Guidance for Public Reviewers of Research Funding Applications to the HRB

---

1 This form has been adapted from the NIHR Guidance for public reviewers of research funding applications to: PRP, i4i, PGfAR and RfPB programmes, with the permission of the NIHR Central Commissioning Facility
Contents
1. Support for reviewers ........................................................................................................... 3
2. How the review process works ............................................................................................ 3
3. Fee and expenses ................................................................................................................. 5
4. Confidentiality and conflicts of interest .............................................................................. 5
5. What we need from your review ......................................................................................... 5
6. Getting started .................................................................................................................... 6
7. What a research proposal looks like .................................................................................... 8
8. Sections of the research proposal relevant to public reviewers ........................................... 9
9. Where to start ..................................................................................................................... 10
10. Finding information on public involvement in the proposal .............................................. 11
11. Working through technical sections .................................................................................. 12
12. What makes a good public review? Examples from previous reviews ............................... 13
13. Completing the review form ............................................................................................. 16
14. What happens next ............................................................................................................. 16
15. Acknowledgement ............................................................................................................. 16
Glossary of Terms .................................................................................................................. 17
1. Support for reviewers

Thank you for accepting our invitation to review a research **funding application**.

This guidance document aims to help you:
- understand the task of reviewing
- successfully complete a review.

A glossary is provided at the end of this document to help clarify the meaning of some of the terms used in the guidance notes. Terms included in the glossary are written in *underlined blue Italic* and will bring you directly to the glossary if you **CTRL + Click on each term**. To return to the point in the document where you were reading, please click **ALT + the left arrow** on your keyboard.

**To jump to the Glossary**
CTRL + Click on the *underlined term*

**To jump back from the Glossary**
Alt + left arrow Key (or command +left arrow key for Mac)

If you would like to receive a paper copy of this guidance document or have any questions or queries before, during or after carrying out a review, please contact Sara Lord by Email ppi@hrb.ie or phone 01 2345 205

2. How the review process works

Reviews are an important part of how decisions are made about what to fund or what not fund. Reviews:
- inform the decision-making process of research programme panels
- provide feedback to the people who have applied for funding including an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of their application.

There is some variation in the review process between different HRB funding schemes but the following flowchart gives a basic overview of how the review process works.
Researchers
Submit a funding application to a Research Programme

HRB Programme Team
- Check the application meets all the basic criteria of the programme.
- Allocate the application to peer and public reviewers with knowledge and experience relevant to the research topic. Until this now only peer reviewers reviewed the applications. We now wish to include a public review of applications so this is a new step in the review process.

Peer & Public Reviewers:
Provide independent assessments of the application
- Reviewers provide written comments on the application in their review form
- At this stage only Peer Reviewers make a funding recommendation to the decision making panel as part of completing the review. Public reviewer’s feedback at this stage will only be sent to the researcher, but we hope to include public reviewers in this step in the future.

Research Programme Panel:
Use peer reviews as part of their decision making process
- Peer Reviewers comments are considered by the panel as part of reviewing and assessing applications.
- Panel makes a funding recommendation for each application: this may be Fund, Fund with changes, Not fundable.

HRB Programme Team:
Process both successful and unsuccessful applications
Funded and not funded applications are handled differently. However the lead researcher of every application funded or not, will be sent copies of any peer and public reviews of their application – all the information about the reviewer (e.g. name) will be deleted from the review before it is sent to the researcher.

HRB Board Approval:
The Board of the HRB approve (or not) the funding recommendations of panels
It can sometimes take a few months between an application being recommended for funding and the research starting. This could be for any number of reasons such as: budget issues or other agreements that need to be in place before a contract can be issued or it may be that the researcher is not quite ready to start working on the research.

Researchers
Funded research begins.....
3. Fee and expenses
We offer a standard payment for completing and returning the completed review to the HRB. Once you have returned your completed review to the HRB, the HRB will send you a form where you will be able to enter the payment due to you for completion of the review. It will take approximately 2-4 weeks for the HRB to make the payment to you. For more information on fees and expenses please see the HRB’s public payment guide.

