



# **Horizon Europe**

## **European Research Council (ERC)**

### **Frontier Research Grants**

## **Guide for Peer Reviewers to the Synergy Grant call 2024**



**European Research Council**  
Executive Agency

Established by the European Commission

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# **European Research Council (ERC) Frontier Research Grants Guide for Peer Reviewers**

**Applicable to the ERC Synergy Grants  
(ERC Work Programme 2024)**

**Version 3.0  
November 2023**

## IMPORTANT TO NOTE

This Guide for Peer Reviewers is based on legal documents setting the rules and conditions for the ERC frontier research grants, in particular:

- the ERC Work Programme 2024<sup>1</sup>, which defines the objectives and principles of the ERC funding as well as the main features of the ERC SyG Grant including the call deadline and the call budget. It also specifies that a three-step peer review evaluation procedure will be applied following a single submission of a full proposal, and sets the framework for budgetary implementation, and the evaluation criteria.
- the [ERC Rules of submission and evaluation under Horizon Europe](#) establishes the rules of submission of proposals and the related evaluation process, selection and award procedures relevant to the Specific Programme of [Horizon Europe](#) – the Framework programme for Research and Innovation (2021-2027).
- The Contract<sup>2</sup> or the Letter of Appointment of the [ERC Rules of submission and evaluation under Horizon Europe](#)<sup>3</sup> (in the case of Remote Referees) for ERC experts, defines the relationship between the ERCEA and the experts, and the use of personal data by the ERCEA.

This document complements and does not supersede the aforementioned documents, which are legally binding and prevail in case of any discrepancies. This guide specifies in more detail the peer review evaluation process and its inputs and outputs, and the responsibilities of the participants in the process.

The European Commission, the ERC Executive Agency or any person or body acting on their behalf cannot be held responsible for the use made of this document.

## Abbreviations

AC - [Associated Country](#)

AdG - [Advanced Grant](#)

cHI - corresponding Host Institution

CoG - [Consolidator Grant](#)

cPI - corresponding Principal Investigator

ERC - [European Research Council](#)

ERC WP - [ERC Work Programme](#)

ERC panel - ERC peer review evaluation panels

ERC NCP - [ERC National Contact Points](#)

ERCEA - [ERC Executive Agency](#)

F&T portal - [Funding & tender opportunities \(Single Electronic Data Interchange Area \(SEDIA\)\) Portal](#)

HI - Host Institution

PI - Principal Investigator

PM - Panel Member

PEV - Panel Evaluator

PIC - [Participant Identification Code](#)

SEP — [Submission and Evaluation of Proposals System](#)

SEP - [Submission and Evaluation of Proposals System](#)

StG - [Starting Grant](#)

SyG - [Synergy Grant](#)

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<sup>1</sup> European Commission Decision C(2023) 3999 of 10 July 2023 .

<sup>2</sup>The model expert contract was adopted by the European Commission Decision C(2017)1392 of 07 March 2017

<sup>3</sup> See Annex B to the [ERC Rules of submission and evaluation under Horizon Europe](#).

# CONTENTS

## ERC SYNERGY GUIDE FOR PEER REVIEWERS

<b>1. EVALUATION OF ERC SYNERGY GRANT PROPOSALS .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>1.1. PEER REVIEWERS.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>CONFLICT OF INTEREST AND CONFIDENTIALITY RULES FOR PEER REVIEWERS.....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>ROLES OF ERC PEER REVIEWERS .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>TASKS OF ERC PEER REVIEWERS IN EACH EVALUATION STEP.....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>1.2. PANEL MEETING OBSERVERS .....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>1.3. EVALUATION PROCESS .....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>ADMISSIBILITY AND ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA OF ERC PROPOSALS.....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>INITIAL PANEL CHAIRS' MEETING AND BRIEFINGS OF EXPERTS .....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>THREE EVALUATION STEPS.....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>2. INDIVIDUAL REVIEWS.....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>2.1. EVALUATION CRITERION.....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>2.2. DRAFTING OF INDIVIDUAL REVIEWS – DOs and DON'Ts .....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>3. PREPARATION AND ORGANISATION OF THE PANEL MEETINGS .....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>4. ELECTRONIC TOOLS USED IN EVALUATION .....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>ANNEX 1 – EVALUATION FORM.....</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>ANNEX 2 – CODE OF CONDUCT OF ERC REVIEWERS .....</b>	<b>21</b>

## 1. EVALUATION OF ERC SYNERGY GRANT PROPOSALS

The ERC has the mandate to implement a bottom-up, investigator-driven approach to main frontier research funding. The selection of proposals for funding by the ERCEA is a result of a panel-based, peer review evaluation with excellence as the sole criterion. The principal objective of this peer review system is to select the best science, independent of its discipline and of the particularities of the review panel structure.

The purpose of the ERC Synergy funding scheme is to enable the Synergy Grant group (a small group of two to four Principal Investigators<sup>4</sup>) and their teams to bring together complementary skills, knowledge, and resources, in order to jointly address ambitious research problems. Synergy projects should enable substantial advances at the frontiers of knowledge, stemming, for example, from the cross-fertilization of scientific fields, from new productive lines of enquiry, or new methods and techniques, including unconventional approaches and investigations at the interface between established disciplines. The transformative research funded by Synergy Grants should have the potential of becoming a benchmark on a global scale.

Principal Investigators must demonstrate the ground-breaking nature, ambition and feasibility of their scientific proposal. Principal Investigators must also demonstrate that their group can successfully bring together the scientific elements necessary to address the scope and complexity of the proposed research question.

**The peer review evaluation will therefore look for proposals that demonstrate the synergies, complementarities and added value of the group that could lead to breakthroughs which would not be possible by the individual PIs working alone.**

As is the case with any other main frontier research funded by the European Research Council research proposals are expected to be risky. It remains important, however, that the risk and how it will be managed are well thought through and explained in the proposal.

### 1.1. PEER REVIEWERS

In the ERC panel-based system high-level scientists and/or scholars assess proposals and make recommendations for funding with the assistance of external specialists called Remote Referees. The peer reviewers are guided by the [Code of Conduct for ERC Evaluators](#). Furthermore, the relationship between the ERCEA and the peer reviewers is defined by a signed expert contract for Panel Members, Panel Chairs and Panel Evaluators and by a letter of appointment for Remote Referees (see Contract and [Letter of Appointment](#)<sup>5</sup>). By signing these documents, the expert accepts the conditions regarding confidentiality and conflict of interest (see [Annex 2 to this document](#), Code of Conduct), and use of personal data by the ERCEA. The ERCEA cannot make proposals available to an expert who has not been officially contracted.

A breach of the Code of Conduct or other serious misconduct by a reviewer may be qualified as grave professional misconduct and may lead to the termination of the contract.

