Project Grants scheme-specific peer review guidelines

The following sections describe the specific processes, timelines and expectations that apply to the peer review of the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) Project Grants applications.

These scheme-specific Peer Review Guidelines (the Guidelines) complement and must be read in conjunction with the following supporting documents:

- the Guide to NHMRC Peer Review 2017, which outlines the overarching principles and obligations under which the NHMRC peer review process operates;
- the NHMRC Funding Rules 2017, incorporating the Project Grant scheme-specific funding rules for funding commencing in 2018, which set out the rules, objectives and other considerations relevant to NHMRC funding;
- the NHMRC Advice and Instructions to Applicants 2017, incorporating the Project Grant scheme-specific advice and instructions to applicants, which provide guidance to assist researchers and Administering Institutions with preparing and submitting applications; and
- the NHMRC Funding Agreement, which sets out the terms and conditions of funding between the NHMRC and Administering Institutions.

It is recommended that you read the Guide to NHMRC Peer Review 2017, before reading these Guidelines.

1. Overview of the Peer Review process

A flowchart of the Peer Review Process is provided at Attachment A.

Note: The following dates are indicative and subject to change.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Date/Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2017 Project Grants round closes</td>
<td>15 March 2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assigners Academy begins process of identifying External Assessors</td>
<td>Late March 2017</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Grant Review Panel (GRP) members declare Conflicts of Interest against applications and nominate Spokesperson preferences | 27 March to 4 April 2017: Week 1-3 panels  
  26 April to 4 May 2017: Week 4-6 panels                               |
| Allocation of applications to panels                                  | Late April 2017                                 |
| Applications allocated to Primary (1SP) and Secondary (2SP) Spokespersons | Late April 2017                                 |
| External Assessor reports due                                        | 2 June 2017: Week 1-3 panels  
  23 June 2017: Week 4-6 panels                                       |
| 1SP and 2SPs complete assessment reports and submit preliminary scores against assessment criteria | 2 June 2017: Week 1-3 panels  
  23 June 2017: Week 4-6 panels                                       |
| Spokespersons and External Assessors reports provided to applicants (Assessor Report) | 5-16 June 2017: Week 1-3 panels  
  26 June to 4 July 2017: Week 4-6 panels                             |
| Applicants submit Applicant Response ("rebuttal")                    | 15-26 June 2017: Week 1-3 panels  
  6-14 July 2017: Week 4-6 panels                                     |
| 1SP and 2SP revise scores against assessment criteria taking into account Applicant Response and Assessor comments | 19-30 June 2017: Week 1-3 panels  
  10-21 July 2017: Week 4-6 panels                                     |
| GRP members consider Not For Further Consideration (NFFC) list and may "rescue" one application | 7-13 July 2017: Week 1-3 panels  
  28 July to 3 August 2017: Week 4-6 panels                           |
| GRP members prepare for GRP meeting                                  | July 2017                                       |
| GRP meets to review all non-NFFC applications                         | Late July to Early September 2017               |
| Applications recommended for funding are provided to NHMRC’s Research Committee, NHMRC Council and the Minister for Health for approval | Late September - December 2017                  |

2. Key changes to the peer review process

Assessors who have previously participated in NHMRC peer review should note the following key changes to the peer review of Project Grants applications:

- Assignment of applications to panels (subsection 4.1.3).
- The 2017 NHMRC Project Grants Category Descriptors (Attachment B).
- Project Grants Assessments – Do’s and Don’t’s (Attachment C).
- The Guidance for Assessors to Assess Applications Against Indigenous Research Excellence Criteria (see Attachment E).
- The 2017 NHMRC Project Grants Category Descriptors & Assessment Criteria for Health Research Involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples (see Attachment F).
3. Roles and responsibilities

The roles and responsibilities of those participating in the Project Grants scheme peer review process are identified in the Project Grants Peer Review Participants table below. These take precedence over the general descriptions in section 6 of the NHMRC Guide to Peer Review 2017.

More information on the duties and responsibilities of GRP members is provided in the NHMRC GRP Induction video available on the NHMRC website.