4. Confidentiality and conflicts of interest
You must treat the application you have agreed to review as confidential. This means that you may not discuss any aspect of the application or the assessment of the application with anyone else. If you think you need to discuss the application with someone else you must first seek permission from the HRB by Sara Lord by Email ppi@hrb.ie or phone 01 2345 205.

You must follow high standards of honesty during the review process. If you receive or print a hard copy to work from, we ask you to either shred the documents when the task is completed or send them back to the HRB and we will reimburse postal expense through the expense form.

Please check with the HRB if you think you may have a conflict of interest. For example, do you know anyone on the research team personally? Have you been involved in developing this application?

5. What we need from your review
Your review is written from your perspective as a member of the public, informed by your knowledge and experience as a patient and/or carer and as an actual or potential user of health services.

It is important to note the difference between ‘Public Patient Involvement’ in research and ‘Participation’ in research. Public Patient Involvement in Research is where members of the public or patients are actively involved in research projects and in research organisations. Participation in research is when people take part in a research project.

Examples of Public Patient Involvement include:
- Being co-applicants or collaborators on a grant application;
- Involvement in identifying research questions;
- Being part of a project Steering or Advisory group to direct the research;
- Helping to carry out the research, for example, through doing interviews with research participants, assisting with the development of patient information leaflets or other research materials or helping to disseminate research findings.

Examples of participation in research include:
- Being recruited to a clinical trial or other research study as a research participant;
- Answering a questionnaire or participating in a focus group to answer questions to help researchers answer a particular research issue.
The parts of an application that we particularly value your comments on are:

- Is the proposed research important to patients, service users, carers or the health of the general population?
- Is the proposed research looking for answers that are important to patients, service users, carers or the health of the general population?
- If the research involves patients, do you believe people would be willing to take part?
- Is the plain English summary of the funding application easy to understand? Could it be improved?
- How appropriate are any plans for patient and public involvement (PPI) in the research application? What difference will it make? Some applications particularly those that are based in laboratories may not require much PPI. However, applications that are looking at health (specific diseases, the prevention of ill health or promotion of good health) or health services (e.g. delivery of care and treatment in hospital, primary care, General practice) should have patients or the public involved in the research team.
- How could the researchers improve their plans for PPI in their research?
- How would you like to hear about the outcomes of this research—for example Media interview, public talks, through your health provider if relevant, etc.?

For some examples of reviewer comments, please see ‘Section 7: What makes a good public review?’ Remember, we are getting a range of reviewers to comment on each application, including those with professional and scientific expertise. What we need from you is your perspective on how well they have included people who are most likely to be influenced by the research, or how they could improve public and patient involvement in their research.

6. Getting started

A research funding application can be anything from under 50 to well over 100 pages in length and it often includes annexes, supporting documents, CVs, charts and letters of support.

Before you complete the online review form you will have to read and find your way around the application. How you approach this task is up to you. However, here are a few tips from experienced public reviewers:

- If you start by reading the plain English summary it can give you a useful overview of the application and ideas about what to look out for elsewhere. If it does not then it may reflect a badly written plain English summary.
- Applications can seem heavy and difficult to get through. It can be helpful to break down the review task into smaller chunks over a number of days. This gives you...
thinking time too. You may need to read some or all of the application several times, before and whilst you are completing the review.

- It’s impossible to say how long it takes to complete a review. Like most things, the more reviews you do the easier and quicker it gets to navigate through the documents and the process. However, some applications will just be more complex than others.

- You could spend hours looking for information and exploring the things that an application makes you realise you don’t know. However don’t lose sight of the fact that we have asked you to do the review because of your personal knowledge and experience as a patient, service user, carer or interested member of the general public. Keep your focus on the questions that are asked in the review form and remember your review is important from the ‘public or patient’ perspective so you do not need to know any details about the scientific aspects of the application. The peer reviewers will make sure that the researchers will do the research to a high quality.