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<sup>4</sup> The personal data are processed in accordance with Regulation (EU) No 2018/1725.

<sup>5</sup> Annex B to the [ERC Rules of submission and evaluation under Horizon Europe](#)

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST AND CONFIDENTIALITY RULES FOR PEER REVIEWERS

Peer reviewers should not be put in a situation in which their impartiality may be questioned, or where suspicion could arise that their recommendations are affected by elements that lie outside the scope of the review. To that effect, a clear set of conflict of interest rules are in place<sup>5</sup>. Furthermore, peer reviewers should not engage in any contact with applicants and Host Institutions about the evaluation that they are participating in (neither during nor after the evaluation). Confidentiality is a contractual obligation and its breach can lead to the termination of the contract or the letter of appointment. The conflict of interest rules for Panel Members and Remote Referees are outlined in their expert contract and letter of appointment respectively.

A list of conflicts of interests (see below) will be displayed in the online evaluation system when experts are asked to review a proposal, and the experts will be asked to confirm the absence of conflict of interests when accepting to review a proposal and when submitting their individual review. Based on the information available, the Panel Chair shall avoid assigning proposals to reviewers who have a conflict of interest. Please note that it is the responsibility of the expert to declare the conflict of interest.

### List of conflicts of interests displayed in the online evaluation system:<sup>6</sup>

- I am a PI or team member in the proposal (or any other proposal submitted to the same call).
- I was involved in the preparation of the proposal (or any other proposal submitted to the same panel).
- I would benefit directly should the proposal (or any other proposal submitted to the same panel) be accepted or rejected.
- I am employed or contracted by the host or partner institutions of the proposal - or have been so in the past 3 years.
- I am involved in the management of the host or partner institutions of the proposal - or have been so in the past 3 years.
- I am collaborating scientifically - or have done so in the past 5 years - with the PI.
- I have (or have had) a mentor/mentee relationship with the PI.
- I have family ties or close personal relationship with the PI (or any PI submitting a proposal to the same panel).
- I have family ties or close personal relationship with anyone who was involved in the preparation of the proposal (or any other proposal submitted to the same panel).
- I have family ties or close personal relationship with anyone who would benefit directly from the proposal being granted (or from any other proposal submitted to the same panel being granted) or rejected.
- I am (or was) in a relationship of scientific rivalry or hostility with the PI.
- I am a National Contact Point or working for the Enterprise Europe Network (EEN).
- I am a member of an EU Programme Committee.
- I am in any other situation that would preclude the impartial review of the proposal or that could appear to do so.

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<sup>5</sup> The actions that the ERC might put in place in order to ensure the strict impartiality of evaluations are either to exclude the expert from participating in the peer review evaluation of the proposal concerned ('out of room' conflict of interest) or, if necessary, of all competing proposals ('out of call' conflict of interest), in accordance with the [Expert Code of Conduct](#) annexed to the Expert Contract and the [Letter of Appointment](#).

<sup>6</sup> Please note that the above-mentioned briefly outlined examples of the conflict of interest situations are fully described in the Code of Conduct annexed to the Experts Contract and to the Letter of Appointment for ERC Remote Referees.

## ROLES OF ERC PEER REVIEWERS

**ERC Synergy Panel(s)** - The Synergy call foresees a single submission of full proposals (Part B1 and B2), followed by a three-step evaluation, including interviews. The Step 1 panel will be formed by 5 Chairs, 6 Vice Chairs and by approximately 85 Panel Members. The 5 Step 2 panels will be composed using the Step 1 Panel Members, grouping them by around 17 experts in each panel. In Step 3, the interview panels may be reconfigured to ensure the best expertise for the proposals in a given panel. The Panel Chair and the Panel Members are selected by the ERC Scientific Council on the basis of their scientific reputation and following the criteria set up by the [ERC ScC Standing Committee on Panels](#). They have specialist as well as generalist competence and should not act as representatives of a single discipline or of a particular line of research. ERC Panels are expected to work as entities, reflecting broad visions embracing emerging fields, inter-and multi-disciplinary research.

**Panel Chairs, Panel Vice Chairs and Panel Members** make a significant commitment of their time to the ERC peer review evaluation process, working individually and as a group. Panel Chairs and Vice Chairs meet three times while Panel Members meet twice to carry out the three-steps review of proposals. The panel as a whole takes decisions on the proposals recommended for funding and it is therefore crucial for the quality of the evaluation process that Panel Members are fully available for the entire duration of all the panel meetings<sup>7</sup>. It is expected that Panel Members attend the evaluation sessions that are held on-site in person. In exceptional and justified cases such as illness, maternity or force majeure, if unable to attend in person, a Panel Member may participate remotely by electronic means (video-conferencing or telephone-conferencing), subject to the ERCEA's agreement.

The names of the Panel Chairs are publicly available before the submission deadline of the call. The names of the Panel Members are published on the ERC website after the evaluation process is concluded and the final results have been communicated to all applicants.

**Panel Evaluators (PEVs)** are Panel Members of other ERC calls and/or Panels and can be involved in all steps of the evaluation process. A high number of Panel Evaluators help the Panel Members at the step 1 remote evaluation. When involved in the step 2 remote evaluation, they have been selected by the Panel due to their close expertise to the proposal, hence they act as specialists similarly to the Remote Referees. Panel Evaluators do not participate in panel meetings. Their remote reviewing work is remunerated.

**Remote Referees** - In addition to the Panel Members (who act as generalists) and PEVs, the ERC evaluations rely on input from Remote Referees (usually two to five per proposal). They are scientists and scholars who bring in the necessary specialised expertise.

Remote Referees are non-paid experts who deliver their individual assessments by electronic means and do not participate in the panel meeting. Their involvement is limited to the step 2 of the evaluation process. Due to the specialised nature of the work, the demands on the time of individual Remote Referees are comparatively smaller (typically, they are asked to evaluate one to three proposals).

The assignment of Remote Referees to proposals is carried out under the responsibility of the Panel Chair in collaboration with the Panel Members and with the support of the ERCEA Scientific Officers. Any researcher of the international scientific community can act as a Remote Referee, subject to the approval and accreditation of the person in question and their acceptance of the conditions regarding confidentiality and conflict of interest. All the reviews will then form the basis for the panel discussions.

The names of all Remote Referees are made public once a year for all ERC calls, after the final results

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<sup>7</sup> Panel meetings may take place at ERCEA premises in Brussels or remotely, using teleconferencing IT tools.



have been communicated to all the applicants.

