

Eczema UK Research Funding Expert Review Policy

Document Control

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Related Documents

This policy should be read alongside:

- Research Funding Terms and Conditions
- Grant Advisory Panel Terms of Reference
- Conflict of Interest Policy

- Artificial Intelligence (AI) Policy for Research Funding
- Research Funding Framework
- Funding Call Guidance
- Applicant Guidance Notes

Foreword

At Eczema UK, we are committed to funding research that delivers meaningful improvements in the lives of people affected by eczema. Achieving this requires a funding process that is fair, transparent, robust and founded on independent expert assessment.

As an introductory member of the Association of Medical Research Charities (AMRC), Eczema UK is committed to ensuring that research funding decisions are made through rigorous expert review, informed by scientific excellence, patient benefit and responsible stewardship of charitable funds. We recognise that the confidence of researchers, patients, donors and the wider public depend upon funding decisions being objective, consistent and free from inappropriate influence.

This Research Funding Expert Review Policy describes the principles and procedures used by Eczema UK to assess research funding applications. It explains the roles and responsibilities of everyone involved in the expert review process, including applicants, external reviewers, members of the Grant Advisory Panel (GAP), Experts by Experience (EXEC) reviewers, staff and Trustees.

The policy should be read alongside the Research Funding Terms and Conditions and associated governance documents that together form Eczema UK's Research Funding Framework.

1. Purpose

The purpose of this policy is to establish a clear, transparent and proportionate framework for the independent assessment of research funding applications submitted to Eczema UK.

The policy aims to ensure that funding decisions:

- are based on scientific excellence, innovation and methodological rigour;
- support research that has the potential to improve the lives of people affected by eczema;
- are fair, objective and evidence-based;
- are free from actual, potential or perceived conflicts of interest;

- are consistent with recognised standards of research governance and expert review;
- represent responsible stewardship of charitable funds; and
- promote public confidence in Eczema UK's research funding programmes.

This policy supports Eczema UK's commitment to research integrity, transparency, equality, diversity and inclusion, meaningful patient and public involvement, and continuous improvement.

2. Scope

This policy applies to all research funding schemes administered by Eczema UK unless alternative arrangements are specified within the funding call documentation or Award Letter.

This includes, but is not limited to:

- Catalyst Grants;
- PhD Studentship Awards;
- commissioned research;
- strategic funding initiatives;
- partnership funding schemes; and
- any future research funding programmes administered by Eczema UK.

The policy applies to all individuals involved in the assessment or approval of research funding applications, including:

- applicants;
- members of the Grant Advisory Panel (GAP);
- external expert reviewers;
- Experts by Experience (EXEC) reviewers;
- Eczema UK staff involved in administering funding programmes;
- the Chief Executive; and
- the Board of Trustees.

3. Principles

Eczema UK's expert review arrangements are designed to operate in accordance with the Association of Medical Research Charities' six principles of expert review: proportionality, independence, diversity, rotation, impartiality and transparency. The additional principles below describe how these requirements are applied within Eczema UK's research funding programme.

Diversity of Expert Review

Eczema UK will seek to involve a range of experts with relevant knowledge and experience and will consider diversity across the expert review process, including expertise, professional background, career stage, geography and demographic characteristics, where appropriate. Eczema UK will periodically review the composition of its Grant Advisory Panel and wider reviewer pool to identify opportunities to broaden representation.

Rotation of Experts

Eczema UK will regularly rotate individuals involved in research funding decisions to introduce new expertise and perspectives and reduce the risk of over-reliance on a limited group of reviewers. Terms of appointment and rotation of Grant Advisory Panel members, including the Chair, are set out in the Grant Advisory Panel Terms of Reference.

The Eczema UK Research Funding Expert Review Process is founded upon the following principles.

3.1 Scientific Excellence

Research funding decisions should be based primarily on scientific quality, originality, methodological rigour and the likelihood that the proposed research will generate meaningful new knowledge.

3.2 Patient Benefit

Eczema UK funds research with the aim of improving the lives of people affected by eczema. Applications should demonstrate clear potential to advance understanding, prevention, diagnosis, treatment or patient care.

3.3 Independence

Funding decisions must be made independently and free from actual, potential or perceived conflicts of interest. All participants in the expert review process are required to comply with Eczema UK's Conflict of Interest Policy.

3.4 Fairness and Transparency

Applications will be assessed using published assessment criteria and consistent procedures. All applicants will be treated fairly and equitably throughout the review process.

3.5 Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

The expert review process will seek to minimise bias and promote equitable assessment. Reviewers should consider how applicants have addressed equality, diversity and inclusion within the proposed research where appropriate.