- It may help you to think of yourself as a ‘critical friend’. Someone who is encouraging and supportive, and who comments honestly and constructively about weaknesses and problems, as well as strengths and successes. Style and tone are important. Significant comments can be missed or dismissed because of an apologetic or an aggressive sounding remark. It is OK to disagree with the researcher, as long as it is in a constructive manner.

- Public reviewers are welcome to suggest rephrasing of sentences or redrafting of the lay summary. Researchers will welcome your comments.

- Single word answers are not helpful. Researchers who will read and use your feedback don’t just want to know what you think. They also want to know the reason or reasons why you think it. For example, “On the basis of my experience as a carer of a person with motor neurone disease, I would suggest that the amount of home support that a family gets is the key question for carers and not how often the patient attends the clinic…”, or “In the absence of any budget for PPI in this application it is difficult to imagine how the researchers would be able to include PPI in the research team in the way they have suggested …”.

- Not all research projects that you will review will require PPI but the researchers should have provided reasonable explanations as to why they have not included PPI.

- The rating that you give should be reflective of your comments otherwise the message that you are trying to convey may be confusing.
7. What a research proposal looks like

A research funding application can be anything from under 50 to well over 100 pages in length and it often includes annexes, supporting documents, CVs, charts and letters of support.

The first page of the application form is always a summary page outlining the following:

- HRB reference code (starts with scheme abbreviation e.g. ILP for Investigator Led Projects)
- project title
- who the leading members of the research team are (lead applicant and co-applicants),
- what institute is going to manage the research funding (host institution)
- how long the project will be (duration)
- how much money they are asking for (budget total)
- a short scientific summary of what the researcher plans to do (abstract)

The second page of the application form is a table of contents outlining the different sections contained in the proposal. Not all of these sections will be relevant for public reviewers and the sections numbers may differ depending on what scheme the proposal is for.
8. Sections of the research proposal relevant to public reviewers

The peer reviewers will read the full application and make sure that the researchers plan to do the research to a high quality. Therefore public reviewers are not expected to read and understand all sections of the application form. You do not need to know any details about the scientific aspects of the application.

There are 4 sections of the application form that in general you might need to refer to when completing your review. The section numbers may differ depending on the funding scheme that the proposal comes under. However these sections will always be within the application.

Keep your focus on the questions that are asked in the review form and remember your review is important from the ‘public or patient’ perspective so you do not need to read and understand every part of each of these sections.
9. Where to start

If you start by reading the plain English summary (Project Lay Summary) it can give you a useful overview of the application and ideas about what to look out for elsewhere. If it does not then it may reflect a badly written plain English summary.

The project lay summary is similar to the project abstract in that researchers are asked to describe what they propose to do, say why they think it is important to complete this piece of work, and how they are going to go about conducting, analysing and drawing conclusions from the research.

The difference is that it needs to be written as a plain English summary such that it is clear, easy to understand, and is easily accessible to a lay audience. The lay summary may be used when providing information to the public with regards to the variety of research funded by the HRB and may be posted on the HRB website. The word limit is 300 words.

The project abstract and the lay summary should never be identical as the abstract is written in scientific language for a scientific audience, while the lay summary should be written in plain English and at a level that you would expect to find in a newspaper.

The importance of a plain English summary

A plain English summary is a clear explanation of your research. Many reviewers use this summary to inform their review of the funding application. They include clinicians and researchers who do not have specialist knowledge of this research field as well as members of the public. If the application for funding is successful, the summary will be used on Health Research Board (HRB) and other websites. A good quality plain English summary providing an easy to read overview of the whole study will help:

- those carrying out the review (reviewers and board and panel members) to have a better understanding of the research proposal
- inform others about the research such as members of the public, health professionals, policy makers and the media
- the research funders (e.g. HRB) to publicise the research that they fund.