### Project Grants Peer Review Participants Table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Responsibilities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assigners Academy</td>
<td>The NHMRC Assigners Academy consists of researchers with extensive knowledge of relevant Australian and international health and medical research and with a reputation for integrity. The NHMRC Assigners Academy will support the peer review process by:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Identifying and advising NHMRC of all real or potential CoIs they have with applications to be reviewed by their GRP.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Providing advice to NHMRC on panel membership and assignment of applications to GRPs where necessary.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Sourcing up to two External Assessors for each of the approximately 25 - 35 applications they are allocated. In undertaking this task, Assigners Academy members may consult other experts in the field including international experts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- The decision on which assessor/s to nominate rests with the Assigners Academy member.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Members with Indigenous health expertise will be responsible for confirming that Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander health research applications have at least 20% of their research effort or capacity building related to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Members with clinical trials and cohort study expertise will be responsible for confirming that clinical trial or cohort study is the predominating methodology and focus for applications identifying these disciplines.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Members with Indigenous health or Clinical Trials expertise will not be responsible for securing External Assessors. Only discipline based Assigners Academy members will be responsible for securing up to two External Assessors with expertise relevant to the application’s scientific area.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indigenous Health Research</td>
<td>Applications deemed to relate to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research will be considered by an Indigenous Health Research Grant Review Panel (IGRP) and suitable External Assessors with appropriate discipline based expertise.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grant Review Panel (IGRP)</td>
<td>NHMRC will endeavor to ensure Indigenous researchers constitute at least 50 per cent of the IGRP’s membership. Advice on the IGRP membership will be sought from the Assigners Academy and the relevant NHMRC Indigenous advisory committee. The IGRP may be supported by additional independent scientific advisors to inform its assessment of applications.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Consistent with all GRPs, the IGRP will assess applications against the 2017 Project Grants Category Descriptors. The IGRP will also review the relative strength of each application in terms of how well it addresses NHMRC’s Indigenous Research Excellence Criteria (see Section 6.3 of the NHMRC Funding Rules 2017). Refer to The 2017 NHMRC Project Grants Category Descriptors &amp; Assessment Criteria for Health Research Involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples (Attachment F).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External Assessors</td>
<td>NHMRC endeavours to obtain two written assessments from External Assessors for each application. An External Assessor:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- is considered to be an independent reviewer for the application</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- can be a national or international researcher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- is chosen on the basis of their expertise in their field of research to complement the application in question but do not necessarily have expertise to cover the entire application</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- can be an Assigners Academy member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- must identify and advise NHMRC of all real or potential Conflict of Interests (CoIs) they may have with any aspect of the application prior to undertaking the assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- will provide written assessments focusing on the key strengths and weaknesses against each of the three assessment criteria including appropriate queries which will then be made available to applicants for response</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Application Budget Guidelines (see Attachment G).*

*Additional Guidance for Assessors to Assess the Project Grants Assessment Criteria (see Attachment H).*
will provide comment on the budget, where appropriate.

Panel Chairs

The Chair’s role is to ensure NHMRC’s procedures are adhered to and that a fair and equitable consideration is given to every application being reviewed at the GRP meeting. Chairs are independent of the review of research proposals, and must manage the process of peer review in accordance with these Guidelines. Chairs will:

Prior to the GRP meeting:

- familiarise themselves with documentation relevant to the funding scheme
- identify and advise NHMRC of all real or potential CoIs they have with applications to be reviewed by their GRP
- familiarise themselves with all the applications being considered by the GRP.

During panel meetings:

- ask members to declare any associations between panel members
- ensure that Observers are fully aware of the names and affiliations of the Chief Investigators (CIs) of applications under discussion and Observers leave the room where a high CoI exists
- keep discussions on time and focused
- ensure NHMRC procedures are followed
- assist members with their duties and understanding what is expected of them
- take appropriate action for each declared CoI
- promote good engagement by Spokespersons and GRP members in all discussions
- ensure that all members consider career disruptions and ‘relative to opportunity’ when discussing applications
- ensure the discussion leads to an outcome where the applications are scored against the Category Descriptors appropriately (using the seven point scale – see Attachment B)
- ensure GRP members are satisfied with score outcomes and appropriately manage any uncertainty
- ensure that GRP members declare a reason/s for voting two or more away from the Primary Spokesperson (1SP) score in any of the three assessment criteria
- facilitate the GRP’s discussion of budgets where required
- assist the panel to resolve budget discussions
- ensure that discussions are consistent for all applications
- ensure panel members are satisfied with each day’s deliberations
- ensure applications to be considered for the Marshall and Warren Award meet the aims of the award
- through RGMS e-scoring, endorse comments of the review and scoring of applications record and notify NHMRC of any requests for clarification or advice.

Assistant Chairs

Assistant Chairs will:

Prior to the GRP meeting:

- familiarise themselves with documentation relevant to the funding scheme
- identify and advise NHMRC of all real or perceived CoIs they may have with applications to be reviewed by their panel.

During panel meetings:

- note GRP discussions and support the Chairperson to ensure that NHMRC procedures are adhered to.

