

Environmental Protection Agency

An Ghníomhaireacht um Chaomhnú Comhshaoil



EPA Research Programme 2021-2030

Evaluation Process

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EPA Research Programme 2021-2030

Evaluation Process

Introduction

This document provides general guidance on the evaluation of proposals for Project-based Awards and Research Fellowships submitted under EPA Research Calls.

Please read this document carefully prior to commencing an evaluation of a research proposal.

This document does not replace, but is complementary to the:

1. EPA Research Call Technical Description Documents
2. EPA Research Programme Guidelines and Terms & Conditions

The above documents are available to download from the EPA's Online Grant Management and Application Portal or from the [Call Documents page on the EPA Website](#).

Evaluations are completed online using the EPA's Grant Management and Application portal at: <https://epa.smartsimple.ie>.

Guidance materials on using the portal can be downloaded when logged into the system, or from the [Grants Management page on the EPA website](#).

More Information

For further information or assistance please contact research@epa.ie.

Disclaimer

Although every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the material contained in this document, complete accuracy cannot be guaranteed. The Environmental Protection Agency does not accept any responsibility whatsoever for loss or damage occasioned or damages claimed to have been occasioned, in part or in full, as a consequence of any person acting, or refraining from acting, as a result of a matter contained in this document.

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Overview of the Evaluation Process

All proposals are subject to eligibility checks carried out by the EPA to ensure that they comply with the requirements of the funding call. Only eligible proposals will proceed to the evaluation process.

The purpose of the evaluation process is to ensure that all proposals are assessed in a fair and transparent manner, and that the highest quality and most suitable proposals are selected for funding.

The evaluation is a two-step process resulting in a list of proposals which have been recommended for funding and a Reserve List of proposals¹.

During the first step, proposals are assigned to evaluators and are assessed against predefined criteria. In the second step, proposals are reviewed by National Overview Committees who make recommendations to the EPA and agree on the final ranking. Details of these steps are provided below.

Funding decisions are made by the EPA Board of Directors based on the outcome of the evaluation process. The EPA reserves the right to modify the evaluation process; Applicants will be notified where relevant.

Call Documentation

Evaluators and members of the National Overview Committees should familiarise themselves with the following call documentation before reviewing proposals:

- EPA Research Call Technical Description Documents
- EPA Research Guidelines and Terms & Conditions

These are available to download from the [EPA's Online Grant Management and Application Portal](#) or the [Call Documents page on the EPA website](#).

Additionally, evaluators should refer to the following:

- The EPA Research Calls [Frequently Asked Questions webpage](#) (for details of any clarifications which have been published during the call period)
- Our short video explaining [Unconscious Bias in Decision Making](#).

¹ Proposals on the Reserve List may be advanced should the Negotiation Process fail to progress on the higher-rated proposals, or if additional budget becomes available.

Evaluation Step 1 – Remote Scientific Evaluation

Evaluator Selection and Panel Formulation

In line with international best practice, EPA assigns panels of independent international and national experts with a record of publication and/or experience and/or knowledge in relevant subject areas to act as evaluators of proposals.

International Evaluator Selection

The use of international evaluators is an integral part of the EPA decision-making process. Evaluators are selected based on the relevance of their domain expertise, experience in previous evaluation panels/committees at national and EU/international level, and/or their experience (knowledge transfer, etc.) for non-academic evaluators.

National Evaluator Selection

To ensure that proposals are relevant to the Irish context and will provide solutions to the identified knowledge gaps, national evaluators may also be included in the evaluation panels. National evaluators may comprise relevant staff from the EPA, Government Departments and other State Agencies, and are selected based on the relevance of their area of work and experience.

Evaluation Panels

For topic-specific calls, one panel of evaluators is established per call topic² to ensure consistency in the evaluation process.

For open-topic calls, one panel of evaluators is established per Thematic Hub (as outlined in [EPA Research 2030](#)³). If required, additional panels may be established depending on the scope of the proposals received.

Each panel is composed of a minimum of three evaluators, at least two of which are international evaluators.