Plain English summary guidance for reviewers, board and panel members

i) Does the plain English summary give a clear explanation of the research?
• Does it help you carry out your review? If not, why not?

• Is the language used appropriate and clear? If not, where are there problems?

• Are scientific terms, abbreviations and jargon explained? If not, which terms need explanation?

ii) If this research is funded, the plain English summary will be published on a variety of websites, without the rest of this application form. Could this plain English summary be used on its own to describe the proposed research? If not, what further information is needed?

10. Finding information on public involvement in the proposal

After reading the plain English (lay) summary, you should have a good idea of what the researcher is planning to do. Now you need to find out how they plan to involve members of the public in this research. A good place to start is the project description, and in particular the section that specifically asks about Public Involvement in the research project.

Researchers were asked to provide details of where there has been public involvement in the preparation and/or design of their application.

They were also asked to provide details of proposed future public involvement in later stages and to provide information on the individuals/groups and the ways in which they will be involved.

If researchers felt that public involvement was not applicable to their application then they were told that they must explain why. The applicants are allowed to write up to 600 words in this section which is just over one page.

If you do not find the information you are looking for here or you do not think that there is enough information provided in this section to answer the question, you may also need to go to the sections below. However remember that you should be able to find the information you need in the lay summary. If you don’t find it here you need to include this in your feedback to the researcher.

Researchers were asked to provide details of how they plan to share the findings of their research here. This section may tell you whether they have any plans for involving members of the public in how they share the findings of their research.
11. Working through technical sections

In some cases you may also need to consult the following sections but we advise that you do not spend too long on these sections as they will contain a lot of detail that you are not expected to understand.
12. What makes a good public review? Examples from previous reviews

Every application is different, and therefore every review will be different. This section provides some examples of public reviewer comments from previous reviews and summarises what is particularly helpful or unhelpful about them. Please note that the examples do not cover all the different sections of the review form.

i) Comments about whether you think the research asks an important question – as well as why you think this.

**Examples:** “As a mother of children with asthma, I consider that the project reflects real issues and will test a very practical model. Attending 6 monthly reviews at a GP’s can be inconvenient and time consuming. Frequently patients see different nurses or GP’s - this model offers an opportunity to build up a relationship with an accessible health adviser.” “As a member of the public with a strong family history of heart attacks I believe that this research will answer an important question about whether or not a community exercise programme reduces the risk of having a heart attack”

**Why are these good reviews?**
- The comments are based on personal experience
- It highlights the importance of the issues
- It gives a practical view

ii) Comments about whether the researchers are measuring the right outcomes – sometimes researchers may choose to measure changes that aren’t so important to patients. For example, researchers may propose to measure the impact of a treatment on people’s physical health but not whether people also experience a better quality of life. It would be helpful if you can comment on what you think is important to measure.
Example: “The reason many women seek medical help is that their day to day life has been effected by the heavy menstrual bleeding, or that it may be in the future. This study seems to be concerned about measuring the amount of blood loss and the physical effects on the women rather than the effects heavy menstrual bleeding has on the lives of the women concerned. The study would be greatly improved if it could also look at how the heavy bleeding is affecting the women’s day to day living. For example if they have to take days off work or miss social events. I feel that the research would be more useful if it also could measure the impact that heavy bleeding has on the women’s lives. Including women who have this condition in the research team would help the researchers to develop the research questions so that it answers the questions that are most important to the women and also help the doctors to understand that heavy blood loss is not the only problem for these women. It would be improved vastly if they also added some impact measurements such as days off work, days/time feeling ill, impact on social and family life.”

Why is this a good review?

- It describes what is important to measure from the perspective of people affected
- It clearly identifies a gap in the research application and suggests how the study could be improved

iii) Comments about whether you think the research would work in practice – it might help to think about whether you would agree to take part in the research and why you would say yes or no.