### TASKS OF ERC PEER REVIEWERS IN EACH EVALUATION STEP

TASKS FOR	STEP1	STEP 2	STEP 3
Remote Referee		Write Individual Assessment Reports	
Panel Evaluator	Write Individual Assessment Reports  Identify Remote Referees, who will complement in step 2 the generalist reviews of Panel Members		
Panel Member	Write Individual Assessment Reports		
	Identify Remote Referees, who will complement in step 2 the generalist reviews of Panel Members		
			Define the interview format; Prepare questions for the interview
		Participate in the step 2 and 3 panel meetings (select proposals to pass to step 3, or recommended for funding; write panel comments)	
Panel Vice Chair (note that the Panel Vice Chair takes up the tasks of Panel Chair in case of their absence)	Write Individual Assessment Reports		
	Identify Remote Referees, who will complement in Step 2 the generalist reviews of Panel Members		
			Define the interview format; Prepare questions for the interview
	Participate in all three panel meetings (select proposals to pass to step 2, then to step 3, then select those recommended for funding; write panel comments)		
Panel Chair	Participate at the Initial Panel Chairs' meeting: familiarise with the proposals and assign proposals to reviewers		
	Write Individual Assessment Reports		
	Identify and approve Remote Referees, who will complement in step 2 the generalist reviews of Panel Members		
		Form 5 panels and assign proposals to reviewers	
			Define the interview format; Prepare questions for the interview
	Participate in all three panel meetings (select proposals to pass to step 2, then to step 3, then select those recommended for funding; write panel comments)		
			Participate at the Final Panel Chairs' meeting

### **Exclusion of independent experts at the request of an applicant**

The applicant corresponding Principal Investigator can request on behalf of the group during the electronic proposal submission that up to four specific persons would not act as evaluators in the evaluation of their proposal. Such a request is made in the administrative forms at the time of proposal submission. If the persons identified for exclusion are independent experts participating in the evaluation, they may be excluded from the evaluation of the proposal as long as the ERCEA remains in the position to have the proposal evaluated by qualified experts.<sup>8</sup>

Such a request will be treated confidentially by the authorised staff of the ERCEA and the concerned Panel Chair. If the excluded expert is a member of the panel, they will be informed in confidence about the request concerning them. In the case of exclusion of the Panel Chair, the authorised staff of the ERCEA may consult the Panel Vice Chair accordingly.

## **1.2. PANEL MEETING OBSERVERS**

The **ERC Scientific Council** may delegate its Members to attend panel meetings. The role of these delegates is to monitor the evaluation process<sup>9</sup>.

In conformity with the mandate of the ERC Scientific Council to carry out the scientific governance of the ERC, and in line with the role of the ERC Scientific Council foreseen in the ERC WP, ERC Scientific Council Members will abstain from influencing the results of the peer review evaluation process.

**Independent observers** - Independent external experts may be appointed as observers to examine the peer review evaluation process from the point of view of its working and execution. The independent observers are external to the ERCEA and to the ERC Scientific Council. Their function and role is described in section 3.4 of the [ERC Rules of submission and evaluation under Horizon Europe](#).

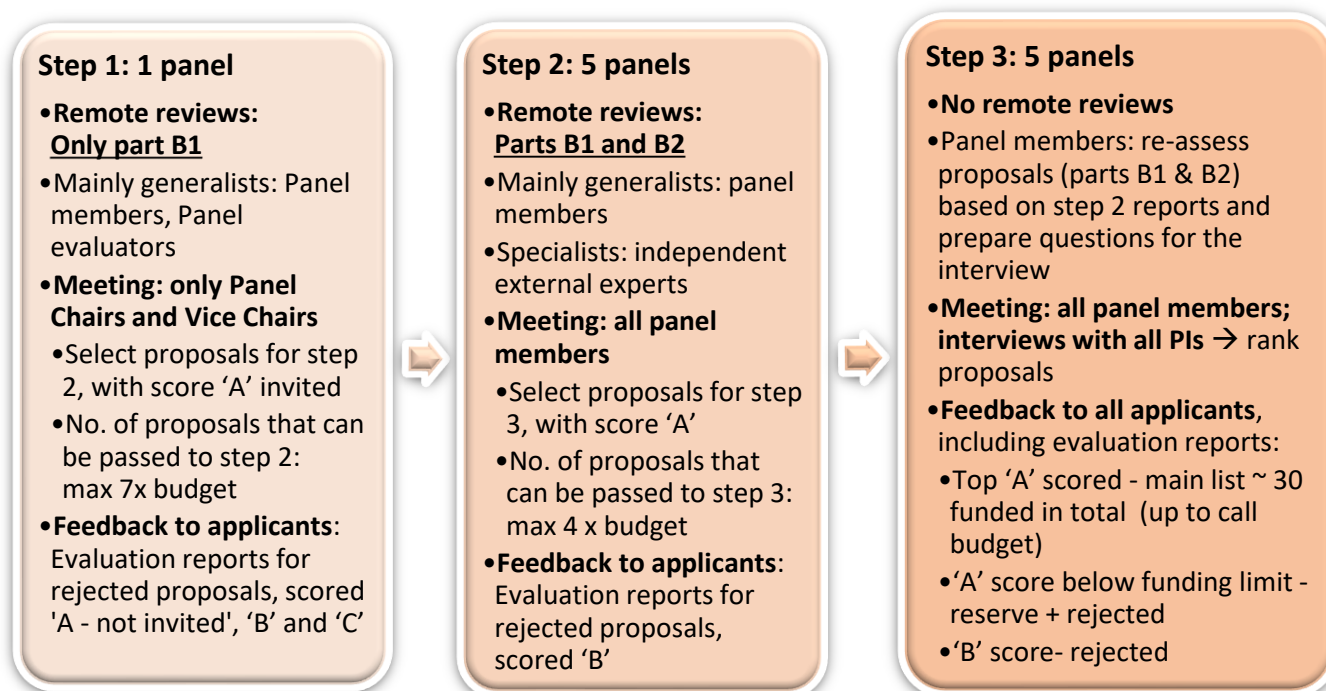
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<sup>8</sup> See section 3.3 of the [ERC Rules of submission and evaluation under Horizon Europe](#)

<sup>9</sup> [https://erc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/document/file/Rules\\_Procedure\\_and\\_Code\\_Conduct\\_ERC\\_Scientific\\_Council.pdf](https://erc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/document/file/Rules_Procedure_and_Code_Conduct_ERC_Scientific_Council.pdf)

### 1.3. EVALUATION PROCESS

The figure above shows the schematic representation of the Synergy 2024 grants evaluation process.



'Panel Evaluator' is an ERC term used for panel members of the other ERC main frontier research calls reviewing ERC SyG proposals.