² Different call topics do not compete against each other as a budget has been pre-allocated to each topic.

³ EPA Research 2030 is a ten-year high-level framework for the EPA's research programming (2021-2030).

Evaluator's Role and Responsibilities

Evaluators are appointed as independent experts deemed to work in a personal capacity and, in performing the work, do not represent any organisation. Evaluators are responsible for reviewing all proposals which have been assigned to them and submitting an individual evaluation form for each one.

The evaluation process is completed remotely, and no meeting with the EPA or the applicant is required. Evaluators must not communicate with applicants at any stage of the evaluation process unless requested to do so by a member of the EPA Research staff.

Evaluators must not delegate or sub-contract any aspect of the evaluation process or part thereof.

Before commencing the evaluation of a proposal, evaluators are required to:

- Confirm they have read and understood the [EPA Privacy Policy](#) and [Terms of Use of EPA Websites](#)
- Complete a declaration confirming no conflict of interest exists
- Complete a declaration of confidentiality
- Watch our short video explaining [Unconscious Bias in Decision Making](#).

Conflicts of Interest

If an evaluator is in some way connected with a proposal or has any other allegiance which impairs or threatens to impair their impartiality with respect to a proposal, they must declare such facts to the EPA as soon as they become aware of it. In case of doubt whether a conflict of interest exists, evaluators should consult with EPA.

If a potential conflict of interest arises during the evaluation process, the evaluator must inform the EPA as soon as they become aware of it and the situation will be assessed and managed appropriately.

Evaluation Criteria

Proposals are assessed using pre-defined evaluation criteria. Evaluation criteria and weightings may be revised periodically, therefore it is essential to refer to the description and marks available on the online Evaluation Form and published in the EPA Research Call documentation.

Criterion	Total Marks Available
<p>Excellence:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clarity and pertinence of the objectives • Soundness of the concept, and credibility of the proposed methodology • Relevance to the Call Technical Description • Extent that the proposed work is beyond the state of the art, and demonstrates innovation potential (e.g. ground-breaking objectives, novel concepts and approaches, new products, services or business and organisational models) • Appropriate consideration of interdisciplinary approaches and, where relevant, use of stakeholder knowledge and gender dimension in research and innovation content 	1,000
<p>Communication, Dissemination, and Knowledge Transfer to Deliver Impact:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extent to which the outputs of the project will contribute to each of the expected impacts mentioned in the call technical description. • Quality of the proposed measures to exploit and disseminate the project results (including management of IPR) and to manage research data where relevant • Communication of the project activities to different target audiences • Applicability and transferability of the results and outputs 	1,000
<p>Implementation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quality and effectiveness of the work plan, including extent to which the resources assigned to work packages are in line with their objectives and deliverables • Appropriateness of the management structures and procedures, including risk and innovation management • Relevance to the Call Technical Description • Complementarity of the participants and extent to which the consortium as a whole brings together the necessary expertise • Appropriateness of the allocation of tasks, ensuring that all participants have a valid role and adequate resources in the project to fulfil that role 	1,000
TOTAL:	3,000

Rating System

The ratings available for each evaluation criterion are as follows:

Rating	Percentage Score (marks assigned)	Description
Fail	0% (0)	The proposal fails to address the criterion or cannot be assessed due to missing or incomplete information.
Poor	20% (200)	The criterion is inadequately addressed, or there are serious inherent weaknesses.
Fair	40% (400)	The proposal broadly addresses the criterion, but there are significant weaknesses.
Good	60% (600)	The proposal addresses the criterion well, but a number of shortcomings are present.
Very Good	80% (800)	The proposal addresses the criterion very well, but a small number of shortcomings are present.
Excellent	100% (1000)	The proposal successfully addresses all relevant aspects of the criterion. Any shortcomings are minor.