Example: “Interviews with bereaved carers could be an invaluable source to help understand the patient's experience, but a great deal of care will need to be taken over the timing of this discussion. If it takes place too soon after the death, the views of the carers may be significantly different to those obtained a few months later, leading to either a more positive or negative view of the patient’s care. As a carer who lived in a different area to my deceased mother, how would I have been traced to participate in the research?”

Why is this a good review?

- It clearly identifies the challenges involved in working with bereaved carers
- It questions the practicality of researchers getting access to required carers
- It is based on personal experience

iv) Comments about impact and dissemination – How do the researchers plan to publicise the findings of their work? For example, do the researchers plan to tell the people who have taken part in their study about the results? Will they be writing an article for a patient organisation newsletter or website, or are they only planning to publish an article in an academic journal?
Example: “The findings should be discussed with a group of patients to help develop recommendations for implementation (if successful) that reflect the patient experience and perspective. It might be possible to do this on an internet discussion forum on a website such as Asthma UK’s.”

Why is this a good review?
- It provides positive, practical suggestions for publicising results to patients, carers and service users.

v) Comments about the public and patient involvement (PPI) in the proposal – for example, have the researchers talked with any local patients’ or carers’ groups about their plans? If they are involving patients on steering groups, have they budgeted for their travel expenses and payment for their time?

Example 1: “The PPI is disappointing. Simply using groups to ‘trawl’ for information is not involvement. Prostate groups in the UK are some of the most advanced male cancer groups. The skills they have in all aspects of this study are not being utilised in the best way. Simply put, a bit of consultation and presenting groups with the already finished article is not involvement. Poorly thought out and sad to see…”

Why is this NOT a good review?
- While this comment highlights the lack of PPI, it does not provide suggestions on how the research team could improve the proposed PPI.

Example 2: “Having read the application it is clearly evident that the research team have fully engaged with patients and carers when developing this application. They have also entered into dialogue with patients and charities to identify important areas for discussion and utilised patients’ technical skills where appropriate. Please could the research team think about the following aspects:
  - Is there a specific experienced member of the research team responsible for coordinating, supporting and delivering patient and public involvement activities?
  - Is there an age limit for patients wishing to participate?
  - Will patients have the option of being able to contact their specialist nurse by phone?
  - If recruitment is not as anticipated and other recruitment centres need to be sought will it be necessary to seek further ethical approval and would this cause a significant time delay resulting in the trial having to be extended?
  - Would the team consider asking patients if possible to keep a brief diary (which could form part of the patient information sheet and be attached to the back), in order for them to be able to note any changes in their health or any queries that they might have while taking part…”
Why is this a good review?
- It is clear and detailed
- It highlights the strengths of PPI in the proposal
- It raises a number of questions for the research team and the panel to consider

13. Completing the review form

The online form is separated into sections, which correspond to the selection criteria used by the panel. Under each section there are a number of prompts to help you complete the form. They are designed to help you think about assessing the funding application from a patient and public perspective.

Once you have inserted your comments into each section of the review form, you'll need to rate each section. Your rating (i.e. Excellent, Good, Fair, Poor, Don’t know) should reflect the comments you have made. When you have completed all mandatory fields and you are ready to submit your review, please save and send as an email attachment to ppi@hrb.ie

If you encounter any difficulties, please contact ppi@hrb.ie or 01 2345205 and we’ll do our best to help.

14. What happens next

After you have submitted your review, you will receive an email from us acknowledging receipt of it. We will read your review shortly after submission and may provide feedback to you on the content of your review or contact you to discuss it. The most common reasons for this are that the review:
- has a lot of sections that are left blank or only has yes or no answers
- doesn’t provide an assessment of public and patient involvement (PPI)
- includes information that makes the reviewer individually identifiable
- includes comments that are potentially offensive.

If you have any questions about your review after submitting it, please don’t hesitate to contact us (see section 1, Support for Reviewers above).