Panel Members

GRP members will:

Prior to the GRP meeting:

- familiarise themselves with documentation relevant to the funding scheme
- identify and advise NHMRC of all real or potential CoIs they have with applications on their panel
- read all documentation including the Assessors Report and the Applicant Responses for each application assigned to the GRP
- provide a fair, impartial and scientific assessment against the assessment criteria, using the category descriptors
- confirm the inclusion of applications on the NFFC list and ‘rescue’ up to one application that warrants discussion at the
GRP if they deem it appropriate.

**During panel meetings:**
- score each application reviewed by the panel using RGMS e-scoring
- prepare for and participate in the panel discussion for each application including budget discussion, where applicable.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary Spokesperson (1SP)</th>
<th><strong>Prior to the GRP meeting:</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>review the allocated applications against the assessment criteria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>assess any claims for Career Disruption according to requirements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>if required, advise NHMRC if an application allocated to the IGRP does not relate to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>score the applications using the category descriptors as a guide and prepare a Spokesperson report in Research Grant Management System (RGMS) for rebuttal by the applicant within the prescribed timeframe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>review the Assessor Reports for inappropriate or biased comments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>following consideration of the Assessors Report and Applicant Response, re-score the application in RGMS within the prescribed timeframes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>prepare speaking notes for the GRP for each application assigned as 1SP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>rigorously assess the proposed budget to ensure that Personal Support Packages (PSPs), Direct Research Costs (DRCs) and equipment requests are appropriate for the project and fully justified</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>prepare a recommendation for the GRP to either: leave the requested budget intact, propose modifying the budget, or seek advice from the panel regarding specific budget requests.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**At the GRP meeting:**
- provide detailed advice to the panel of any applications that have claimed a career disruption
- lead the discussion using prepared notes and contribute to the budget discussion
- provide final scores for allocated applications based on discussions
- rigorously assess the proposed budget to ensure that PSPs, DRCs and equipment requests are appropriate for the project and fully justified.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Secondary Spokesperson (2SP)</th>
<th><strong>Prior to the GRP meeting:</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>review the allocated applications against the assessment criteria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>assess any claims for Career Disruption according to requirements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>score the applications using the category descriptors as a guide and prepare a Spokesperson report in RGMS for rebuttal by the applicant within the prescribed timeframe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>review the Assessor Reports for inappropriate or biased comments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>following consideration of the Assessors Report and Applicant Response, re-score the application in RGMS within the prescribed timeframes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>prepare speaking notes for each application assigned to them as 2SP focusing on the Assessors Report and Applicant Response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>rigorously assess the proposed budget to ensure that Personal Support Packages (PSPs), Direct Research Costs (DRCs) and equipment requests are appropriate for the project and fully justified</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>prepare a recommendation for the GRP to either: leave the requested budget intact, propose modifying the budget, or seek advice from the panel regarding specific budget requests.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**At the GRP meeting:**
- add to the 1SP comments and discussion with reference to prepared notes
- ensure that External Assessor(s) comments, specifically the strengths and weaknesses raised, are presented to the GRP
- ensure that the Applicant Response is presented
- provide final scores for allocated applications based on discussions
- be prepared to assist the 1SP in discussion on the appropriateness or otherwise, of the requested budget with reference to the individual elements of the budget ensuring PSPs, DRCs and equipment requests are appropriate for the project and...
fully justified

› present a recommendation for the GRP to either: leave the requested budget intact, propose modifying the budget, or seek advice from the panel regarding specific budget.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Office of NHMRC - Research Scientists</th>
<th>NHMRC staff with extensive research expertise will be involved in:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>› establishing the membership of the GRPs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>› allocating applications to panels and spokespersons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>› assisting and advising on the GRP process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>› chairing or assistant chairing some GRPs.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Office of NHMRC - Secretariat</th>
<th>Prior to the GRP meeting:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>› act as the first point of contact for GRP members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>› approach potential GRP members, on advice from NHMRC Research Scientists and the Assigners Academy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>› provide administrative support and advice to the Chair, Assistant Chair and GRP members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>› prepare the list of NFFC applications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>› prepare the order in which applications will be reviewed during the GRP meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>› notify NHMRC Scientific Staff of any requests for clarification or advice.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At the GRP meeting:

› operate RGMS e-scoring processes
› advise the Chair if GRP process points have been overlooked
› as applicable, record budget adjustments on recommendation from the panel
› record outcomes of GRP recommendations
› flag applications for Marshall and Warren award discussion, including the final recommendation, and manage the COI process for the nominations.