Thresholds

To proceed to the second stage of the evaluation process, proposals must:

- Achieve a **minimum average** score of 600 in each evaluation criterion (i.e. as an average across all individual evaluations)
- Achieve a **minimum average** total score of 2,100 out of 3,000 marks (i.e. as an average of the total score across all individual evaluations)

In the case that there is an individual evaluator for a proposal whose total score is markedly lower than that of the other evaluators⁴, the thresholds above will be re-calculated excluding the scores from this evaluator. For proposals that progress to Step 2 of the Evaluation Process, note that the assessments and scores from all evaluators for that proposal will be considered by the National Overview Committees.

⁴ The criterion for assessing this will be if the total score for an individual evaluator is 800 marks or more below the median total score across all evaluators for that proposal.

Evaluator Comments

In addition to providing scores for each criterion, evaluators are required to provide comments to justify the rationale for their scoring. The online evaluation form consists of two main sections:

- Evaluation of the individual criterion
- Overall comments and recommendations

Proposals must be evaluated based on the details submitted at the time of application, and not on the potential of a proposal should certain changes be made.

Comments on Evaluation Criteria

The comments entered by evaluators under each individual criterion will inform the discussion during the National Overview Meeting, and the preparation of the Technical Queries during the Negotiation Process⁵.

The comments entered under each criterion should be specific to that criterion only, and should include:

- The proposal's strengths for the criterion
- Any areas of weakness for the criterion
- Recommendations for improvements (if any) for the criterion

Overall Comments and Recommendations

The comments entered by evaluators in this section will form the basis of the feedback provided to the applicant and will be made available to the applicant as part of the Evaluation Summary Report. The comments should be constructive and give clear reasons for the marks and, if appropriate, any recommendation for modifications to the proposal should it advance to the Negotiation Process.

The comments in this section should address all the evaluation criteria and should include:

- The proposal's overall strengths
- The proposal's overall weakness(es)
- Any recommendations for improvements

A full review of the proposed budget will be completed by the EPA Research Financial Consultants. It is not necessary for evaluators to conduct a review of the submitted budget.

⁵ The Negotiation Process is only applicable to proposals that have been recommended for funding or placed on a Reserve List following Step 2 of the Evaluation Process, and subsequently ratified by the EPA Board of Directors.

Evaluation Step 2 – National Overview

Proposals shortlisted following Step 1 of the Evaluation Process are evaluated against the following criteria:

- National Overview Criterion [assessed by the National Overview Committee]
- Past Performance Criterion [score assigned by the EPA]

Role of the National Overview Committee

For each Thematic Hub (as outlined in [EPA Research 2030](#)), the EPA will establish a National Overview Committee. The purpose of the National Overview Committees is to review the proposals shortlisted following Step 1 of the Evaluation Process, agree on the final ranking of the shortlisted proposals subject to the availability of funding and make recommendations to the EPA.

The National Overview Committees can make the following recommendations:

- The proposal is recommended for funding
- The proposal is placed on a reserve list
- The proposal is not recommended for funding

Composition of Committees

National Overview Committees comprise representatives from relevant Government Departments, State Agencies, funding agencies (including co-funders), and the EPA, as well as other relevant stakeholders (e.g., data providers or users).

In advance of the Committee meeting and prior to receiving details of the proposals for review, all members of the National Overview Committees are required to:

- Confirm they have read and understood the [EPA Privacy Policy](#) and [Terms of Use of EPA Websites](#)
- Complete a declaration confirming no conflict of interest exists
- Complete a declaration of confidentiality
- Watch our short video explaining [Unconscious Bias in Decision Making](#).

National Overview Criterion

In the context of the Call Technical Description, this criterion considers added value, expected impacts and potential for knowledge transfer of the proposed research project and how the outputs will provide evidence to inform environmental policies and considerations.

This score is agreed by the National Overview Committee using the following Rating System:

Rating	Score	Description
Fail	0	The proposal fails to address the criterion or cannot be assessed due to missing or incomplete information.
Poor	1	The criterion is inadequately addressed, or there are serious inherent weaknesses.
Fair	2	The proposal broadly addresses the criterion, but there are significant weaknesses.
Good	3	The proposal addresses the criterion well, but a number of shortcomings are present.
Very Good	4	The proposal addresses the criterion very well, but a small number of shortcomings are present.
Excellent	5	The proposal successfully addresses all relevant aspects of the criterion. Any shortcomings are minor.