3.6 Research Integrity

Assessment should uphold the highest standards of honesty, objectivity, accountability and responsible research conduct. Reviewers are expected to assess applications in accordance with recognised principles of research integrity.

3.7 Meaningful Patient Partnership

People with lived experience of eczema bring valuable perspectives to research assessment. Eczema UK incorporates patient and public perspectives through its Experts by Experience (EXEC) Group to help ensure funded research addresses issues that matter to those affected by eczema.

3.8 Confidentiality

All applications, reviewer comments and funding discussions are confidential. Individuals involved in the expert review process must protect confidential information and comply with Eczema UK's confidentiality, data protection and information governance requirements.

3.9 Responsible Stewardship

As a medical research charity, Eczema UK has a responsibility to ensure that charitable funds are invested wisely. Funding recommendations should therefore consider scientific quality, feasibility, value for money and the potential public benefit arising from the research.

The level of expert review and scrutiny applied to an application will be proportionate to the scale, complexity, risk and value of the proposed award. Applications will normally receive at least two independent scientific reviews. Additional independent review may be sought where specialist expertise is required, where reviewer opinions differ substantially, or where the funding requested is significant in relation to Eczema UK's overall research expenditure.

4. Roles and Responsibilities

The expert review process is supported by a number of individuals and groups, each with clearly defined responsibilities. Together they ensure that research funding decisions are fair, transparent, independent and consistent with Eczema UK's governance framework.

4.1 Board of Trustees

The Board of Trustees has overall responsibility for ensuring that Eczema UK's research funding programmes are governed appropriately and that charitable funds are used in accordance with the charity's objectives.

The Board shall:

- approve the Research Funding Expert Review Policy and associated governance documents;
- approve the establishment and terms of reference of the Grant Advisory Panel (GAP);
- consider funding recommendations submitted by the Grant Advisory Panel;
- satisfy itself that appropriate governance, due diligence and conflicts of interest have been managed throughout the assessment process;
- make the final decision on research awards, unless delegated under an approved scheme of delegation; and
- oversee the effectiveness and integrity of Eczema UK's research funding programme.

The Board does not routinely re-evaluate the scientific merit of individual applications, relying instead on the independent expert review process and the recommendations of the Grant Advisory Panel.

4.2 Chief Executive

The Chief Executive is responsible for ensuring that Eczema UK's research funding programme is delivered in accordance with the charity's strategic objectives and governance requirements.

The Chief Executive shall:

- oversee the effective operation of the research funding programme;
- ensure appropriate resources are available to administer the funding process;
- support the implementation of Board decisions;

- ensure appropriate governance and risk management arrangements are maintained; and
- act as the senior executive responsible for the integrity of the funding programme.

The Chief Executive shall not influence the independent scientific assessment of applications.

4.3 Eczema UK Staff

Eczema UK staff are responsible for administering the expert review process and supporting applicants, reviewers and the Grant Advisory Panel.

Staff responsibilities include:

- managing funding calls and application processes;
- providing guidance to applicants;
- conducting eligibility and administrative checks;
- coordinating conflict of interest declarations;
- coordinating the identification, invitation and administration of external reviewers under the oversight of the GAP Chair;
- supporting communication with applicants;
- preparing funding documentation following Trustee approval; and
- monitoring compliance with Eczema UK's research governance policies.

Staff facilitate the assessment process but do not determine the scientific ranking of applications.

4.4 Grant Advisory Panel (GAP)

The Grant Advisory Panel is an independent advisory body comprising experts with appropriate scientific, clinical, methodological and, where appropriate, patient expertise.

The Panel is responsible for providing independent scientific assessment and funding recommendations to the Board of Trustees.

The Grant Advisory Panel shall:

- independently assess eligible applications;
- consider independent external expert review comments and scores, where applicable under the relevant funding scheme;

- consider patient and public reviewer feedback;
- evaluate applications against the published assessment criteria;
- discuss applications collectively during the assessment meeting;
- agree final scores and funding recommendations;
- ensure that conflicts of interest are appropriately managed; and
- maintain confidentiality throughout the assessment process.

The composition and operation of the Grant Advisory Panel are governed by the Eczema UK Grant Advisory Panel Terms of Reference.

4.5 Chair of the Grant Advisory Panel

The Chair provides independent leadership of the expert review process and is responsible for ensuring that the Panel operates fairly, consistently and in accordance with this Policy.