### ADMISSIBILITY AND ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA OF ERC PROPOSALS

Admissibility and eligibility criteria are simple, factual and legally-binding. Their interpretation does not involve scientific judgement. Therefore the assessment of admissibility and eligibility<sup>10</sup> of submitted proposals is not part of the evaluation process and is carried out by the ERCEA. Nevertheless, if an expert considers a proposal to be potentially inadmissible or ineligible during the evaluation process, they should report the case immediately to the ERCEA's Scientific Officers. Resubmission restrictions concerning PIs and the eligibility of the HIs are checked after the submission deadline. The remaining checks are run only after the Step 1 evaluation. Thus, proposals not complying with admissibility and eligibility criteria may be declared inadmissible or ineligible during or even after the peer review evaluation process.

### INITIAL PANEL CHAIRS' MEETING AND BRIEFINGS OF EXPERTS

Soon after the call deadline and at the start of the proposals evaluation process, Panel Chairs are invited to the **Initial Panel Chairs' meeting**. They are briefed on all relevant aspects of the evaluation processes and procedures, as well as to work on tasks including the assignment of the proposals with the ERCEA's Scientific Officers. The allocation of proposals to experts is done also considering the keywords used by the applicants to best describe the field(s) of research covered by their proposals (same keywords used as for ERC StG/CoG/AdG grants). Panel Members are also briefed at the beginning of the Step 1 remote evaluation phase.

<sup>10</sup> For admissibility and eligibility criteria see p. 23 of [ERC Work Programme 2024](#)

### THREE EVALUATION STEPS

The Synergy Grant call foresees a single submission of full proposals followed by a three-step evaluation, including interviews with the applicants.

At all evaluation steps, two main elements of the proposal are evaluated: the **Research Project** and the **Principal Investigators**. The panels will primarily evaluate the ground-breaking nature, ambition, and feasibility of the research project. At the same time, the panels will evaluate the intellectual capacity, creativity, and commitment of the Principal Investigators, with a focus on the extent to which the Principal Investigators have the required scientific expertise and capacity to successfully execute the project. Each evaluation step has a remote phase preceding the Panel meeting. At the start of each Panel meeting, Panel Chairs and Panel Members are briefed by ERCEA's Scientific Officers on different aspects related to the evaluation rules and procedure<sup>11</sup>.

The deliverables of the panel meetings include the following documents:

1. Ranked list of proposals;
2. Conflict of interest taken into consideration by the panel;
3. Panel comments approved by the panel for feedback to applicants<sup>12</sup> (see paragraph below);
4. List of delivered reviews per evaluation step (only step 1 and 2);
5. List of approved Remote Referees (only at step 2);
6. Panel report;
7. Panel Recommendations: feedback from the panel to the ERC Scientific Council (at step 3);
8. Step 2 and step 3 panel compositions.

At each step, a number of proposals of reasonable or good quality will be rejected. Such proposals may typically have positive comments from individual reviewers. However, following the discussion at the meeting, they do not gather enough support from the panel when taking into account the maximum of proposals that can be passed to the next step depending on the budgetary constraints set out in the Work Programme or the maximum number of proposals that can be funded at Step 3<sup>13</sup>.

**The panel comment** is part of the 'Evaluation Report' and is a key element of the information provided to the applicant at the end of the evaluation. In addition to individual reviews, once the scores and the ranked list of the proposals are decided, Panel Members may also be asked to draft panel comments after the score and the rank of the proposal is decided. Each application is assigned to a 'Lead Reviewer' who introduces the proposal to the panel for discussion. In step 2 and 3 the Lead Reviewer is responsible for drafting the panel comment, reflecting the main points of the panel discussion. The panel comment should clearly explain the reason(s), respecting the ERC evaluation criterion, which make(s) the proposal succeed or fail in the evaluation. Panel Members should also ensure that scientific feedback made to applicants (which may or may not be taken into account) is clearly distinct from their budget recommendations to the ERCEA (which are binding).

In some cases, the panel may take a position that is different from what could be inferred from the comments/marks of the individual reviewers. For example, if the panel discussion reveals an

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<sup>11</sup> See section 3.6. 1(1) – 'Briefings of the panels' in the [ERC Rules of submission and evaluation under Horizon Europe](#)

<sup>12</sup> In accordance with section 3.8 of the [ERC Rules of submission and evaluation under Horizon Europe](#), the ERCEA will not change the content of the panel comments, except if necessary to improve readability or, exceptionally, to remove any clerical errors or inappropriate comments, provided such errors or comments do not affect the evaluation results.

<sup>13</sup> For limits on the number of proposals that can be passed at each step see p.35-36 of [ERC Work Programme 2024](#) and p.13 of this document.

important weakness in a proposal, the panel comment should document this weakness. The panel comment is a conclusive comment drafted by the 'Lead Reviewer' is agreed upon by the panel and **approved by the Panel and should clearly explain the decision adopted by the Panel.**

### The panel report

In addition to the ranked list of proposals, the panel report (prepared by the ERCEA's Scientific officers with the Panel Chair) documents the evaluation methodology followed by the panel. It may also contain, as deemed appropriate, reflections on issues such as the quality of proposals in relation to the budget. It may furthermore contain recommendations to be taken into account by the ERC in future review sessions.

### Step 1 evaluation

Proposals that fulfil the eligibility criteria<sup>14</sup> are evaluated by a single panel made of about 85 members. If needed, Panel Members of other main ERC frontier calls will provide further reviews. These experts, working for the Synergy Grant call, are called Panel Evaluators (PEVs), they do not participate in panel meetings.

During the step 1 both Panel Members and Panel Evaluators, act as generalists and review remotely **Part B1 only** (the extended synopsis together with the PIs' CVs and Track Records).

Concurrently, the reviewers are also asked to suggest additional scientists/scholars (Remote Referees) who could assess the proposals, if passed to step 2, as specialists. They are selected on the basis of their expertise for the specific proposal; any researcher from anywhere in the world can be nominated. The Panel Chairs are mandated by the Scientific Council to select independent external experts for remote evaluation on the basis of the specific expertise required by each proposal<sup>15</sup>.

At the end of the Step 1 remote phase, the SyG Panel Chairs and Vice Chairs meet in the Panel meeting and discuss all proposals to establish the panel ranking. The proposals are ranked by the panel on the basis of the comments and panel scores assigned during the meeting (A invited, A not invited B or C) and the panel's overall appreciation of their strengths and weaknesses. Each proposal receives one of the following panel scores:

**Score A invited** – the proposal is of excellent quality and ranked sufficiently high to pass to step 2 of the evaluation;

**Score A not invited** – the proposal is of excellent quality but not ranked sufficiently high<sup>16</sup> to pass to Step 2 of the evaluation;

**Score B** – the proposal is of high quality but not sufficient to pass to step 2 of the evaluation;

**Score C** – the proposal is not of sufficient quality to pass to step 2 of the evaluation.

Applicants whose proposals receive a **B** or **C** score in **step 1** of the evaluation may be subject to resubmission restrictions in future calls if specified in the applicable [ERC Work Programme](#)<sup>17</sup>.

