

Guidance on the application review process and the peer review framework

1. Introduction

The selection of proposals for funding by Coeliac UK's Research Awards Panel is based strictly on peer review evaluation of scientific excellence and against the criteria of the charity's Research Strategy and overall aims. The Research Awards Panel comprises of experts who make recommendations for funding, either autonomously or based on the feedback of experts external to the panel and the lay Member Review Panel.

This document outlines the peer review framework, its inputs and outputs, and it defines the responsibilities of the participants in the process. It details a number of important issues, such as practical guidelines for the management of conflict of interest.

2. Research Awards Panel (RAP)

The RAP consists of a Chair and up to an additional nine panel members. The RAP Chair is appointed by the Board of Governors and the other panel members are selected by the Research Strategy Board based on their expertise and scientific reputation.

The RAP Chair and the members make a significant commitment to the peer review evaluation process, performing the following tasks:

1. Familiarisation with research proposals
2. Individual remote review - by electronic means
3. Sourcing and engaging reviewers external to the panel – remote reviewers
4. Participation in the RAP meetings

The RAP Chair has additional tasks and responsibilities:

5. To chair the RAP meetings.
6. To assign proposals to RAP members for individual reviewing. The Chair will pay particular attention to the policy on conflicts of interest
7. To appoint a deputy panel Chair at the beginning of the evaluation process
8. To ensure the RAP produces all necessary deliverables of the required quality standards by the end of RAP meetings, including the ranked lists, recommended funding proposal for approval by the Board of Governors and feedback to applicants.
9. When required, attend the Board of Governors meeting to present the proposal of selected research for funding.

The Chair and members of RAP are listed on the Coeliac UK website.

3. The remote external reviewers

In addition to the RAP, Coeliac UK relies on input from external remote reviewers. They are individuals who bring in the necessary specialised expertise. Remote external reviewers work remotely and deliver their individual assessments by electronic means. They do not participate in RAP meetings.

The assignment of remote reviewers to proposals is carried out under the responsibility of the RAP Chair in collaboration with the RAP members and Coeliac UK's research team. Any member of the international scientific community can act as a remote reviewer, subject to the approval and accreditation of the person in question and their acceptance of the conditions regarding confidentiality and conflict of interest.

To take advantage of the best spectrum of specialised expertise, in addition to RAP members, reviews are requested from remote external reviewers who work remotely. All the reviews will then form the basis for the RAP discussions.

4. Exclusion of independent experts at request of an applicant

Applicants submitting proposals may request that up to three specific persons would not act as peer reviewers in the evaluation of their proposal. Such a request must be made at the time of the grant application submission within the grant application form and a reason given.

The RAP may consider excluding the listed individuals from the evaluation of the application as long as the RAP remains in the position to have the proposal evaluated effectively and to the highest standards.

Such a request will be treated confidentially by the RAP. A request to exclude a member of the RAP will not be permitted.

5. Allocation of funding

The charity's Board of Trustees decides on what funding is available for research and allocated to each research call. The RAP is responsible for selecting and proposing what research to fund based on the peer review and lay process and the budget available.

6. The individual reviews

Individual reviews are carried out prior to RAP meetings. RAP members and remote external reviewers participate in the individual review stage. Coeliac UK's Member Review Panel, representing people affected by coeliac disease, will review and score the lay summary of the application.

Minimum requirements:

Each application shall be reviewed by at least three peer reviewers. All applications are reviewed by a member of the RAP and at least two remote external reviewers.

Each application may be assigned to a 'lead reviewer' who introduces the proposal to the RAP for discussion at the panel meeting and is responsible for drafting the panel comment. The panel comment is part of the 'Evaluation Report' which is returned to the applicant as feedback.

The 'lead reviewer' is a RAP member selected from those assigned to evaluate the application. A 'lead reviewer' may be assigned to each application during the evaluation process. The lead reviewer's role is to briefly introduce the proposal to their peers during the panel meeting and draft the panel comment in order to reflect the main points of the panel discussion. The panel comment drafted by the 'lead reviewer' is agreed upon by all RAP Members.

The interpretation of 'individual' review

During the individual reviewing/remote evaluation process, there shall be no discussions of the proposals between reviewers. When a RAP member considers that they have insufficient expertise to evaluate any of the assigned proposals, they should immediately inform the RAP Chair, so that the proposal can be reassigned to another member.