Community Observers

NHMRC invites respected members of the general community to sit in on the GRP meetings to observe that NHMRC policy and procedures are being adhered to. The Observers assist NHMRC in ensuring that the assessment of all applications is fair, equitable and impartial.

Observers will be briefed on GRP procedures prior to the GRP meeting. They will not participate in the discussion of any application, and will be identified by their name tags.

At the GRP meeting:

› identify and advise the Panel Chair of all real or potential conflicts they have with applications on their GRP
› monitor the procedural aspects of the GRPs
› provide feedback to NHMRC on the consistency of procedures across all GRPs.

Observers may raise issues of a general nature with NHMRC Research Scientists who may communicate these issues to Chairs at the Chair’s Meetings.

Observers are subject to the same CoI requirements as the GRP panelists. Where a high CoI exists, the Observer will leave the room.

4. Peer Review process

The NHMRC peer review process is designed to provide a rigorous, fair, transparent and consistent assessment of the merits of each application according to the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research to ensure that only the highest quality, value for money research is recommended for funding (see section 11.2 of the NHMRC Funding Rules 2017).

All applications, including those for NHMRC New Investigator, Cancer Council and Cancer Australia funding, are assessed against the Assessment Criteria as set out in the Project Grants scheme-specific funding rules for funding commencing in 2018, using the Category Descriptors at Attachment B. Applications that are accepted to relate to the improvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health are also assessed against the Indigenous Research Excellence Criteria (set out in section 6.3 of the NHMRC Funding Rules) – refer to Attachment F.
Applications are assessed relative to opportunity, taking into consideration any career disruptions (see section 6.2 of the NHMRC Funding Rules 2017).

An overview of the Project Grants peer review process can be found in section 1 and Attachment A. Further detail about each step is provided below.

### 4.1 Before the GRP Meeting

#### 4.1.1 Establishment of the Grant Review Panel

GRPs are established to review all Project Grant applications. The number of GRPs formed will depend on the total number and type of applications received. Each GRP will be led by a Chair with support from an Assistant Chair. Both will be independent and will not participate in the assessment or scoring of applications. Each panel is supported by a dedicated NHMRC Secretariat who will support the GRP operations.

The number of members on each GRP will vary depending on the number and type of applications received. Panel members are chosen for their expertise and experience by NHMRC Research Scientists. The Guiding Principles for GRP establishment endorsed by Research Committee (NHMRC Principles of Peer Review outlined within the Guide to NHMRC Peer Review 2017) are applied when determining each panel’s membership.

NHMRC endeavours to limit occurrences where the Chief Investigator (CI) of an application is a member of the GRP that is reviewing their application. NHMRC will endeavour to avoid instances where the GRP Chair or Assistant Chair is a CI on an application being reviewed by the panel.

Information will not be revealed to the applicant regarding which GRP their application has been allocated to or the membership of that panel.

#### 4.1.2 External Assessors

NHMRC Assigners Academy will identify and endeavor to obtain up to two External Assessors for each application assigned to them.

External Assessors provide expert advice to the GRP members on how well the applicant has addressed the assessment criteria in a specific field of research and its weaknesses, and may also focus on aspects of the application that require further clarification.

Potential External Assessors will be asked to identify any CoIs, prior to gaining access to the full application. If the nominated External Assessor has declared a low or no conflict, they will be provided access to the full application in RGMS.

External Assessors will submit their assessment in RGMS. Assessments will provide comments addressing all three assessment criteria and will use the category descriptors as a guide (see Attachment B). They may also remark on the proposed budget and include any additional comments and questions they may have for the applicant.

External Assessors should focus on the strengths and weaknesses of the application. The report should help clarify outstanding questions but not overly criticise the application, not provide scores, contain inappropriate language or comments/questions inconsistent with assessment criteria. The ‘Assessment Do’s and Don’ts’ are provided at Attachment C.

NHMRC will not preview Assessor’s comments. Assessors must ensure that their reports do not contain inappropriate or defamatory remarks see section 6.1 of the NHMRC Guide to Peer Review 2017 and Attachment C of these Guidelines.

Where Assessors believe that the proposed research has already been done by others, they may raise this in their assessment as long as they provide references so that applicants have the opportunity to respond in their applicant response.

#### 4.1.3 Assignment of Applications to Panels

Applications are allocated to a GRP primarily based on the applicant nominated ‘best fit’ peer review panel based on NHMRC guidance (see NHMRC Project Grants webpage). Allocation may also be informed by the proposed field of research, and other key words entered in RGMS.