Based on the Step 1 evaluation outcome, proposals being scored A and within the budgetary cut-off up to **seven times** the panel's indicative budget are retained for step 2.

<sup>14</sup> ERCEA carry out eligibility checks on submitted proposals - See Restrictions on submission of proposals under "Admissibility and eligibility criteria" of the [ERC WP](#).

<sup>15</sup> See footnote <sup>34</sup> of the [ERC rules of submission and evaluation under Horizon Europe](#)

<sup>16</sup> I.e. exceeds the maximum threshold of proposals that can be passed to Step 2.

<sup>17</sup> See Restrictions on submission of proposals under "Admissibility and eligibility criteria" of the [ERC WP 2024](#).

For the rejected proposals (**B** or **C** scored) short panel comments will summarize the decision of the panel. The applicants whose proposals have been rejected at step 1 receive an information letter and an Evaluation Report including the final panel score, the ranking range of their proposal among the proposals evaluated by the panel, the panel comment and the individual reviews given by each reviewer<sup>18</sup>.

Applicants whose proposals are retained for the step 2 evaluation do not receive a step 1 Evaluation Report.

At the end of step 1 Panel Meeting, with the proposals passed to the second evaluation step (**A scored**), Panel Chairs will form the five step 2 evaluation panels to ensure the best expertise for the proposals (i.e. the most appropriate Panel Members) in each given panel. The nature of the scientific field(s) covered by each panel, will depend on the nature of the proposals retained for step 2. Each panel will have around 17 Members. In addition, Panel Chairs will decide on the assignment of these proposals to experts<sup>19</sup>. ERCEA contacts the Remote Referees selected by the Panel Chairs for a more in-depth review during the step 2 remote evaluation.

### Step 2 evaluation

At step 2, Panel Members and Remote Referees remotely and individually review the complete version of the retained proposals - **Parts B1 and B2** - providing generalist and specialist reviews respectively.

After this remote evaluation phase, all Panel Members take part in the Step 2 meetings. The five panels accommodate the possibility of experts participating in discussions of different panels to ensure proper treatment of inter/multidisciplinary proposals.

The Synergy Grant call budget will be allocated to each panel in proportion to the budgetary demand of its assigned proposals. The number of proposals will be reduced during the Step 2 panel meetings such that the accumulative total value of all proposed budgets is up to **four times** the panel's indicative budget. Each proposal receives one of the following panel scores:

**Score A** – the proposal is of sufficient quality to pass to step 3 of the evaluation;

**Score B** – the proposal meets some but not all elements of the ERC's excellence criterion.

Applicants whose proposals receive a B score in step 2 of the evaluation may be subject to resubmission restrictions in future calls if specified in the applicable [ERC Work Programme](#)<sup>20</sup>.

The applications passed to step 3 (**scored A**) will not be ranked.

For the proposals not selected for step 3 (**scored B**) panel comments will be prepared. The applicants whose proposals have been rejected at step 2 receive an information letter and an Evaluation Report including the final panel score, the ranking range of their proposal among the proposals evaluated by the panel, the panel comment and the individual reviews given by each reviewer. At the end of the step 2 panel meeting, the Chairs of the Step 2 panels jointly examine all successful proposals to establish the interview format (duration; number of slides allowed, if any; time allocated to the presentation and to the questions and answers session) and to constitute the step 3 panels. The same panel configuration as in step 2 may be considered for step 3.

### Step 3 evaluation

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<sup>18</sup> These individual reviews may not necessarily be convergent - differences of opinion about the merits of a proposal are legitimate among evaluators, and it is potentially useful for an applicant to be informed of the various views.

<sup>19</sup> In rare cases when the expertise of a Panel Member is no longer suitable to evaluate any of the proposals left in evaluation, these experts may not need to further participate in the evaluation.

<sup>20</sup> See Restrictions on submission of proposals under "Admissibility and eligibility criteria" of the [ERC WP 2024](#).

The most competitive of the retained proposals are identified at this step. Principal Investigators whose proposals have been retained for step 3 of the evaluation are invited for an on-site interview to present their proposal to the evaluation panel. A minimum of three and a maximum of five panels would interview the applicants in parallel. Panel Members will be encouraged to participate in panels of variable configurations to best meet the needs of the proposal. No new written reviews are required at this stage.

At the end of the meeting, the panels establish the final panel ranking and each proposal receives one of the following panel scores:

**Score A** – the proposal fully meets the ERC's excellence criterion and is recommended for funding, if sufficient funds are available<sup>21</sup>;

**Score B** – the proposal meets some but not all elements of the ERC's excellence criterion and will not be funded.

For all proposals, the panels will draft panel comments conveying the decision and score. All applicants whose proposals have been evaluated at step 3 receive an information letter, together with an Evaluation Report including the ranking range of their proposal among the proposals evaluated by the panel, the panel score, the panel comment and the individual reviews given by each reviewer.

### **Review of the proposal budget**

At step 3, the panel analyses the budget, its justification and the requested contribution of the proposals, which are being considered for funding. Recommendations for reduction of the requested grant may be made if some expenses (excluding salary costs) are not considered fully justified or needed (the analysis is done case-by-case, cuts across-the-board are not allowed). Such recommendations must be documented and explained in the panel comments for each proposal concerned, based on an analysis of the resources requested and necessary to carry out the proposed work.

After the step 3 meetings have finished for all panels, the results from the different panels are consolidated into one call ranking list based on the 'normalised accumulated budget'<sup>22</sup>. The highest ranked **A** scored proposals are invited for grant preparation until the entire call budget is spent. The remaining proposals recommended for funding may be funded by the ERC if more funds become available.

### **The possible use of a voting system**

While consensus decisions are strongly preferred, panels may expedite their ranking process by the use of a voting system (e.g. a majority vote on one or more proposals, with each Panel Member having one vote per proposal being considered).<sup>23</sup> A Panel Chair/Member can neither be involved in a discussion nor vote for a proposal if under a conflict of interest.

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<sup>21</sup> Additional funds can become available in cases such as the failure of the granting procedure to projects, the withdrawal of proposals, budget savings agreed during the granting procedure, or the availability of additional budget from other sources.

<sup>22</sup> The recommended normalised accumulated budget (NAB) for every Panel is calculated by summing the normalised budget (recommended budget divided by panel's indicative budget) of each proposal from the top position down to the actual position of the given proposal. Thus, the NAB takes into account the position of the proposal in its panel ranking, the recommended budget of the proposal and of all proposals ranked higher in the same panel, and the indicative budget of the panel.

<sup>23</sup> There is also the possibility to use a cumulative ranking system where Panel Members contribute their individual preferred ranking of a subset of proposals under discussion. All rankings submitted by Panel Members are added up and divided by the number of Panel Members resulting in a cumulative ranking which reflects the view of the entire Panel.