The Chair shall:

- Oversee the selection and allocation of external expert reviewers, including confirming that reviewers have appropriate expertise and independence and that declared conflicts of interest have been appropriately considered;
- ensure conflicts of interest are identified and managed appropriately;
- appoint rapporteurs where required;
- chair Panel meetings;
- facilitate balanced discussion;
- ensure all relevant viewpoints are considered;
- confirm final recommendations following Panel deliberation; and
- present funding recommendations to the Board of Trustees.

Where the Chair has a conflict of interest, the meeting shall be chaired by the Vice-Chair or another appropriately appointed member in accordance with the Conflict-of-Interest Policy.

4.6 External Expert Reviewers

Eligible applications will normally undergo independent external scientific expert review before consideration by the Grant Advisory Panel.

External expert reviewers are selected on the basis of relevant scientific, clinical or methodological expertise, independence and the absence of material conflicts of interest.

External reviewers are expected to:

- assess applications objectively and confidentially;
- provide constructive, evidence-based feedback;
- declare any actual, potential or perceived conflicts of interest;
- maintain the confidentiality of all application materials;
- comply with Eczema UK's Artificial Intelligence Policy and Conflict of Interest Policy; and
- submit reviews within the required timescales.

External expert reviewers provide independent expert assessment to inform the Grant Advisory Panel's consideration of applications but do not make funding recommendations or final funding decisions.

4.7 Experts by Experience (EXEC) Reviewers

Members of Eczema UK's Experts by Experience (EXEC) Group provide lived experience perspectives that complement scientific expert review.

EXEC reviewers may be invited to assess:

- lay summaries;
- relevance to people affected by eczema;
- acceptability of proposed research;
- Patient and Public Involvement and Engagement (PPIE) plans;
- clarity of patient-facing information; and
- anticipated patient benefit.

EXEC reviewers do not assess scientific merit unless they also possess relevant scientific expertise.

4.8 Applicants

Applicants are responsible for submitting complete, accurate and truthful applications that comply with the published funding guidance.

Applicants shall:

- ensure that all information provided is accurate;
- disclose relevant conflicts of interest;

- comply with Eczema UK's Artificial Intelligence Policy;
- obtain institutional approval where required;
- respond promptly to requests for clarification; and
- notify Eczema UK of any material changes to the application before funding decisions are made.

Applicants must not seek to influence reviewers or members of the Grant Advisory Panel during the assessment process.

5. Funding Cycle and Assessment Process

Eczema UK operates a structured, transparent and proportionate expert review process to ensure that research funding applications are assessed fairly, consistently and independently.

While individual funding schemes may vary, research applications will normally progress through the following stages.

5.1 Publication of Funding Opportunity

Eczema UK publishes details of each funding opportunity through its website and other appropriate communication channels.

Funding calls will normally specify:

- the objectives of the funding scheme;
- eligibility requirements;
- available funding;
- assessment criteria;
- application guidance;
- submission requirements;
- key dates; and
- contact details for enquiries.

Funding opportunities may also be promoted through professional societies, research institutions, patient organisations and other relevant networks.

5.2 Submission of Applications

Applications must be submitted using the application process specified within the funding call.

Applicants are responsible for ensuring that applications:

- are complete;
- comply with the published guidance;
- are submitted before the published deadline;
- include all required supporting documentation; and
- have received any required institutional approvals.

Late or incomplete applications will not normally be considered unless exceptional circumstances apply.

5.3 Administrative and Eligibility Screening

Following submission, Eczema UK staff will undertake an initial administrative and eligibility review.

This review may include confirmation that:

- applicant eligibility requirements have been met;
- the Host Institution is eligible;
- the application is complete;
- required declarations have been provided;
- the proposed budget complies with funding guidance;
- supporting documentation has been submitted; and
- the application falls within the scope of the funding scheme.

Administrative screening does not assess the scientific quality of an application.

Applications that do not meet the published eligibility requirements may be rejected before expert review. Where appropriate and where time permits, applicants may be invited to correct minor administrative omissions prior to the application deadline.

5.4 Conflict of Interest Review

Before applications are allocated for assessment, Eczema UK will review declared conflicts of interest in accordance with the Eczema UK Conflict of Interest Policy.

Applications will be allocated to reviewers who are able to provide an independent assessment free from actual, potential or perceived conflicts of interest.

Where a conflict is identified, an alternative reviewer will be appointed.

5.5 Independent External Scientific Expert Review

Eligible applications will normally undergo independent external scientific expert review before consideration by the Grant Advisory Panel.

Applications will normally be assessed by at least two independent scientific reviewers with appropriate expertise. Reviewers will be selected in accordance with Sections 6.4–6.6 of this Policy and must be free from material conflicts of interest.

In accordance with the principle of proportionality, additional independent review may be obtained where the scale, complexity, risk or specialist nature of an application warrants further scrutiny.