Where the applicant has nominated a peer review area which is unlikely to provide appropriate expertise and thus optimal peer review, senior scientific staff at the NHMRC will identify a more appropriate GRP to conduct the peer review. The NHMRC Assigners Academy will endeavour to secure external assessments, where appropriate, to fill expertise gaps on a panel.

Once allocated, each application will be assigned two Spokespersons from the respective GRP who will assess it against the assessment criteria (see Attachment B).

Particular considerations apply to the assignment of applications to the Clinical Trials + Cohort Study GRP and IGRP (see below).

**Assignment of Clinical Trials + Cohort Studies Applications**

Applications containing clinical trial or cohort study components will be identified on a preliminary basis based on applicant information.

NHMRC Assigners Academy members with clinical trials and cohort study expertise, in consultation with NHMRC scientists, will determine whether the proposed research is a clinical trial or cohort study and whether the respective discipline is the predominate methodology and focus.
in the study. Guidance on research to be considered a clinical trial is outlined in section 6.2.2 of the Project Grants scheme-specific funding rules for funding commencing in 2018.

Note: A cohort study may have characteristics of a clinical trial, however the study will not have a control group.

Assignment of Applications to the IGRP

Applications indicating research relating specifically to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health will be identified on a preliminary basis by the information provided by the applicant.

NHMRC Assigners Academy members with Indigenous health expertise, in consultation with NHMRC scientific staff, will confirm that applications have at least 20% of their research effort and/or capacity building focused on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health. Those applications deemed appropriate will be subject to NHMRC’s Indigenous Research Excellence Criteria and associated category descriptors (Attachments E and F respectively). The extent to which the application fulfils these criteria in relation to research into the health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, including documentation and other relevant written evidence where appropriate, will be considered by the IGRP and suitable External Assessors with appropriate expertise.

Note: NHMRC may, where necessary, require a Primary Spokesperson on the IGRP to confirm whether an application has at least 20% of the research effort and/or capacity building focused on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health.

An overview of the IGRP peer review process can be found at Attachment D of these guidelines. Additional guidance for Assessors to assess the criteria for Health and Medical Research of Indigenous Australians can be found at Attachment E.

Applicants will be provided with an opportunity to respond to the assessment against The Indigenous Research Excellence Criteria (Attachment E) in their Applicant Response.

4.1.4 Identification of GRP member conflicts

Panel Members will be provided access (via RGMS) to the Snapshot Summary Report of each relevant application and will be asked to declare any CoIs. Members will only be given access to the full application if they have a low or no Col. For information on what constitutes a Col see section 4.3.2 A Guide to NHMRC Peer Review 2017.

Members are asked to notify the GRP Secretariat immediately if a CoI is identified later in the process. It is important that all CoIs are declared early. CoIs that are not declared until late in the assessment process or GRP meeting can cause delays.

Panel members are required to review and confirm all NHMRC Col rulings in advance of the panels meeting.

4.1.5 Allocation of Spokesperson

While declaring their CoIs, panel members will indicate their suitability to act as a Spokesperson on applications based on their expertise. NHMRC Scientific Staff, with guidance from the Assigners Academy where necessary, will allocate Spokespersons to each application based on the indicated suitability and declared CoIs of each panel member. Panel members will be notified of their allocations accordingly.

When indicating expertise, it would be expected that GRP members have at least a moderate or high level of expertise for the majority of applications allocated to the panel. Members should only indicate no expertise in cases where they feel strongly that they do not have any expertise to assess the application. In the event that there is insufficient expertise on a panel, every effort will be made to secure additional expertise.

4.1.6 GRP Members Access Applications

All panel members will be provided with access to the full application where there is a no or low CoI. When accessing the full application, panel members should re-check whether they have a CoI not previously evident.

GRP members who become aware of any previously undeclared CoI should contact the NHMRC secretariat immediately. The panel member will be required to delete or destroy any files in their possession pertaining to applications with which they have declared a late high CoI.

4.1.7 Preparation of Spokespersons reports and initial scores

The 1SP and 2SP prepare a Spokesperson report that will be provided to the applicant as part of the Assessors’ Report. The Spokesperson report should discuss the key strengths and weaknesses of the application (see Attachment C for further guidance) and include questions on those aspects of the application that require clarification, including the appropriateness of the requested budget. For guidance on NHMRC Budget Guidelines refer to Attachment G. To ensure impartiality and independence of assessments the Spokespersons must not enter into dialogue, nor will they have access to External Assessor reports when preparing their report.