## 2. INDIVIDUAL REVIEWS

### 2.1. EVALUATION CRITERION

**Scientific excellence is the sole criterion of evaluation** and is at the core of the peer review evaluation process. It will be applied to the evaluation of both the ground-breaking nature, ambition and feasibility of the Research Project, and at the same time to the intellectual capacity, creativity and commitment of the Principal Investigators, with a focus on the extent to which the Principal Investigators have the required scientific expertise and capacity to successfully execute the project.

The feasibility of the scientific approach is assessed at step 1. The detailed scientific approach (methodology, timescales and resources included) is assessed at step 2. The detailed elements applying to the excellence of the Research Project and the Principal Investigators for each step and their interpretation are described in the applicable Work Programme. In evaluating the applicants' track records, preprints properly referenced and with the DOI linked to a preprint, may also be taken into consideration. All assessments on proposals must be made against the evaluation criterion and its detailed elements alone.

In case of the ERC Synergy Grant the scientific excellence takes on an additional meaning: its intrinsic synergetic effect. Peer reviewers are asked to look at distinct features – synergy, complementarity of the Principal Investigators, collaborative working arrangements, risk – when assessing the excellence of the proposal.

No other criteria than the evaluation elements applying to the Evaluation Criterion defined in the [Work Programme](#), must be considered when evaluating a proposal. Evaluation questions are listed in [Annex 1](#).

**Please note that the incorrect application of the evaluation criterion or the application of inexistent or irrelevant criteria for the step concerned is considered a procedural error, which may justify a re-evaluation of the proposal.**

### 2.2. DRAFTING OF INDIVIDUAL REVIEWS – DOs and DON'Ts

Individual reviews are written prior to Step 1 and 2 panel meetings. The [ERC Rules of submission and evaluation under Horizon Europe](#) stipulate that each proposal shall be reviewed by at least three peer reviewers.

During the individual remote review evaluation, there shall be no discussions of the proposals between reviewers and they should not disclose the proposals assigned for their evaluation to other experts. When a Panel Member considers that they have insufficient expertise to evaluate any of the assigned proposals, they should immediately inform the ERCEA's Scientific Officers and the Panel Chair, so that the proposal can be reassigned to another reviewer.

During the individual remote review evaluation, **reviewers evaluate and mark** the proposals according to (1) Research Project and (2) Principal Investigators, addressing the questions stated in the evaluation form (see Annex 1 of this document). Reviewers need to:

- Provide explanatory comments for the **Research Project** and **award an overall numerical mark**. Marks are ranging from 5 (*Outstanding*), 4 (*Excellent*), 3 (*Very Good*), 2 (*Good*) to 1 (*Non-competitive*), with a possibility of awarding half marks.
- Provide explanatory comments for the **Principal Investigators**, indicate to which extent they agree with the statements related to the Principal Investigators (multiple choice format) and



**award an overall qualitative assessment** with the following five options: *Outstanding/Excellent/Very Good/Good/Non-competitive*. (Annex 1).

- Please note that Remote Referees award a qualitative three-option recommendation on the proposal: highly recommended, recommended, or not recommended.
- Moreover, all reviewers **in step 1** (Panel Chairs, Panel Vice Chairs, Panel Members and Panel Evaluators) are required to:
  - answer the question: ‘Do you think this proposal should be further evaluated in step 2’?
  - suggest names of scientists/scholars who could assess as specialists (Remote Referees) the proposals in step 2. These suggestions are crucial at this stage of the Synergy evaluation process.

**Individual reviews have to be submitted no later than the deadlines set by ERCEA.**

#### **Proposal mark and PIs overall qualitative assessment**

**The proposal numerical mark and overall qualitative assessment of the PIs should be consistent with the comments.** The use of the full range of marks is, in general, recommended. The proposal marks and overall qualitative assessment of the PIs are not communicated to the applicants; only the final panel score, expressed as A invited, A not invited, B or C is provided in the Evaluation Report.

#### **Quality standards of individual reviewers’ comments**

All individual reviewers’ comments are included in the Evaluation Report and as such reproduced in the feedback to applicants. Reviewers should therefore take care about the formulation of comments in their individual assessments.

**Please note that the individual reviews should be of good quality, genuine and substantial. They should also be polite. Comments should take the form of a statement and explanation of key strengths and weaknesses of the proposal, in light of the evaluation criterion.**

The ERCEA will not change the content of the reviews that form part of the panel report, except if necessary to improve readability or, exceptionally, to remove any clerical errors or inappropriate comments, provided such errors or comments do not affect the evaluation results. These individual reviews may not necessarily be convergent - differences of opinion about the merits of a proposal are legitimate among evaluators, and it is potentially useful for an applicant to be informed of the various views.

**Reviewers need to observe the following guidelines:**

#### **General guidelines:**

- Provide substantial, explanatory comments; avoid comments that merely give a description or a summary of the proposal.
- Use dispassionate, analytical and unambiguous language.
- Use grammatically correct, complete, clear sentences with no jargon.
- Ensure that critical comments are constructive.
- Make sure that comments are in line with the marks or recommendation given and avoid referring to them in the comment’s narrative.
- Avoid self-declaration of insufficient expertise (personal or panel) in the proposal.
- Avoid dismissive statements about the applicants, the proposed science, or the scientific field concerned.
- Consider the diverse research career paths of the Principal Investigators and particularly noteworthy contributions to the research community, as well as possible breaks in the research career of the applicants and the effects of major life events or pandemic

restrictions on the applicants' progression as a researcher.

- Avoid reference to the applicants' age, nationality, gender, or personal matters.
- Be aware of unconscious bias in aspects such as gender and diversity more broadly<sup>24</sup>.
- Avoid any comments on applicants' past, current or future Host Institutions, since their standing is not an ERC evaluation criterion.
- When assessing the research achievements of the applicants, focus on the scientific content and refrain from using surrogate measures of the quality of research outputs, such as Journal Impact Factors. Throughout the evaluation the qualitative judgement of the panels should be paramount and quantitative indicators should be used responsibly. Please note that the ERC Scientific Council has endorsed the DORA declaration and signed the Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment.
- Note that the funding ID serves a double purpose: (i) to help reviewers to assess the novelty of the proposed research; (ii) to allow the ERCEA to assess potential overlap during the grant preparation. The funding ID should therefore include only current grants or pending applications. The funding ID is not intended to be a complete funding record.
- Note that societal impact is not an ERC evaluation criterion.
- Avoid any direct comparison with any other proposals.
- Avoid any reference or comparison with previous assessments (in case of resubmitted proposal).
- Avoid copy-paste from the proposal and/or from individual reviews of other experts.
- Avoid comments on the ethical and security aspects of the proposal. Ethical and security clearance is performed after the scientific evaluation by the ERCEA and respective EU institutions for all fundable proposals.

