss competitive applications.
- 6.4 For applications that pass this first stage, discussion proceeds with the internal reviewer presenting his/her assessment of the application, describing the strengths and weaknesses of the proposal (see paragraph 5.2 Factors in the Assessment) and addressing the comments of the external reviewers. The director of research development may wish to comment further on issues that have already been raised, or may wish to raise additional issues as appropriate.
- 6.5 The chair leads discussion of the proposal by all panel members. In addition to points raised by the internal reviewer, views expressed in the external reviewer reports must also be taken into account. The research grants manager or director of research development may introduce points not adequately addressed by the internal reviewer.
- 6.6 Special concerns of eligibility, ethics, overlapping sources of funds, or other points are discussed. If necessary, such concerns should be flagged for MND Association staff to address should the proposal be funded.
- 6.7 Any concerns regarding the timescale or budget for the proposal should also be discussed and recommendations for changes should be noted.
- 6.8 If required, the research grants manager may read back their notes capturing the key elements of the discussion, which should be considered when rating the application.

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- 6.9 Following the discussion, the chair seeks a ‘suggested consensus rating’ from the internal reviewer. This may be a revision of their initial rating based on the panel discussion, if they see fit. All panel members including the internal reviewer and trustees, but excluding MND Association staff, are then invited to agree or disagree with this suggested consensus rating.
- 6.10 Once all applications have been reviewed, if the panel feels that any application(s) has been treated inconsistently, re-review of one or a small number of applications is permitted. Any panel member with a conflict of interest must again leave the room. Following this additional discussion, a consensus rating is suggested by the internal reviewer and other panel members asked to agree or disagree.
- 6.11 The panel does not review the overall ratings of all applications at the end of the meeting, as individuals with conflicts of interest would inevitably be present during such a process.
- 6.12 When all applications have been discussed, each scoring member of the panel is invited to score all applications with a suggested consensus rating of **A or B**. This is done in writing and in confidence. The final rating assigned to the proposal is the average of these confidential numeric scores. Panel members do not score those applications where there is a conflict of interest.

A scoring system will be used as follows	Rating	Scoring					
		Not fundable		Recommended for funding			
				Low → High			
Appropriate for support	A			3	4	5	6
Possible for support	B	1	2	3	4		
Declined	C	Not scored					

Note that the A and B applications are both considered in the process, but the C applications have already been rejected.

Only applications rated ‘A’ and ‘B3’ or higher are eligible for a recommendation for funding by the panel. Applications rated below ‘B3’ may be flawed in some respect, such that they are not considered to be of high enough priority, do not meet standards or fit with the research strategy and would require significant rewriting to be considered acceptable.

- 6.13 At the end of the meeting the **mean** score for each application will be calculated to two decimal places and applications ranked in order of priority.

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- 6.14 From the scores, a ranked list of projects is produced suitable for presentation by the director of research development to the Board of Trustees for funding decisions.
- 6.15 An essential component of any panel meeting is a final review of the panel's effectiveness and functioning, along with a discussion of policy issues that may have arisen in the course of its deliberations. Panel members should therefore plan to stay for the entire meeting and make travel arrangements accordingly. Guidance on the probable length of the meeting will be provided in advance.

7 The Rating

The rating given to an application reflects the evaluation of many factors. The Association does not provide rigid guidelines since no two applications are identical.

On occasion, if an application contains sections of varying quality and part(s) is(are) regarded as particularly compelling, the panel may prefer to base its rating on the parts regarded more favourably and recommend reducing the requested duration and/or funding of a project accordingly. It may also happen that a proposal is particularly exciting but feasibility of the entire body of work depends on a positive outcome to an initial experiment. In such a case, the panel may recommend funding to enable the applicant to obtain 'pilot' data that can then be used to support a subsequent follow-up proposal.

In deciding on the rating panel members should use the full scale. The rating should not be influenced by such factors as overlapping funds, eligibility or issues of ethics which do not have scientific relevance. These should be discussed *after* the application has been rated. If the panel agrees, the concerns should be flagged for attention by MND Association staff.

8 Budget Considerations

An important part of the review process is to seek justification of resources and consequent budget requirements to fund a project. The appropriate budget is very much a matter for judgement by the panel. Some areas of research are more expensive than others. The panel may recommend funds for only the part(s) of the proposed research which are regarded more highly than others.

Discussion on justification of resources may be influenced not only by the perceived costs of the work proposed, but also by the judgements of the rate at which the panel feels the applicant should be able to progress. The latter may correlate with the rating value. Thus an application rated as merely good is not likely to be given the same latitude in terms of requested resources as one regarded as excellent.

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Each budget item must be justified. If a budget is not adequately justified or explained in order to assess the request appropriately, the panel may request a follow-up by MND Association staff. If the proposal is approved for funding, funds will not be released until the budget justification concerns are resolved.

For equipment requests built into grant applications, recommended budgets should be justified item by item. Recommendation of only a global amount without itemised justification is not acceptable.

Consideration of the budget should follow this sequence:

8.1 Research Staff

Research staff should be determined by the actual needs for the techniques and work required for the research, as well as by the speed at which the panel considers the work could proceed. Applications for less than two years must include a named researcher who has the relevant expertise.

8.2 Materials, Supplies, Services and Travel

The panel may wish to consider the detail of costs in the above heading. MND Association grant awards may not be used for indirect costs, eg library access, heat and light, office furniture, regular telephone rates etc. Some applications request an amount for what may seem to be indirect costs or 'overheads'. These will need to be justified in terms of their direct contribution to the research, eg a contribution to salary of glassware washer or technician to operate a common piece of research equipment is allowable.

8.3 Equipment

Equipment costs may be requested for identified items required to do the research. Cost quotations should be provided for equipment or service contracts greater than £10,000. The panel may receive proposals requesting equipment and/or maintenance alone.

All such costs should be rated according to the quality of the science the equipment is to support and the necessity for the equipment. Reviews should include comments on the proposed uses and need for the equipment and/or maintenance, the appropriateness of the equipment and/or maintenance requested, and the availability of similar equipment or services to the applicant's laboratory.

8.4 Overlaps with other Funding Sources

The panel is asked to review the requested resources in grant applications irrespective of other sources of funds received or applied for, ie they should *not* reduce recommended budgets to take into account potential overlap. However, if there is evidence of overlap with other actual or potential sources of funds, the application should be flagged by the panel. This information will be followed up by MND Association staff, with further consultation with panel members as required and adjustments made as appropriate. A summary and description of overlap for any grants held or applied for by the applicant should be included on the application form

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9. Term of Support

The length of support recommended by the panel will reflect their view of the time needed to make significant progress and the expectation that the applicant(s) will be productive. The panel should recommend a term of support sufficient to allow the applicant(s) time to show progress.

Reviewers are often reluctant to rate highly an application which is truly novel, in the absence of preliminary data. In this situation the panel is encouraged to support such innovative applications with a high rating, but mitigate the risk by recommending limited funding which will allow the applicant to obtain preliminary data in support of a more substantive future application.

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