NHMRC will not preview assessors’ comments. Assessors must ensure that their reports do not contain inappropriate or defamatory remarks. Further guidance on what may be considered inappropriate remarks can be found at Section 4.1.2 and additional guidance on assessment ‘do’s and don’ts is provided at Attachment C.
At this point, the 1SP and 2SP will also provide initial scores in RGMS against each assessment criterion using the seven-point scale (Attachment B). Further guidance on how to assess applications against each assessment criterion, can be found at Attachment H.

### 4.1.8 Release of Assessor Reports

The Spokesperson and External Assessor’s reports will be collated into the Assessors’ Report and made available to applicants through RGMS. The Assessors’ Report will be released to applicants within one of two timeframes (see Section 1). NHMRC endeavours to release Assessor reports when at least one external assessor and both Spokespersons have submitted their reports. Assessor reports may not be released within the anticipated published timeframes if the reports have not been submitted.

Note: The comments provided in the Assessors’ Report are not an indication of the final outcome of the application.

### 4.1.9 Applicant Response

The Assessors’ Report will be provided to applicants in one of two release periods (see section 1).

Instructions on the required format of Applicant Response and the date that it is due will be provided with the release of the Assessors’ Report.

The response should address the questions raised and is not an opportunity to modify the proposed research plan.

Applicants will be allowed up to 10 days, inclusive of weekends and public holidays, in which to submit their Applicant Response.

The provision of the Assessors Report to applicants is dependent upon the timely provision and availability of reports from the Spokespersons and ExternalAssessors and therefore may occur outside of the indicative time periods. Where significant delays occur, applicants will be notified.

### 4.1.10 Spokesperson reassessment of applications

Once the Applicant Responses have been received, the 1SP and 2SP for each application will consider the research proposal in conjunction with the Assessors’ Report and Applicant Response. The 1SP and 2SP will then be asked to review their initial scores and may rescore the application in RGMS against each of the three assessment criteria.

### 4.1.11 Removing Less Competitive Applications - Not For Further Consideration (NFFC)

The Not for Further Consideration (NFFC) process aims to identify and remove applications that are assessed as being less competitive than others on the panel. Since less than 20% of applications are expected to be funded in 2018, the bottom 50% of applications on each GRP will be included on the NFFC list. The Spokespersons’ scores, following review of the Assessors’ Report and Applicant response, will determine the ranked list for each panel.

The bottom 50% of applications from each list will form a preliminary NFFC list and will be provided to respective panel members before the GRP meeting. Each panel member has the opportunity to rescue one application from the NFFC list if they strongly feel that an application warrants full review at the GRP meeting. Once the NFFC list has been finalised, the GRP secretariat will release a running order for the GRP meeting. Applications not appearing on the NFFC list will proceed to full review.

**Exclusion criteria**

An application will be excluded from NFFC for the following reasons:

- NHMRC has not received a score and an assessment report from both the 1SP and 2SP and an assessment report from at least one external assessor.
- Overall scores from the Spokespersons are two or more points away from each other and the notional score of either 1SP or 2SP ordinarily would have placed the application in the top 50% of ranked applications.
- It pertains to the NHMRC New Investigator or Cancer Australia Young Investigator category and is assessed as a notional category 5 or above.
- If a late CoI is declared by the 1SP or 2SP for an application on the NFFC list, a new Spokesperson will be assigned to the application, and the application will be removed from the NFFC list and will be reviewed in detail by the panel. The scores from the conflicted Spokesperson/s will be discarded.

### 4.2 Grant Review Panel Meeting

Each GRP will meet for up to five days (depending on the number of applications per panel) to review each application allocated to the panel. GRP meetings will commence on a Monday. An induction session will be held via online ‘GRP videos’ in the weeks prior to the GRP meeting, providing panel members with information on their duties and responsibilities.

*Declaration of inter-relationships (suggested time limit – 30 minutes)*
When members (including the Chair, Assistant Chair and Secretariat) meet face-to-face for the first time, each panel member will be invited to briefly describe their expertise and previous peer review experience. During their introductions, members will be asked to declare any relationships with other panel members including:

- current and previous collaborations
- former student/teacher/mentoring relationships
- common employment/institutional relationships
- other relationships that may, or be seen to, impair fair and impartial assessment.

A quorum of more than 50% of panel members must be involved for an application to be reviewed and scored by a GRP. NHMRC will endeavour to identify, prior to GRP meetings, those applications that do not have a quorum and obtain a suitably qualified member from another panel meeting in the same week to participate in panel discussion and to score that application.

GRP review of applications will be conducted as follows:

4.2.1 Chair to announce the application - (suggested time limit – 2 minutes)

The Chair will announce the application to be discussed including the title, institution and the Chief Investigators (CIs).