#### **Resources assessment guidelines:**

- Avoid recommendations on resources at Step 1 or Step 2 evaluation (assessment of resources is done at Step 3 evaluation).
- Avoid recommendations on salaries (they depend on national and institutional rules and customs, and are eligible costs).
- Provide proper justification in case a budget cut is recommended (see assessment of proposal's budget at step 3 evaluation).

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<sup>24</sup> It has been shown that unconscious bias applies equally, regardless of whether the evaluators are male or female. Whereas possible gender biases may be rooted in the institutions or the community where the applicants may come from, a wealth of evidence points at possible introduction of unconscious biases in evaluation processes (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g978T58gELo>). Experts are requested to be vigilant and aware so such elements are not introduced in the evaluation process.

### 3. PREPARATION AND ORGANISATION OF THE PANEL MEETINGS

#### The efficiency of meetings and preparation

The ERC aims to have highly efficient panel meetings. For this reason, preparatory work is carried out in advance of each meeting by electronic means:

PRIOR TO STEP 1 MEETING	Reviewers individually and remotely review assigned proposals and recommend specialist External reviewers (Remote Referees) for the in-depth review of those proposals that they consider having a high chance to be retained for step 2.  Panel Chairs and Vice Chairs participating in the meeting familiarise themselves with the proposals.
PRIOR TO STEP 2 MEETING	Panel Members and Remote Referees individually and remotely review assigned proposals.  Panel Members participating in the meetings familiarise themselves with the proposals in their panel.
PRIOR TO STEP 3 MEETING	While no new reviews are written, Panel Members prepare for the interview meeting by identifying the proposals' strengths, weaknesses and concerns raised in step 2.  Panel Members participating in the meetings familiarise themselves with the proposals in their panel.

The prior individual preparation stage increases the efficiency of the evaluation in two ways:

1. By gathering considerations on the proposals or by creating a preliminary ranking, it allows panel discussions to focus on proposals that merit substantial discussions and an early elimination of the low-ranked proposals.
2. By gathering elements of the feedback to applicants; particularly for the low ranked proposals, the comments obtained by their individual reviewers may sufficiently capture substantial reasons for the rejection.

### 4. ELECTRONIC TOOLS USED IN EVALUATION

At all the remote evaluation steps, experts work individually using the [online Commission's Evaluation tool \(SEP\)](#). Useful information on SEP are reported below:

- **Quick Guide on SEP Evaluation tool** can be found here: [https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/docs/2021-2027/common/it-manuals/user-manual\\_sep-expert-evaluation\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/docs/2021-2027/common/it-manuals/user-manual_sep-expert-evaluation_en.pdf)
- **Detailed how-to procedures and instructional video presentations on the usage of the SEP Evaluation tool** are available on the following location under 'Expert' -> 'Evaluate a proposal': <https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/funding-tenders-opportunities/display/IT/Evaluate+a+proposal>
- **Information on EU Login** is available here: [EU Login - Online Manual - Funding Tenders Opportunities \(europa.eu\)](https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/funding-tenders-opportunities/display/IT/Evaluate+a+proposal)

## ANNEX 1 – EVALUATION FORM

### 1. Research Project

#### Ground-breaking nature, ambition and feasibility

##### **Ground-breaking nature and potential impact of the research project**

*To what extent does the proposed research address important challenges?*

*To what extent are the objectives ambitious and beyond the state of the art (e.g. novel concepts and approaches or development between or across disciplines)?*

##### **Scientific Approach**

*To what extent is the outlined scientific approach feasible bearing in mind the ground-breaking nature and ambition of the proposed research(based on the Extended Synopsis)?*

*To what extent does the proposal go beyond what the individual Principal Investigators could achieve alone (based on the Extended Synopsis)?*

*To what extent do the Principal Investigators succeed in proposing a combination of scientific approaches that are crucial to address the scope and complexity of the research questions to be tackled (based on the Extended Synopsis)?*

*To what extent are the proposed research methodology and working arrangements appropriate to achieve the goals of the project (based on the research proposal)?*

*To what extent are the proposed timescales, resources and PI commitment adequate and properly justified (based on the research proposal)?*

### 2. Principal Investigators

**Intellectual capacity and creativity** *To what extent have the PIs demonstrated the ability to conduct ground-breaking research?*

*To what extent do the PIs provide evidence of creative and original tinkering?*

*To what extent do the PIs have the required scientific expertise and capacity to successfully execute the project?*

*To what extent does the Synergy Grant Group successfully demonstrate in the proposal that it brings together the know-how – such as skills, experience, expertise, disciplines, teams – necessary to address the proposed research question (based on the Extended Synopsis)?*

## ANNEX 2 – CODE OF CONDUCT OF ERC REVIEWERS<sup>25</sup>

Code of conduct as annexed to the model expert contract under Horizon Europe.

### 1. Performing the work

- 1.1. The expert must work independently, in a personal capacity and not on behalf of any organisation.
- 1.2. The expert must:
  - (a) evaluate each proposal in a confidential and fair way, in accordance with the applicable rules and, in particular, with the ERC Rules of Submission and Evaluation<sup>26</sup>;
  - (b) perform his/her work to the best of his/her abilities, professional skills, knowledge and applying the highest ethical and moral standards;
  - (c) follow the instructions and time-schedule given by the Agency.
- 1.3. The expert may not delegate the work to another person or be replaced by another person.
- 1.4. If a person or entity involved in a proposal(s) approaches the expert before or during the evaluation, s/he must immediately inform the Agency.
- 1.5. The expert may not be (or become) involved in any of the actions resulting from the proposal(s) that s/he evaluated (at any stage of the procedure, including for two-stage calls).

### 2. Impartiality

- 2.1. The expert must perform his/her work **impartially** and take all measures to prevent any situation where the impartial and objective implementation of the work is compromised for reasons involving economic interest, political or national affinity, family or emotional ties or any other shared interest ('**conflict of interests**').

The following situations will automatically be considered as conflict of interest:

- (a) **for a proposal(s) s/he is requested to evaluate**, if s/he:
  - (i) was involved in the preparation of the proposal(s);
  - (ii) is a director, trustee or partner or is in any way involved in the management of an applicant (or linked third party or other third party involved in the action);
  - (iii) is employed or contracted by one of the applicants (or linked third parties, named subcontractors or other third parties involved in the action);
  - (iv) has close family ties (spouse, domestic or non-domestic partner, child, sibling, parent etc.) or other close personal relationship with the principal investigator of the proposal s/he is requested to evaluate as an additional reviewer from another panel (cross-panel or cross-domain proposal);
  - (v) has (or has had during the last five years) a scientific collaboration with the principal investigator of the proposal;
  - (vi) has (or has had) a relationship of scientific rivalry or professional hostility with the principal investigator of the proposal;
  - (vii) has (or has had), a mentor/mentee relationship with the principal investigator of the proposal.