Scores and comments

Individual reviewing consists of:

- Providing a succinct explanatory comment on the overall excellence of the research project and principal investigator, ensuring the criteria of the Research Strategy has been met.
- Awarding scores for originality, feasibility and meeting the needs of people with coeliac disease.
- Providing a comment on whether the research project supports the top ten research priorities for coeliac disease.

Members of the Member Review Panel will provide feedback on whether they have understood the lay summary, whether they believe the proposal will benefit people with coeliac disease and in their opinion whether the grant should be awarded.

The importance of scores and comments

Both scores and comments are critically important. The individual review scores determine the relative position on the initial ranking list and serve as a starting point for the RAP discussions. These scores are not communicated to the applicants; only the final outcome expressed as funded, not funded or funded with conditions set by RAP. All comments are included in the Evaluation Report and therefore reproduced in the feedback to applicants. Reviewers should therefore take care about the formulation of comments in their individual assessments to ensure anonymity.

The nature of the comments

Comments should be provided by each reviewer of the application. They should be of good quality, genuine, succinct but substantial. They should also be impeccably polite.

Comments should take the form of a statement and explanation of key strengths and key weaknesses of the proposal, in light of the evaluation criteria.

Reviewers are obliged to observe the following guidelines:

- Use dispassionate, analytical and unambiguous language.
- Use grammatically correct, complete, clear sentences with no jargon.
- Critical comments should be constructive.
- Avoid self-declaration of insufficient expertise (personal or panel) or non-confidence in the proposal.
- Avoid reference to the applicant age, nationality, gender, or personal matters.
- Avoid making reference to scores in the comments.
- Avoid any direct comparison with any other proposals.
- Avoid any reference or comparison with previous assessments.
- Avoid comments that give a description or a summary of the proposal.
- Avoid dismissive statements about the Principal Investigator, the proposed science, or the scientific field concerned.

Individual reviews must be submitted in due time to the RAP and at the latest prior to the RAP meeting.

RAP members and remote reviewers will evaluate and score the proposals according to:

1. Originality
2. Feasibility
3. Meeting the needs of people with coeliac disease
4. Value for money
5. PPIE

Each proposal receives a score on a scale from 1 to 5 for each of the above areas. Scores are awarded in integers or halves. Marks range from 1 (least/non-competitive) to 5 (most/outstanding). In all cases, reviewers are requested to base their assessment strictly on the evaluation criteria.

While numerical marks from 1 to 5 are used in the remote evaluation phase and serve as a starting point for the RAP meetings, the outcome of the RAP meeting is expressed as funded, not funded or funded with conditions. Hence, the individual numerical scores are not communicated to the applicants. At the end of the evaluation step, the proposals will be ranked by the RAP on the basis of the scores they have received and the panels' overall appreciation of their strengths and weaknesses.

Review of the requested financial contribution

The RAP should only recommend a reduction of a requested grant where there are specific recommendations for a particular application (i.e. there should be no across the board cuts). Recommendations for amendments to the amount granted must be documented and explained in the panel comments for each application concerned. They should be based on an analysis of the resources requested and necessary to carry out the work.

The RAP is advised to consider carefully whether recommendations for large reductions may in fact be a reflection of a weak proposal and whether it would be advisable to reject the proposal.

7. Declaration of conflicts of interest and confidentiality

Remote reviewers must sign a declaration of conflicts of interest and confidentiality having read and accepted the charity's policy on conflicts of interest, confidentiality and processing of personal data.

The RAP cannot make research proposals available to a reviewer who has not signed and returned a conflicts of interest and confidentiality declaration.

Peer reviewers should not be put in a situation in which their impartiality might be questioned, or where the suspicion could arise that recommendations are affected by elements that lie outside the scope of the review.

On the basis of the information available, the RAP Chair shall avoid making conflicting assignments of proposals to reviewers.

Consequences of conflicts of interest

If a conflict of interest is reported by the remote reviewer or established by the RAP, or becomes apparent at any stage of the evaluation, the expert must not evaluate any application to the call. Any comments and scores already given by the expert will be discounted. If necessary, the expert will be replaced.

If there is a conflict of interest for a RAP member they must not evaluate the given application or take part in any discussion or scoring of it. The RAP member must leave the room or the electronic forum when the proposal is discussed ('out of the room' rule).