The Chair will identify any members who have previously identified a CoI with the application. Those members with a high CoI will be asked to leave the room.

The Chair will then invite members to declare any late CoIs with the application. If a member declares a new CoI, or wishes to discuss any concerns related to an existing CoI, the matter will be discussed with the panel. It is up to the remaining panel members to determine if the new interest constitutes a high CoI and if the declaring panel member should leave the room. The details of the late CoI will be recorded by the NHMRC. As this decision making can take extra time, it is important that all CoIs are declared and decided upon well in advance of the meeting, where possible.

If a CoI is declared at the GRP meeting by a 1SP or 2SP, which prevents them from participating in the assessment of the application, a new 1SP or 2SP will be assigned to the application and the scores from the initial Spokesperson will be discarded. Discussion of the application will be moved to later in the week, where possible, to give the new Spokesperson/s time to prepare.

Once highly conflicted members have left the room (those with a low CoI remain in the panel room), the Chair will announce the category of funding the application relates to (e.g. NHMRC, NHMRC New Investigator and/or Cancer Australia) and if there were any career disruptions claimed. The Chair will then identify the Spokespersons and External Assessors and announce the Spokesperson scores for each of the three assessment criteria.

4.2.2 1SP to comment on the application - (suggested time limit – 8 minutes)

The 1SP will:

- outline the nature of any career disruption/s (where applicable)
- discuss the application’s strengths and weaknesses against the three assessment criteria
- ensure that relevant considerations (e.g. Research Track Record relevant to opportunity and career disruptions etc.) are highlighted
- not make reference to the budget at this stage.

4.2.3 2SP to comment on the application - (suggested time limit – 6 minutes)

The 2SP will:

- present the External Assessors’ views
- present the Applicant Response
- briefly highlight their agreement/disagreement with the 1SP and External Assessors’ comments
- not make reference to the budget at this stage.

4.2.4 Full panel discussion – (suggested time limit – 5 minutes)

The Chair will open discussion to the panel. GRP members have an opportunity to ask questions of both Spokespersons discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the application and ensure that relevant considerations are taken into account.

The Chair must ensure adequate review of the application occurs, that all members get a fair opportunity to comment and no member exerts undue influence over others.

4.2.5 Scoring by members – (suggested time limit – 3 minutes)
Following the panel’s discussion, the Chair will ask the Spokespersons to confirm their three criterion scores noting that these may change as a result of the panel discussion.

The Chair will then ask if any GRP member intends to score two or more away from any of the 1SP’s three criterion scores. If so, the GRP member must declare this to the GRP and provide a brief justification.

All GRP members in the room, excluding the Chair and Assistant Chair, must independently score the application through RGMS E-scoring. All scoring GRP members will provide scores against the three assessment criteria using the seven-point scale as reference. At the completion of scoring, the GRP secretariat will announce the following results to the GRP:

1. **Rating** - The rating will be determined by including each voting member’s score for each of the assessment criteria. The rating, as calculated arithmetically to three decimal places, will take account of the weighting of each criterion.

2. **Category** - this will be deemed, based on the calculated rating, as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating range</th>
<th>Deemed category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.001 - 1.500</td>
<td>deemed as Category 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.501 - 2.500</td>
<td>deemed as Category 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.501 - 3.500</td>
<td>deemed as Category 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.501 - 4.500</td>
<td>deemed as Category 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.501 - 5.500</td>
<td>deemed as Category 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.501 - 6.500</td>
<td>deemed as Category 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.501 - 7.000</td>
<td>deemed as Category 7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Where members have concerns regarding the final score, the Chair should invite further discussion. If the panel collectively determines that reassessment is warranted, members will be invited to independently re-score for that application. Panel members should not aim to achieve a consensus score, nor take into consideration the potential overall ranking or funding outcome of an application.

### 4.2.6 Discussion of proposed budget – (suggested time limit – 5 minutes)

Budget discussions should not commence until the NHMRC Secretariat has announced the rating and category. Applications with a score of 5.001 or greater (top half of Category 5) will trigger a discussion of the proposed budget.

Exceptions include:

- New Investigator and Electromagnetic Energy applications – will have budget discussions at Category 5 (score of 4.501 – 5.5) and above.
- Applications on the IGRP – applications will have a budget discussion with a score of 4.001 and above (top half of Category 4).