Specialist methodological, statistical, clinical, health economic or other technical review may also be obtained where appropriate.

5.6 Experts by Experience (EXEC) Review

Where appropriate, applications will also undergo review by members of Eczema UK's Experts by Experience (EXEC) Group.

EXEC reviewers provide feedback on aspects such as:

- relevance to people affected by eczema;
- anticipated patient benefit;
- quality of Patient and Public Involvement and Engagement (PPIE);
- accessibility of lay summaries; and
- clarity of patient-facing information.

EXEC feedback forms part of the overall assessment but does not replace scientific expert review.

5.7 Panel Review and Funding Recommendations

The Grant Advisory Panel will consider reviewer comments, assessment scores and EXEC feedback before discussing each application collectively.

Following discussion, GAP members may revise their preliminary scores where they consider this appropriate in light of the Panel discussion. The Panel will agree funding recommendations based on the published assessment criteria and available funding.

5.8 Trustee Approval

Funding recommendations made by the Grant Advisory Panel will be submitted to the Board of Trustees for approval.

The Board is responsible for ensuring that appropriate governance procedures have been followed before confirming research awards.

The Board does not routinely undertake a further scientific assessment of individual applications.

5.9 Notification of Outcome

All applicants will receive appropriate feedback arising from the assessment process, subject to confidentiality, data protection and any other legitimate restrictions. The expected timetable for notification and feedback will normally be communicated as part of the funding call.

Successful applicants will receive:

- an Award Letter;
- Research Funding Terms and Conditions;
- any Special Conditions of Award; and
- information regarding the next steps for accepting the Award.

Applicants may raise a concern where they believe that Eczema UK's published assessment process has not been followed, a material conflict of interest has not been appropriately managed, or another significant procedural irregularity has occurred. Scientific judgement, differences of expert opinion and disagreement with scores or funding recommendations do not in themselves constitute grounds for procedural review. Where a material procedural failure is identified, Eczema UK may take proportionate corrective action.

5.10 Post-Award Monitoring

Following acceptance of an Award, funded projects will be managed in accordance with the Eczema UK Research Funding Terms and Conditions.

Award Holders will be expected to submit progress reports, financial information and other documentation as specified within the Award Letter.

6. Eligibility Screening and Reviewer Allocation

6.1 Administrative Screening

Following the application deadline, Eczema UK staff will undertake an administrative review of all submitted applications before they proceed to scientific assessment.

The purpose of this review is to confirm that applications comply with the published requirements of the funding scheme. Administrative screening is not an assessment of scientific merit and does not influence funding decisions.

Administrative checks may include confirmation that:

- the application has been submitted by the published deadline;
- all mandatory sections have been completed;
- required declarations and approvals have been provided;
- the applicant and Host Institution satisfy the published eligibility criteria;
- the requested funding falls within the permitted limits of the funding scheme;
- supporting documentation has been submitted; and
- the application complies with the published application guidance.

6.2 Eligibility Assessment

Applications that satisfy the administrative review will be assessed against the eligibility criteria for the relevant funding scheme.

Eligibility criteria may include, where applicable:

- applicant eligibility;
- Host Institution eligibility;
- research discipline or scope;
- funding limits;
- project duration;
- eligibility of requested costs; and
- compliance with any scheme-specific requirements.

Applications that do not satisfy the published eligibility criteria will not normally proceed to expert review.

6.3 Clarification of Administrative Matters

Where an application contains minor administrative omissions or clerical errors, Eczema UK may, at its discretion and where time permits, request clarification or correction before the expert review process begins.

Applicants will not normally be permitted to make substantive changes to the scientific content, methodology, objectives or budget of an application after the published submission deadline unless explicitly requested by Eczema UK.

6.4 Allocation of Reviewers

Eligible applications will be allocated to reviewers with appropriate expertise to ensure that applications receive independent, informed and proportionate assessment.

Reviewer allocation will seek to achieve an appropriate balance of:

- subject-specific expertise;
- methodological expertise;
- clinical expertise where appropriate;
- statistical or technical expertise where required;
- patient and public perspectives through EXEC review; and
- reviewer workload.

Reviewer allocation will be overseen by the Chair of the Grant Advisory Panel, with administrative coordination and support provided by Eczema UK staff.

6.5 Conflict of Interest Assessment

Before reviewer allocation is confirmed, all declared interests will be considered in accordance with the Eczema UK Conflict of Interest Policy.

Individuals with an actual, potential or perceived conflict of interest will not normally be assigned to review or discuss the relevant application.