If it is revealed during an evaluation that an expert has knowingly concealed a conflict of interest, the expert will be immediately excluded and sanctions applied. Any RAP meeting in which s/he has participated will be declared null. The RAP meeting will be reconvened and the application(s) concerned will be re-evaluated.

8. The eligibility and evaluation criteria

There are two types of criteria:

- Eligibility criteria
- Evaluation criteria

Eligibility criteria

Eligibility criteria are simple, factual and legally binding. Their interpretation does not involve scientific judgement. Hence, eligibility is not part of the peer review evaluation process. Instead, it is usually carried out by Coeliac UK staff. Nevertheless, if an expert considers a proposal to be potentially ineligible during the evaluation process they should clarify the case immediately with the Chair of the RAP.

Evaluation criteria

Meeting the requirements of the charity's Research Strategy and scientific excellence are the criteria of evaluation and is at the core of the peer review evaluation process. All assessments of applications must be made against the evaluation criteria and its detailed elements alone.

9. Preparation and organisation of the RAP meetings

Autonomy of the RAP Chair

The RAP Chair has a high degree of autonomy in the conduct of the RAP meetings; which proposals to discuss in detail, in which order, when to resort to voting and how to vote, etc. The conduct of the meetings will also be influenced by the number of proposals to be reviewed by the RAP.

The efficiency of meetings and preparation

RAP meetings should be efficient. For this reason, preparatory work is carried out in advance of the meeting by electronic means:

1. RAP members should familiarise themselves with proposals in order to be able to make high quality recommendations.
2. RAP Members, individually and remotely, review allocated applications.
3. Remote reviewers contribute to the evaluation process with individual reviews prepared remotely.

The individual reviewing stage increases the efficiency of evaluation in two ways:

1. By creating a preliminary ranking of proposals; this allows RAP discussions to focus on those proposals that merit substantial discussions and an early elimination of the low ranked proposals.
2. By gathering elements of the feedback to applicants; particularly for the low ranked proposals, the comments obtained by their individual reviewing may sufficiently capture substantial reasons for the rejection.

The possible use of a voting system

At the RAP meeting, the RAP may expedite its ranking process by the use of a voting system (e.g. a majority vote on one or more applications, with each RAP member having one vote per application being considered). The RAP Chair or a RAP member cannot vote for an application if there is a conflict of interest, and in such case, an appropriate adjustment is applied. Voting can be an effective way of finalising a ranking list.

Outputs of the panel meetings

The output of any panel meeting, to be provided at the end of the meeting, consists of the following elements:

1. The ranked list of proposals
2. A proposal for funding
3. The feedback to applicants
4. A panel report

The panel report

In addition to the ranked list of proposals, the panel report (prepared by the Panel Chair) briefly documents the evaluation methodology followed by the panel. It may also contain, as deemed appropriate, reflections on issues such as the quality of applications in relation to the budget. It may furthermore contain recommendations to be considered by Coeliac UK in future review sessions.

10. The tasks of the panel meetings

The RAP makes three types of recommendations:

1. Priority for funding – the application/s which are highest scoring and/or look to fill a current important evidence gap so recommended to be a high priority for funding from Coeliac UK.
2. Fundable with amends – the application/s which meet some but not all elements of the criteria or those which must meet mandatory conditions as outlined by RAP for Coeliac UK to be able to offer funding.
3. No fundable – the application/s which RAP do not think Coeliac UK should look to fund at this time due. This could be due to a number of factors such as low scores, duplication of ongoing work, etc.

Proposals recommended for funding, depending on sufficient funds, will be presented to the Board of Trustees for the final decision on funding.

11. Feedback to applicants (the Evaluation Report)

Apart from recommendations on fundable applications and their ranking, the other most important output of the RAP meetings is the feedback to applicants. Coeliac UK will provide an Evaluation Report to each applicant, which documents the results of the evaluation. Especially in the case of rejection, the Evaluation Report needs to convey a comprehensive explanation of the fate of the application and the position of the RAP with regard to it. The principle applied is that the Evaluation Report of each application contains a documentation of all comments and observations it received from both RAP

members and the remote reviewers who have carried out individual assessments of the application.

Elements of the Evaluation Report

The Evaluation Report of any application comprises three components:

1. The recommendation of the RAP.
2. A comment by the RAP, written by the 'lead reviewer' or another RAP member, and approved by the RAP.
3. The comments from the individual assessments given by remote reviewers and RAP members prior to the RAP meeting.