The Chair will facilitate the budget discussion to ensure applications are considered fairly and equitably. The 1SP must be prepared to discuss the proposed budget and comment on the appropriateness of the outlined costs and provide recommendations, if any. Other panel members may also provide relevant comments. Where the GRP deems that the proposed budget is in excess of that required to accomplish the research objectives, appropriate reductions may be recommended and reasons recorded by the Assistant Chair.

NHMRC will record budget recommendations as agreed by the panel. NHMRC will quality assurance check the budget recommendations to ensure the budgets have been recorded correctly.

NHMRC scientific staff may amend the budget recommended by the GRP for any application if deemed necessary.

**Clinical Trials (CT) applications**

In the case of CT applications the GRP may, where appropriate, recommend NHMRC fund a proportion of the proposed budget with the expectation that the applicant will secure the remaining funds from other sources. NHMRC may require applicants to obtain co-funding as a prerequisite for NHMRC support.

### 4.2.7 Reconciliation and further review of applications

At the end of each day’s deliberations, a reconciliation of applications reviewed will take place. This process gives GRP members an opportunity to raise any concerns regarding applications that have been reviewed throughout the day.

Where a GRP member believes an application may have been reviewed in an inconsistent manner, they should raise the matter with the GRP
Chair. The NHMRC secretariat will ensure that members with high CoIs leave the room prior to details of the application and the circumstances of concern being outlined to the panel.

In the event that the Chair determines an application needs to be reassessed, the application will be reopened for discussion and rescored independently by the panel at the next opportunity (i.e. the following day).

The Chair may also revisit budget discussions at the end of each day to ensure consistency was achieved.

4.2.8 Marshall and Warren Award

Each year NHMRC will designate at least one highly innovative and potentially transformative Project Grant for the *Marshall and Warren Award(s)*.

Applications nominated for this award will be highly innovative therefore scoring highly on the Significance and/or Innovation criterion, but overall may not be as highly competitive as other applications.

Where more than one application is recommended within a panel, the GRP Chair and NHMRC Secretariat will request the panel to nominate only one application for the award at the end of the peer review week (the NHMRC Secretariat will manage CoIs throughout the nomination process).

The 1SP for the nominated application will then be asked to provide a 2-4 sentence justification for the nomination for Research Committee’s consideration.

4.3 Post GRP meeting

After the GRP meetings conclude the following steps occur:

1) **Linearisation of scores** - Scores are linearised to ensure that NHMRC funds the same proportion of category five applications from each GRP. This minimises any potential panel-specific bias.

The linearised score is used to determine the ultimate funding cut-off and to prepare a consolidated final list from which funding recommendations are developed.

2) **Funding recommendations** - The Office of NHMRC will review the linearised list of applications and determine which applications will be recommended for funding. Research Committee recommends those applications to be funded through NHMRC Council to the CEO who submits them for approval to the Minister with portfolio responsibility for NHMRC.

3) **Funding announcements** - Subsequent to Ministerial approval, applicants and RAOs will be advised of the outcome of applications through RGMS, which may be subject to an embargo.

4) **Preparation of Application Assessment Summary** – All non-NFFC’d applicants seeking NHMRC funding will receive numerical feedback in the form of an Application Assessment Summary, following the announcement of outcomes.

Applicants whose applications were NFFC’d will not receive Application Assessment Summaries and will instead be directed to the Assessors’ comments.

5) **Funding from other organisations** - Applications assessed by the GRP as fundable but not funded and that asked to be considered for funding by another organisation will have their application forwarded to the relevant organisation/s for their consideration and outcome notification. In the case where an application applied only for funding from external agencies (i.e. did not apply for NHMRC funding), an Application Assessment Summary, and therefore scores, will not be provided.

4.4 GRP Documentation

GRP members must retain their speaking notes and any other notes they make of the peer review process until the outcomes of the panel’s deliberations are finalised. For GRP meetings, this is following discussion of the last application and the Secretariat has confirmed all data entry is complete. After this time, notes, both hard copy and electronic, should be disposed of appropriately.

5. Attachments

- Attachment A: Overview of 2017 Project Grants Peer Review Process (PDF, 55KB)
- Attachment B: 2017 NHMRC Project Grants Category Descriptors (PDF, 54KB)
- Attachment C: Project Grants Assessments - Do’s and Don’ts (PDF, 18KB)
- Attachment D: Overview of the 2017 Peer Review Process for Indigenous Health Research Applications (PDF, 17KB)
- Attachment E: Guidance for Assessors to assess applications against the Indigenous Research Excellence Criteria (PDF, 16KB)
- Attachment F: 2017 NHMRC Project Grants Category Descriptors & Assessment Criteria for Health Research Involving Aboriginal and