

Conflicts of Interest statement and protocols

Background

The integrity of the review process that underpins the allocation of funding to research proposals is critical to the Challenge. There are two stages in the review process of proposals where there is a potential for a conflict of interest (COI) to occur. The first is at the independent review stage; the second is when the Leadership Group (LG) reviews the proposals and the independent reviewers' reports. A conflict of interest occurs when the activities of a reviewer or LG member could lead to material benefit for the person concerned, or their organisation, or could interfere with that person's fulfilment of their employment obligations. Any reference to a conflict includes real, perceived or potential conflicts of interest. The following protocols will be used to address and mitigate against conflicts of interest.

Independent reviewers

The potential for conflicts of interest to occur during the independent review process will be minimised by careful and transparent selection of reviewers. Independent reviewers will be asked to provide a written declaration of any potential conflicts of interest to the LG prior to receiving proposals or documents for review. Conflicts of interest could be either personal (the reviewer could personally gain from having the proposal funded, is a personal friend or family member) or professional (where they are a close colleague, they have worked directly with or have published with a member of the project team within the past 5 years).

If the LG determines that a conflict of interest exists, or is perceived to exist, the LG will acknowledge the conflict of interest and either: a) authorise the reviewer having a potential COI but provide a written declaration of this potential conflict as minimal or acceptable, or b) use additional or alternative reviewers as appropriate to ensure impartiality of the review process. Some potential COI may only become apparent while the review process is underway; in all cases, reviewers will be requested to provide a written declaration regarding conflicts of interest and part of their review.

Leadership Group (LG)

There is potential for conflicts of interest to occur within the LG because members will likely be involved in projects funded by the Challenge. Where evaluative processes are involved, the protocol for dealing with these include:

- All personal, professional and institutional (where the member is from an institution that will gain from the proposal being funded) conflicts of interest will be declared on a detailed Interest Register, this will be circulated and updated prior to all LG meetings that consider funding proposals.
- Where a personal or professional conflict of interest has been identified the team will be reminded of these before the discussion of the proposal begins and the LG member will be able answer questions in the meeting regarding the proposal but will not advocate for the proposal in any way. The person will not have voting rights regarding the proposal.
- Where an institutional conflict of interest is identified, the group will be reminded of these before the discussion of a proposal begins.

- If an unforeseen or undeclared conflict of interest arises during a meeting, LG members will be given the opportunity to declare so at meetings, and the above protocols then apply.
- The Challenge director has ultimate responsibility for managing any outstanding conflicts of interest or disputes appropriately.

Guidance on actions when a conflict is identified

Where during a meeting (or similar process whereby a conflict may become relevant) a conflict of interest is identified, the following is guidance on the sort of actions that may be appropriate:

- Conflict of Interest (real or potential) advised to the *Chair (or equivalent)
 - Chair then decides on course of action, e.g.:
 - » Immaterial = no effect. Acknowledgement of potential for conflict is recorded for transparency (as in all cases of conflict of interest).
 - » Direct Conflict = the persons conflict is such that it is appropriate that they leave the room and take no part in decisions or discussion around that topic.
E.g. part of a competing funding proposal.
 - » Indirect Conflict = the chair should assess the level of conflictedness.
E.g. where this is assessed as a lower level conflict the conflicted person may be allowed to stay in the room and listen, but does not get a vote.
E.g. if the person had a significant relationship with another person who was involved in a competing proposal, then this may warrant the conflicted person leaving the room.
E.g. the persons organisation is submitting competing proposals, but the person themselves is not involved in the proposal – the person may be allowed to stay in the room and listen, but does not get a vote.

* Should the conflicted person be the Chair, then the decision-making around the action to follow should pass to a non-conflicted deputy.

The above focusses on issues around the review process and in formal meetings, however there are other situations where real or perceived conflicts of interest may arise, in particular (but not limited to) around the awarding of contracts for funding (research or otherwise). In such cases the guidance above should provide a basis for avoiding/managing such conflicts