Where a conflict becomes apparent after reviewer allocation, Eczema UK will determine whether reassignment of the application or other management measures are required.

6.6 Selection and Appointment of External Reviewers

External expert reviewers will be selected on the basis of:

- relevant subject, clinical or methodological expertise;
- independence and objectivity;
- absence of material conflicts of interest; and

- ability to provide an informed assessment of the application.

Reviewer selection and allocation will be overseen by the Chair of the Grant Advisory Panel, with administrative support from Eczema UK staff.

Where additional or specialist expertise is required, further independent reviewers may be appointed. This may include expertise in methodology, statistics, laboratory science, health economics, implementation science or other areas relevant to the application.

External expert reviewers provide independent expert assessment to inform consideration by the Grant Advisory Panel but do not make funding recommendations or final funding decisions.

6.7 Appointment of Rapporteurs

The Chair of the Grant Advisory Panel may appoint a rapporteur for each application from among the Panel members.

The rapporteur will normally:

- undertake a detailed assessment of the application;
- consider reviewer comments and assessment scores;
- identify key strengths and weaknesses;
- summarise areas of agreement or disagreement between reviewers; and
- present the application during the Grant Advisory Panel meeting to facilitate discussion.

The rapporteur supports discussion but does not determine the outcome of the assessment.

6.8 Confidentiality

All individuals involved in reviewer allocation and assessment must maintain the confidentiality of application materials.

Applications and supporting documentation shall be used solely for the purpose of expert review and must not be copied, shared or retained beyond the period necessary to complete the assessment, except where required under Eczema UK's policies or applicable law.

All reviewers must comply with the Eczema UK Confidentiality Agreement, Conflict of Interest Policy and Artificial Intelligence Policy for Research Funding.

7. Scientific Expert Review

7.1 Purpose of Expert Review

Scientific expert review is the principal mechanism by which Eczema UK evaluates the quality, feasibility and potential impact of research funding applications.

The purpose of expert review is to provide an independent, expert assessment of each application to support fair, transparent and evidence-based funding decisions.

Expert review is intended to identify proposals that demonstrate scientific excellence, methodological rigour, meaningful patient benefit and responsible use of charitable funds.

7.2 Independent Assessment

Applications shall be assessed independently by appropriately qualified reviewers with relevant scientific, clinical or methodological expertise.

Reviewers are expected to assess each application objectively and impartially, taking account of the published assessment criteria and the objectives of the relevant funding scheme.

Reviewers shall base their assessment solely on the information provided within the application and any supporting documentation supplied by Eczema UK.

7.3 Number of Reviewers

Applications will normally be assessed by at least two independent scientific reviewers. In accordance with the principle of proportionality, Eczema UK may obtain additional independent review where:

- specialist or multidisciplinary expertise is required;
- reviewer opinions differ substantially;
- clarification is required on a material aspect of the application;
- the scale, complexity or risk of the proposed research warrants additional scrutiny;
- the funding requested is significant in relation to Eczema UK's overall research expenditure; or
- the Grant Advisory Panel considers additional independent advice necessary.

The number and nature of reviews will be proportionate to the funding scheme and the application under consideration.

7.4 Responsibilities of Reviewers

Scientific reviewers are expected to:

- assess applications fairly, objectively and consistently;
- apply the published assessment criteria;

- provide evidence-based comments that support their assessment;
- identify both strengths and weaknesses of the proposal;
- distinguish clearly between major and minor concerns;
- declare any actual, potential or perceived conflicts of interest;
- maintain confidentiality throughout the review process; and
- submit reviews within the requested timeframe.

Reviewer comments should be constructive, professional and respectful, recognising that feedback may be shared with applicants.

7.5 Scope of Assessment

Reviewers should consider the application as a whole, including, where appropriate:

- the importance of the research question;
- originality and innovation;
- scientific rationale;
- study design and methodology;
- statistical considerations;
- feasibility and deliverability;
- expertise of the research team;
- suitability of the research environment;
- Patient and Public Involvement and Engagement (PPIE);
- equality, diversity and inclusion;
- ethical and regulatory considerations;
- value for money; and
- anticipated scientific, clinical and patient impact.

The relative importance of individual criteria may vary depending on the funding scheme.

7.6 Research Involving Animals

Where an application proposes research involving animals, reviewers shall consider

whether the proposed use is scientifically justified and whether appropriate consideration has been given to the principles of Replacement, Reduction and Refinement (the 3Rs).

Applicants must demonstrate appropriate consideration of the 3Rs within the application, and Eczema UK will obtain additional specialist review where required. Applications involving non-human primates, cats, dogs or equines will be referred for additional review in accordance with applicable AMRC requirements.