The review that you have provided, along with all other public reviews, will be used to provide feedback to the applicant team in relation to how the PPI component of their application could be improved. At this stage your review will not contribute to the overall score or funding decision but it is hoped that public reviews will become an integral part of the funding score in the near future.

15. Acknowledgement

THANK YOU for getting involved. We very much appreciate and value the time, skills and effort that members of the public contribute to our work. A big thank you is also due to the public contributors who helped to write this guidance.
Glossary of Terms

A
Abbreviation
A shortened form of a word or phrase: HRB is an abbreviation of Health Research Board

Annex(es)
An extra part of the main document that may help explain things in detail but that is not essential

Appropriate
Suitable or proper under the circumstances

C
Clinical Status
A clinical measure of the condition of the patient, their disease and treatment at a given time point that is used by doctors, nurses or others that work in the health service

Commercialisation
The process of managing or running something mainly for financial gain

Confidential
Intended to be kept secret

Conflict of interest
A situation in which the concerns or aims of two different people/groups are clashing/opposing; or A situation in which a person is in a position to gain personal benefit from actions or decisions made in their official role

Constructively
In a way that has or is intended to have a useful or beneficial purpose

Credible
Able to be believed; convincing; capable of persuading people that the research will be successful

Criteria
Principles or standards by which something may be judged or decided

D
Disclose
Make (secret or new information) known
Dissemination
The act of spreading something, especially information, widely; circulation; making people aware of research results

E
Expertise
Expert skill or knowledge in a particular field

Equitable
Fair and impartial, unbiased

F
Functional status
An individual's ability to perform normal daily activities required to meet basic needs, fulfil usual roles, and maintain health and well-being; a person’s ability to go about day-to-day life

Fundamental purpose
The main reason why the research is to be done

Funding Application
A form completed by researchers in request for money to carry out research, outlining what research they want to do and how they want to do it

Financial scrutiny
Critical observation or examination of the proposed budget, analysis of how the researchers plan to spend the money

I
Impact
A noticeable effect or influence

Impenetrable
Impossible to understand

Integrity
The quality of being honest and having strong moral principles, truthfulness

J
Jargon
Special words or expressions used by a profession or group that are difficult for others to understand
L
**Lived experience**
The knowledge or skill gained through a period of hands-on experience of something, especially that gained through everyday life e.g. as a patient or carer

M
**Mandatory**
Required by law or mandate; compulsory

**Mutual confidentiality agreement**
A contract through which both people/groups agree not to disclose (make public) information covered by the agreement

P
**Peer Review**
Assessment of scientific, academic, or professional work by others working in the same field

**Perspective**
A particular attitude towards or way of looking at something; a point of view

**Prompts**
Words or symbols on the form to show that the reviewer needs to provide input e.g. checkboxes, textboxes

**Projected Outputs**
Planned/expected yield from the research work such as published results from a research project

**Proportionate**
Matching in size or amount to something else

**Prioritising the Research Questions**
Deciding which research questions to answer first based on their level of importance

**Public and Patient Involvement**
Research carried out ‘with’ or ‘by’ members of the public rather than ‘to’, ‘about’ or ‘for’ them

R
**Reimburse**
Repay (a sum of money that has been spent or lost)
Research Participant
An individual who is studied in a trial, often, but not necessarily, a patient

S
Selection criteria
The rules or standards by which funding decisions may be judged or decided

Service users
The term ‘service user’ includes:
- people who use health and social care services as patients;
- carers, parents and guardians;
- organisations and communities that represent the interests of people who use health and social care services;
- members of the public and communities who are potential users of health services and social care interventions

Sustainable
Able to be maintained (carry on) at a certain rate or level

Scrutinises
Examine or inspect closely and thoroughly

Subsidising
Paying part of the cost of producing (something) to reduce prices for the buyer or costs for the commercial partner

T
Transparent
Process is open to public scrutiny; easily understood