

BHF independent expert review guidelines

Independent expert review is the foundation of [how funding decisions](#) are made at the BHF. Whilst we support a wide range of funding schemes, the basic principles of good expert review remain constant. This means that although each funding scheme may have its own specific criteria (see [respective funding scheme pages](#) and review forms), the following guidelines should be applied in the assessment of all funding applications to the BHF.

Additionally, we have made a [commitment](#) to support and uphold the principles set out by the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment ([DORA](#)), which are reflected in these guidelines. The [DORA practical guide for research evaluators](#) may also be useful in considering these principles in your review.

These guidelines are designed to assist external expert reviewers maintain the high standards of independent expert review expected and to help applicants understand how their proposals are assessed.

Conduct in expert review

BHF is committed to ensuring that peer review is fair, objective, constructive and conducted to the highest standards of integrity. We ask reviewers to assess applications on their scientific merit, potential impact and value for money, while recognising and mitigating potential sources of bias. Reviews should be evidence-based, respectful and proportionate, providing clear rationale for critiques and recommendations. This guidance outlines the standards of conduct and expectations that apply to all individuals involved in peer review.

Transparency - Expert reviewers should be explicit in their written reviews about the criteria that they have applied and the concerns that have arisen in their evaluations. It is particularly important that concerns that are reflected in given scores are clearly articulated in the non-confidential comments (See *Scoring applications*).

Please note that reviews are, at least in part, anonymously fed back to the applicant(s) and considered by Committee members who are not necessarily specialists within the field. Therefore, the language used should be clear and jargon-free.

Conflicts of interest - Expert reviewers should be impartial and assess applications based on their merits. Potential conflicts of interest that could threaten reviewer impartiality should be immediately declared to the BHF research team who will advise further. Please review our [Conflicts of interest policy](#) for more information.

Impartial assessment – Expert reviewers are expected to provide an independent and impartial assessment of the application based solely on its scientific quality, feasibility and potential impact. We encourage all expert reviewers to be aware of the potential influence of unintended biases on assessment and decision-making (see [Rethinking Research Assessment: Unintended Cognitive and Systems Biases](#), DORA). To support fair, objective, and evidence-based peer review, reviewers should:

- Base assessments and recommendations on the evidence presented within the application and the relevant review criteria.
- Approach decisions thoughtfully and deliberately, recognising that taking time to reflect can help reduce the influence of unconscious bias.
- Critically consider the rationale underpinning their judgements and recommendations.
- Reflect on any personal assumptions or biases that may influence their evaluation.
- Be mindful of cultural stereotypes, perceptions, or preconceptions, and take appropriate steps to ensure these do not affect their assessment.

Confidentiality – All application materials and associated information must be treated as strictly confidential. Reviewers must not disclose application content to any individual or organisation, or upload, share, or enter such content into any artificial intelligence (AI) tool or service (see *Use of AI Tools*).

Use of AI tools - Expert reviewers must not input confidential information from funding applications into generative AI tools to develop their reviews. Maintaining security and confidentiality in our review process is essential for safeguarding the exchange of scientific opinions and evaluations and the release of confidential material into generative AI tools breaches this. Please see [Funders joint statement: use of generative AI tools in funding applications and assessment](#) for more information.

BHF research policies

When assessing applications to BHF, it would also be useful to be aware of our latest policies in research and research assessment:

Diversity in research design – As a responsible research funder, we are committed to supporting research that reflects the diversity of the populations it aims to benefit. We therefore expect that, wherever possible, the research we fund is designed to be representative and inclusive. For example, research involving animals should not be single sex (unless there is a strong scientific justification), and research involving human participants should aim for a sex/gender distribution which reflects the prevalence of the condition being studied. See [Diversity in research design](#) for more information.

Animals in research – BHF will support research involving animals only where there is a clear scientific justification and no suitable alternative (see [BHF Animals in research](#)). Applications proposing the use of animals must provide a robust and appropriately detailed experimental plan, including a strong justification of the proposed work, relevant preliminary data, and appropriate statistical analyses. Applicants are also expected to demonstrate how the principles of the 3Rs (Replacement, Reduction and Refinement) have been incorporated into the study design. We recommend applicants use the [NC3R's Experimental Design Assistant](#) when designing their animal research experiments. Please refer to the [NC3Rs ARRIVE guidelines](#) and [Responsibility in the use of animals in bioscience research](#) for further guidance or webpage for more information.

Appropriate use of metrics - As a core principle of DORA, applicants are requested not to mention journal impact factors in their applications. Where publications are listed in applications, Expert reviewers are instructed not to use journal-based metrics to assess a

researcher's career history or to make funding decisions. Published research achievements should be judged on their own merits rather than on the basis of the journal in which they have been published.

Consideration of all research outputs – Expert reviewers are advised to consider the value and impact of all research outputs (including, but not limited to – publications, datasets, influence in policy, inventions, preprints, software, contribution to clinical guidelines, and protected IP). Qualitative indicators of research impact, such as influence on policy and practice, should also be considered.

Open research - Open research promotes transparency and accessibility through open access publication of research findings and, where appropriate, sharing of the underlying research data. BHF encourages researchers to adopt open data practices but does not mandate data sharing. All publications generated from BHF-funded research, however, are expected to be made openly accessible (see [BHF Open Access policy](#)).

Scoring applications

BHF external expert reviewers are asked to score applications to support robust and evidence-based funding decisions, enabling funding committees to incorporate a broader range of perspectives and assessment criteria into their deliberations. This approach also enhances the transparency and consistency of decision-making, helping to ensure a uniformly high standard of funded research across all BHF schemes.

Please note that BHF fellowship schemes include a separate assessment of the candidate, using different scoring criteria. Further information is provided in the review form, which is available on the relevant scheme webpage.

Score	Definition
6	The application is exceptional. It very strongly meets all the assessment criteria to the highest standard. Priority recommendation for an award.
5	The application is excellent. It meets all the assessment criteria, but with some minor weaknesses or limitations. Recommendation for an award.
4	The application is good. It meets the assessment criteria well, but with some clear weaknesses or limitations. Potentially a recommendation for an award.
3	The application is weak. It meets the assessment criteria, but with significant weaknesses or limitations. Unlikely to recommend an award.
2	The application is unsatisfactory. It does not meet one or more of the assessment criteria. Recommend reject.
1	The application is unsatisfactory. It does not meet any of the assessment criteria. Recommend reject.

AMRC principles of expert review

As a member of the Association of Medical Research Charities (AMRC), the BHF upholds the [AMRC principles of expert review](#). These include:

- **Proportionality** – our review processes are tailored to individual funding schemes and initiatives; see individual [funding scheme](#) webpages for information on how funding decisions are made across our funding schemes.
- **Independence** – BHF funding committee members and expert reviewers are independent of administrative staff and trustees. We have an open [Expression of Interest call](#) for prospective independent expert reviewers and funding committee members.
- **Diversity** – BHF funding committee members have a diverse range of scientific expertise, across scientific disciplines, cardiovascular conditions and the discovery/ translational/clinical spectrum. Our Clinical Studies Committee also has representation from an [independent Patient Advisory Group](#). For information related to the age, disability status, ethnicity and gender our funding committee members, see [Our research funding diversity data report](#).
- **Rotation** – BHF funding committee members serve for a maximum of three to four years before stepping down.
- **Impartiality** – BHF funding committee members are subject to our [conflict of interest policy](#) and are required to complete an annual Declaration of Interest form.
- **Transparency** – details of the [six main BHF funding committees](#) and information on how we make funding decisions across individual [funding schemes](#) are available online.