Eczema UK's approach to animal research should be read alongside its Research Funding Terms and Conditions and its public position on the use of animals in research.

7.7 Constructive Feedback

Reviewers should provide comments that are clear, balanced and sufficiently detailed to support funding decisions.

Comments should:

- explain the reasons for the assigned score;
- identify significant strengths;
- identify important weaknesses or risks;
- distinguish between essential revisions and desirable improvements where relevant; and
- remain objective, evidence-based and free from personal criticism.

Feedback should be written in language that is professional and suitable for sharing with applicants where appropriate.

7.8 Confidentiality

Applications submitted for expert review contain confidential and unpublished information.

Reviewers shall:

- use application materials solely for the purpose of expert review;
- not disclose or discuss applications with unauthorised individuals;
- not retain confidential material following completion of the review process unless authorised by Eczema UK; and
- comply with Eczema UK's Confidentiality Agreement and relevant data protection requirements.

7.9 Use of Artificial Intelligence

Reviewers must comply with the Eczema UK Artificial Intelligence Policy for Research Funding throughout the expert review process.

In particular, reviewers must not upload confidential applications, unpublished research proposals or reviewer comments into publicly available generative artificial intelligence systems unless expressly authorised by Eczema UK and appropriate contractual, security and confidentiality safeguards are in place.

Reviewers remain personally responsible for the content, accuracy and independence of their assessments. Artificial intelligence must not replace independent scientific judgement.

7.10 Quality Assurance

Eczema UK may review completed assessments to ensure that reviews are:

- complete;
- consistent with the published assessment criteria;
- appropriately evidenced;
- professionally written; and
- suitable for informing funding decisions.

Where necessary, Eczema UK may seek clarification from reviewers or obtain additional independent assessment before applications proceed to the Grant Advisory Panel.

8. Assessment Criteria and Scoring

8.1 Assessment Framework

Applications shall be assessed against the published assessment criteria for the relevant funding scheme using a structured scoring framework developed by Eczema UK.

The assessment framework is intended to promote consistency, transparency and fairness across all applications while recognising that no two research proposals are identical.

Reviewers are expected to exercise their professional judgement when applying the assessment criteria, taking account of the objectives of the funding scheme and the overall quality of the application.

8.2 Assessment Criteria

Depending on the funding scheme, reviewers may be asked to consider the following areas.

Scientific Quality and Rigour

Reviewers should consider:

- the importance of the research question;
- the originality and innovation of the proposal;
- the scientific rationale;
- study design and methodology;
- statistical analysis where appropriate;
- robustness and reproducibility;
- recognition of limitations and risks.

Importance to People Affected by Eczema

Reviewers should consider:

- the relevance of the research to people living with eczema;
- potential to improve prevention, diagnosis, treatment or care;
- anticipated patient benefit;
- contribution to reducing unmet need; and
- likely scientific, clinical or societal impact.

Feasibility and Deliverability

Reviewers should consider:

- whether the proposed work can reasonably be completed within the available time and resources;
- recruitment and retention plans where applicable;
- availability of facilities and infrastructure;
- project management arrangements;
- identification and management of project risks.

Research Team and Environment

Reviewers should consider:

- expertise and experience of the research team;
- appropriateness of the supervisory arrangements where relevant;
- complementary skills within the team;
- institutional support;
- access to appropriate facilities and infrastructure.

Patient and Public Involvement and Engagement (PPIE)

Where applicable, reviewers should consider:

- whether people with lived experience have been meaningfully involved in developing the research;
- the quality and appropriateness of proposed PPIE activities;
- whether involvement is proportionate to the study;
- plans for recognising and supporting public contributors.

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

Where relevant, reviewers should consider whether the application demonstrates appropriate consideration of equality, diversity and inclusion throughout the research lifecycle.

This may include:

- inclusive recruitment strategies;
- accessibility of study materials;
- consideration of under-served populations;
- justification for any exclusions;
- plans to improve diversity where appropriate.

Value for Money

Reviewers should consider:

- whether the requested resources are appropriate and justified;
- whether the proposed budget is proportionate to the planned work;
- efficient use of charitable funds; and

- the likely return on Eczema UK's investment.

8.3 Scoring

Each reviewer shall assign scores using the scoring system specified by Eczema UK for the relevant funding scheme.

Scores should reflect the reviewer's overall assessment of the application against the published assessment criteria and should be supported by clear written justification.

Reviewers are encouraged to use the full scoring range where appropriate to distinguish between applications of differing quality.

8.4 Reviewer Comments

Numerical scores alone are not sufficient to support funding decisions.

Reviewers are expected to provide written comments that:

- explain the rationale for the assigned score;
- identify significant strengths;
- identify important weaknesses or risks;
- distinguish between essential concerns and suggestions for improvement where appropriate; and
- provide constructive feedback that may be shared with applicants.

8.5 Variation Between Reviewer Scores

Differences of opinion are a normal and valuable part of expert review.

Where reviewers reach substantially different conclusions, the Grant Advisory Panel will consider the reasons for those differences during its deliberations.

Where appropriate, the Chair may seek clarification from reviewers or obtain additional independent assessment before recommendations are finalised.

8.6 Funding Recommendations

Assessment scores inform, but do not solely determine, funding recommendations.

When reaching recommendations, the Grant Advisory Panel may also take account of:

- reviewer comments;
- EXEC feedback;
- strategic fit with the objectives of the funding scheme;

- balance of the research portfolio;
- available funding; and
- any other factors identified within the published funding guidance.

Final funding recommendations are made collectively by the Grant Advisory Panel and are subject to approval by the Board of Trustees.

9. Grant Advisory Panel Review and Funding Recommendations

9.1 Purpose of the Grant Advisory Panel

The Grant Advisory Panel (GAP) is responsible for considering the findings of the expert review process and making independent funding recommendations to the Board of Trustees.

The Panel provides collective scientific, clinical and methodological expertise to ensure that funding recommendations are robust, balanced and consistent with the objectives of Eczema UK's research funding programmes.

The Grant Advisory Panel acts in an advisory capacity. Final funding decisions are made by the Board of Trustees.

9.2 Panel Meetings

The Grant Advisory Panel will normally meet following completion of the expert review process.

Meetings may be held:

- in person;
- virtually; or
- using a hybrid format.

The Chair shall ensure that meetings are conducted fairly, efficiently and in accordance with this Policy, the Grant Advisory Panel Terms of Reference and the Eczema UK Conflict of Interest Policy.

9.3 Quorum

A meeting of the Grant Advisory Panel shall be considered quorate where **at least five unconflicted expert members** are present and eligible to participate in the consideration of the relevant application.

Members who have declared a material conflict of interest in relation to an application shall not be counted towards the quorum for that item.

If fewer than five unconflicted expert members remain for consideration of an application, discussion and any funding recommendation relating to that application shall be deferred until a quorate Panel can be convened or appropriate additional independent expertise can be secured in accordance with the Grant Advisory Panel Terms of Reference.

The Chair shall ensure that quorum is confirmed and recorded for each application where conflicts of interest affect Panel participation.

9.4 Declaration and Management of Conflicts of Interest

At the start of each meeting, Panel members shall declare any actual, potential or perceived conflicts of interest relating to the applications under consideration.

Where a conflict of interest exists, the affected individual shall normally:

- take no part in the discussion of the relevant application;
- not score or rescore the application;
- withdraw from the meeting for the duration of the discussion where appropriate; and
- have their withdrawal recorded in the meeting minutes.

Conflicts of interest shall be managed in accordance with the Eczema UK Conflict of Interest Policy.

9.5 Consideration of Applications

Each application will normally be introduced by the appointed rapporteur, who will summarise:

- the aims of the proposed research;
- the principal strengths of the application;
- significant weaknesses or concerns;
- reviewer comments and scores;
- EXEC reviewer feedback, where applicable; and
- any matters requiring discussion by the Panel.

The Panel shall consider all relevant information before reaching a recommendation.

Discussion should be objective, respectful and evidence-based.

9.6 Panel Deliberation

Panel members are encouraged to contribute openly to discussion while respecting differing scientific opinions.

The Chair shall ensure that:

- all relevant viewpoints are considered;
- discussion remains focused on the published assessment criteria;
- conflicts of interest are appropriately managed;
- sufficient time is allocated for balanced consideration of each application; and
- decisions are reached in a fair and transparent manner.

Differences of scientific opinion are recognised as a normal and valuable part of expert review.

9.7 Revision of Scores

Following discussion, GAP members may revise their preliminary scores where they consider this appropriate in light of the Panel discussion.

Revised scores should continue to reflect each GAP member's independent scientific judgement.

The Chair shall ensure that any revised scoring process is applied consistently across all applications.

9.8 Funding Recommendations

Following completion of its deliberations, the Grant Advisory Panel shall agree funding recommendations for submission to the Board of Trustees.

Recommendations may include:

- funding without conditions;
- funding subject to specified conditions;
- placement on a reserve list where applicable;
- invitation to resubmit to a future funding round where appropriate; or
- rejection.