Past Performance Criterion:

Grantees are required to comply with the EPA's requirements for Grantees to ensure satisfactory completion of a project. The past performance of Principal Investigators on EPA-funded research projects, including compliance with reporting requirements, is considered as part of Step 2 of the Evaluation Process.

The scoring for Past Performance is completed by the EPA using the following Scoring Matrix:

Score	Description
1.00	New Principal Investigator with no previous EPA grant awards. OR Principal Investigator who is already in receipt of EPA funding and there are no issues with the management/delivery of the project.
0.90	Principal Investigator who is already in receipt of EPA funding and there are outstanding interim/final deliverables (minor to moderate non-justified delays of less than 3 months).
0.80	Principal Investigator who is already in receipt of EPA funding and there are outstanding interim/final deliverables (significant non-justified delays of greater than 3 months) AND/OR Principal Investigator who has had a grant terminated due to no/poor performance within the last 24 months.

Final Score

The final score is calculated as follows:

$((\text{Scientific Score} / 3,000) \times 5) + (\text{National Overview Score}) \times \text{Past Performance Score}$

Example:

Scientific Score is 2,300: $(2,300/3,000) * 5 = 3.83$

National Overview score is 4: 4.00

Sub Total:	7.83
Past Performance score is 0.90:	x 0.90
Final Score:	7.05

Threshold

Only proposals with a **minimum final score of 7.00 out of 10.00** will be considered for funding.

Funding Decisions

Proposals under each call topic will be ranked by their final score. The highest scoring proposal(s) will be recommended for funding, and additional proposals may be added to a reserve list.

The EPA Board of Directors will approve the final list of proposals that are Recommended for Funding and proposals recommended to be put on a reserve list. This approval is conditional subject to the successful resolution of all technical and financial queries raised during the evaluation process⁶.

Feedback to the Applicants

All applicants will be notified in writing (via email from donotreply.epa@smartimple.ie) of the outcome of the Evaluation Process. The notification will include an Evaluation Summary Report, which contains summary comments from each member of the evaluation panel, and summary comments from the National Overview Committee.

⁶ The technical and financial queries will be addressed during the Negotiation Process.

Freedom of Information Act

The EPA may be obliged to disclose information relating to the evaluation of projects under the Freedom of Information Act 2014 and / or the European Communities (Access to Information on the Environment) Regulations 2007 to 2014. Where the evaluator submits any information to the EPA which they consider to be confidential, they must identify this information at the time it is submitted and explain why they consider the information to be confidential. The EPA will take account of the evaluators request and will endeavour to give effect to it if it considers it to be reasonable; but it cannot guarantee that it will not be obliged to disclose any such information; and the evaluator acknowledges this.

Data Protection

Personal information supplied to the EPA Research Programme will be stored in electronic and structured manual data formats e.g., hard copy folder or database, for use only in connection with this application and the administration of the EPA Research Programme and publication of results. The provisions of Data Protection Legislation shall be complied with by the EPA and the Grantees with respect to the processing of personal data.

Data Protection Legislation shall mean the Data Protection Acts 1988 to 2018 and Directive 95/46/EC, any other applicable law or regulation relating to the processing of personal data and privacy (including the E-Privacy Directive and the European Communities (Electronic Communications Networks and Services) (Privacy and Electronic Communications) Regulations 2011, as such legislation shall be amended, revised or replaced from time to time, including by operation of the EU General Data Protection Regulation (2016/679) (GDPR) (and laws implementing or supplementing the GDPR and/or the E-Privacy Regulations).

The provisions of the applicable Terms and Conditions with respect to data protection, and the terms of the EPA Privacy Policy, shall apply to the processing of personal data in connection with the EPA Research Programme.

Further Information

Any queries not covered in this document should be addressed to research@epa.ie.