In this case, the expert must be excluded from the evaluation of the proposal(s) concerned (and may not take part in any discussion or scoring of the proposal and must leave the room or the electronic forum when it is discussed ('out of the room' rule). Part(s) of an evaluation to which the expert

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<sup>25</sup> Please note that a new model Code of Conduct could be introduced in the course of 2024. Therefore, you may see changes in the text of the Conduct annexed to your new Horizon Europe expert contract - [https://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/data/ref/h2020/experts\\_manual/h2020-experts-mono-contract\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/data/ref/h2020/experts_manual/h2020-experts-mono-contract_en.pdf)

<sup>26</sup> Available at [ERC Rules of submission and evaluation under Horizon Europe](#)

already participated must be declared void. Comments and scores already given must be discounted. If necessary, the expert must be replaced and the proposal(s) concerned must be re-evaluated. However, in exceptional and duly justified cases, the responsible Agency staff may decide to nevertheless invite the expert to take part in the evaluation, if:

- the expert works in a different department/laboratory/institute from the one where the action is to be carried out and
- the departments/laboratories/institutes within the organisation concerned operate with a high degree of autonomy and
- the participation is justified by the requirement to appoint the best available experts and by the limited size of the pool of qualified experts.

In this case, the other experts in the group of evaluators will be informed about the situation of the expert.

**(b) for a proposal(s) s/he is requested to evaluate AND for all proposal(s) competing for the same call budget-split, if s/he:**

- (i) was involved in the preparation of any proposal(s) assigned to the same panel within the same call budget-split;
- (ii) would benefit if any proposal(s) assigned to the same panel within the same call budget-split is accepted or rejected;
- (iii) has close family ties (spouse, domestic or non-domestic partner, child, sibling, parent etc.) or other close personal relationship with a person (including linked third parties or other third parties) involved in the preparation of any proposal(s) assigned to the same panel within the same call budgetsplits, or with a person which would benefit if such a proposal(s) is accepted or rejected.

In this case, the expert may not evaluate any proposal in the call concerned ('out of the call' rule). Part(s) of an evaluation to which the expert already participated must be declared void. Comments and scores already given must be discounted. If necessary, the expert must be replaced and the proposal(s) concerned must be re-evaluated.

**(c) for ALL proposal(s) under the call in question, if s/he:**

- (i) is a member of an advisory group set up by the EU to advise on the preparation of work programmes or work plans in an area related to the call in question;
- (ii) is a National Contact Point (NCP) or is working for the Enterprise Europe Network (EEN);
- (iii) is a member of a programme committee;
- (iv) has submitted a proposal as a principal investigator or a team member, under the same call;
- (v) has close family ties (spouse, domestic or non-domestic partner, child, sibling, parent etc.) or other close personal relationship with the principal investigator of any proposal submitted to his/her panel.

In this case, the expert may not evaluate any proposal in the call concerned ('out of the call' rule). Part(s) of an evaluation to which the expert already participated must be declared void. Comments and scores already given must be discounted. If necessary, the expert must be replaced and the proposal(s) concerned must be re-evaluated.

The following situations **may be** considered as **conflict of interest** if the responsible Agency staff so decides (in consultation with the ERC Scientific Council) , in view of the objective circumstances, the available information and the potential risks:

- (a) employment of the expert by one of the applicants (or linked third parties or other third parties involved in the action) in the last three years;
- (b) involvement of the expert in a contract, grant, prize or membership of management structures (e.g. member of management or advisory board etc.) or research collaboration with an applicant, linked third party or other third party involved in the action in the last three years;
- (c) any other situation that could cast doubt on his/her ability to participate in the evaluation impartially, or that could reasonably appear to do so in the eyes of an outside third party.

In this case, the responsible Agency staff may decide (in consultation with the ERC Scientific Council) to exclude the expert from the evaluation (and on the scope, i.e. only for the proposal(s) concerned or also for competing proposal(s) or the entire call) and, if necessary, to replace him/her and organise a re-evaluation.

- 2.2. The expert will be required to confirm — for each proposal(s) s/he is evaluating — that there is no conflict of interest, by signing a declaration in the Funding & Tenders Portal electronic exchange system (see Article 21).

If the expert is (or becomes) aware of a conflict of interest, s/he must immediately inform the responsible Agency staff and stop working until further instructions.

- 2.3. If the expert breaches any of his/her obligations under Points 2.1 and 2.2, the Agency may apply the measures set out in Chapter 5, and in particular terminate the Contract (see Article 17).

### **3. CONFIDENTIALITY**

- 3.1. During implementation of the Contract and for five years after the date of the last payment, the expert must keep confidential all data, documents or other material (in any form) that is disclosed (in writing or orally) and that concerns the work under the Contract ('confidential information').

Unless otherwise agreed with the responsible Agency staff, s/he may use confidential information only to implement the Contract.

The expert must keep his/her work under the Contract strictly confidential, and in particular:

- a) not disclose (directly or indirectly) any confidential information relating to proposal(s) or applicants, without prior written approval by Agency;
- b) not discuss proposal(s) with others (including other experts or Agency staff that are not directly involved in the evaluation of the proposal(s)), except during evaluation meetings and with prior approval by the responsible Agency staff;
- c) not disclose:
  - details on the evaluation process or its outcome, without prior written approval by Agency;
  - details on his/her position/advice;
  - the names of other experts participating in the evaluation.
- (d) not communicate with applicants (including linked third parties or other third parties involved in the actions) nor with the principal investigators or potential team members or persons linked to them during the evaluation or afterwards — except in panel hearings, interviews or on-site visits.

If the Agency makes documents or information available electronically for remote work, the

expert is responsible for ensuring adequate protection and for returning, erasing or destroying all confidential information after the end of the evaluation (if so instructed).

If the expert works on Agency premises, the expert:

- (a) may not remove from the premises any documents, material or information on the proposal(s) or on the evaluation;
- (b) is responsible for ensuring adequate protection of electronic documents and information and for returning, erasing or destroying all confidential information after the end of the evaluation (if so instructed).

If the expert uses outside sources (for example internet, specialised databases, third party expertise etc.) for his/her evaluation, s/he:

- (a) must respect the general rules for using such sources;
- (b) may not contact third parties, without prior written approval by the Agency.

The confidentiality obligations no longer apply if:

- the Agency agrees to release the expert from the confidentiality obligations;
- the confidential information becomes public through other channels;
- disclosure of the confidential information is required by law.

- 3.2. If the expert breaches any of his/her obligations under Point 3.1, the Agency may apply the measures set out in Chapter 5.