In making recommendations, the Panel shall consider:

- scientific quality;

- methodological rigour;
- anticipated patient benefit;
- feasibility;
- value for money;
- reviewer comments;
- EXEC feedback;
- strategic alignment with Eczema UK's research priorities; and
- the funding available for the scheme.

9.9 Recording of Decisions

Eczema UK shall maintain an appropriate record of Panel meetings.

Meeting records should include:

- attendance;
- declarations of conflicts of interest;
- applications considered;
- funding recommendations;
- actions arising; and
- any other matters considered necessary for good governance.

Reviewer discussions shall remain confidential.

9.10 Confidentiality

All discussions, documentation and recommendations considered by the Grant Advisory Panel are confidential.

Panel members shall not disclose:

- application materials;
- reviewer identities;
- deliberations;
- preliminary recommendations; or

- any other confidential information obtained through their participation.

Confidentiality obligations continue after an individual's membership of the Panel has ended.

9.11 Escalation of Concerns

Where the Grant Advisory Panel identifies significant concerns relating to an application, including matters affecting research integrity, ethics, governance or applicant eligibility, the Chair may seek additional information or independent advice before finalising a recommendation.

Where appropriate, consideration of an application may be deferred pending clarification.

10. Trustee Approval and Award Decisions

10.1 Trustee Approval

Following completion of the expert review process and deliberation by the Grant Advisory Panel, the Panel's funding recommendations shall be submitted to the Board of Trustees for approval.

The Board of Trustees is responsible for ensuring that funding decisions are made in accordance with Eczema UK's charitable objectives, governance framework and legal obligations.

In considering funding recommendations, the Board shall satisfy itself that:

- the expert review process has been conducted in accordance with this Policy;
- conflicts of interest have been appropriately identified and managed;
- funding recommendations are supported by independent expert assessment;
- appropriate governance procedures have been followed; and
- sufficient funding is available within the approved research funding budget.

The Board may seek clarification regarding the process or recommendations before reaching a decision where necessary.

10.2 Role of the Board of Trustees

The Board of Trustees is responsible for approving research awards. The Board shall not re-score applications, alter the scientific ranking determined through expert review or substitute its scientific judgement for that of the Grant Advisory Panel.

Where the Board does not approve a funding recommendation, the reasons must relate to its legal, fiduciary, governance, financial or charitable responsibilities and shall be recorded.

Trustees rely upon the independent scientific advice provided through the expert review process and the recommendations of the Grant Advisory Panel.

The Board's role is to provide strategic oversight and assurance that:

- research funding decisions are consistent with Eczema UK's charitable objectives;
- charitable funds are invested responsibly;
- appropriate governance standards have been maintained;
- decisions have been reached fairly and transparently; and
- the integrity and independence of the funding process have been protected.

10.3 Funding Decisions

Following consideration of the Grant Advisory Panel's recommendations, the Board of Trustees may:

- approve an application for funding;
- approve funding subject to specified conditions;
- place an application on a reserve list, where applicable;
- defer a decision pending clarification or additional information; or
- decline an application.

Any conditions attached to an award shall be communicated to the applicant as part of the Award Letter.

10.4 Conditions of Award

Where funding is approved subject to conditions, applicants may be required to address specified matters before an Award Letter is issued or before funding is released.

Conditions may include, but are not limited to:

- revision of the project budget;
- clarification of project methodology;
- amendment of Patient and Public Involvement and Engagement (PPiE) plans;

- confirmation of ethical or regulatory approvals;
- completion of contractual documentation; or
- any other requirement considered necessary to support the successful delivery of the Award.

Eczema UK reserves the right to withdraw an offer of funding where specified conditions are not satisfactorily addressed within the required timeframe.

10.5 Acceptance of an Award

Successful applicants shall be required to formally accept the Award in accordance with the Award Letter and Eczema UK Research Funding Terms and Conditions.

Acceptance of an Award constitutes agreement to comply with:

- the Award Letter;
- the Research Funding Terms and Conditions;
- the approved application and budget;
- any Special Conditions of Award; and
- all applicable Eczema UK research governance policies.

Research activity funded by Eczema UK should not normally commence until all required approvals, contractual arrangements and conditions of award have been satisfied.

10.6 Transparency and Publication

Eczema UK will publish information explaining its research strategy, research funding opportunities, assessment criteria, expert review process and Grant Advisory Panel governance. The names of Grant Advisory Panel members involved in research funding decision-making will be published in accordance with AMRC requirements.

Eczema UK will publish appropriate information about the research it funds and, where practicable, information about funding-round outcomes, while protecting confidential application information and the identity of external expert reviewers.