The comments by individual reviewers

The comments by reviewers (RAP members and remote reviewers) are included in the Evaluation Report as received. They may be subject to mild editing by the RAP, or Coeliac UK staff, without altering their intended message, to enhance clarity, remove any inappropriate, irrelevant or polemic remarks, remove revelation of the remote reviewers' identity, misleading recommendations, etc. These individual comments may not necessarily be convergent - differences of opinion about the merits of an application proposal are legitimate among evaluators, and it is potentially useful for an applicant to be informed of the various views.

The panel comment

In many cases the comments by the individual reviewers provide a sufficient explanation of the RAP's decision. In such cases, the panel comment simply acknowledges the weaknesses or strengths pointed out by the individual reviewers without containing observations that substantially deviate from the views expressed by the individual reviewers.

In other cases, the panel may take a position that is different from what could be inferred from the comments/scores of the individual reviewers. For example, if the RAP discussion reveals an important weakness in a proposal, the RAP comment shall document its reasons in a substantial comment.

A number of applications of reasonable/good quality but ranking below the budgetary cut-off level may be rejected. Such proposals may typically have positive comments from individual reviewers. However, they do not gather enough support from the RAP when taking into account the budgetary constraint. In such cases, the panel comments may be expressed in these terms.

The panel comment is the key element of the information provided to the applicants at the end of the evaluation. It should clearly explain the decision adopted by the RAP substantiating the reasons which led to the RAP decision.

12. The role of independent observers

Coeliac UK staff, in particular the Director of Evidence and Policy and the Research Officer, observe RAP meetings to examine the peer review evaluation process from the point of view of its working and execution.

Where there is an application for co-funding, a representative of the co-funder may also observe the RAP meeting.

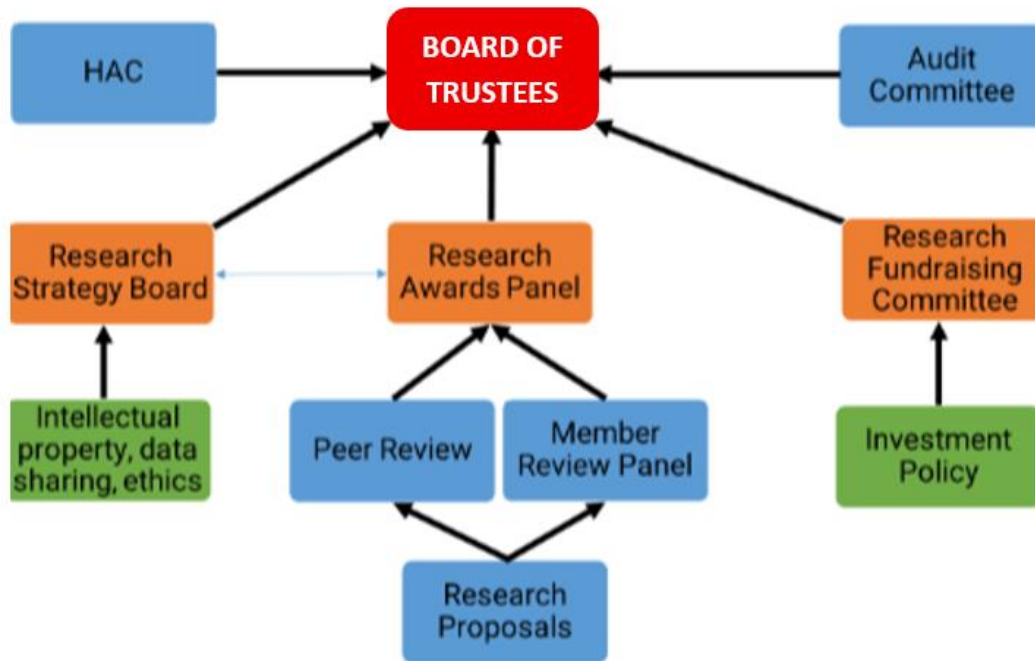
A staff member of the Association of Medical Research Charities may also be an observer of a RAP meeting for the purpose of auditing the peer review evaluation process.

Observers have no role in the outcome of the RAP meeting.

13. Two stage application process

Where a two stage application process is employed, stage one concept notes will not undergo peer review. Applications will be triaged by RAP alongside Coeliac UK staff in a meeting. Successful applications will be invited to submit a stage two application which is a full application. Full applications will undergo peer review as outlined above and lay review.

Governance structure:



Peer review framework:

