

How do funders decide what grants to fund?

Project grants

There are a number of criteria that funding boards use when they are deciding whether to fund a project over and above the scientific rigour of the project methods. These are summarised below:

Need: How important is your research question to the NHS and/or to meeting social care needs? How much difference will your research make? When writing your grant application, it is important to convey the scope and scale of the problem you describe and how well your study or intervention will address this. Try to use both relative numbers (e.g. percentages) and absolute numbers (i.e. X number in the current population) to describe the extent of the issue at hand. Clearly articulate the link between this issue and the reason why you are undertaking the study or delivering the specific intervention you are proposing. Is there a gap in the literature? What do your Patient and Public Involvement group think to the proposal? One of the most common reasons why grant applications are unsuccessful is that research teams often fail to spell out what will happen in any intervention involved and what context the intervention will be delivered in.

Value for Money: This factor relates to the relative merit of your application compared to other applications that have been submitted (and for 'Researcher-Led' applications, these are commonly not in the same subject area as your own, so you also have to 'sell' the importance of your area of research). Is your study novel or does it address an under-researched area? What are your total costs? For example, it is not unusual for a randomised controlled trial to cost between £1M and £2M, but a feasibility study or pilot would only be a quarter of this cost. Try to take a step-back and compare your costs with the duration of the study. A two-year interview or observational study costing £650,000 is quite expensive, whilst a five-year trial costing £1M may well be criticised for being under-resourced. Are the Chief Investigator (CI) and co-applicants costed appropriately? You'd normally expect a CI to be spending at least a half a day or one full day a week on the study (depending on its complexity). Allocating less than 5% WTE for co-applicants raises questions about their contribution to the study. How many Directly Incurred staff (e.g. Research

Officers or Research Assistants) have you costed in and do these and the non-staff cost budget make sense in the context of what you are proposing to do? You should also highlight any costs that you are meeting yourself or through other sources.

Feasibility and risk to delivery: This factor relates to whether there is anything that could go wrong in your study. Does your study rely on a crucial element outside of the research team's control e.g. access to data, data-linkage or recruitment and retention of participants? Do different work streams rely on each other (e.g. does the failure of one work stream lead to the failure of others in a 'domino effect')? You should ideally be aiming for interdependence with independence across your work streams. In smaller projects, does the research team and host organisation have the capacity to undertake the work? For instance, if one team member leaves could the project still continue?

Pathway to impact: This factor relates to the 'so what' question. Not only is this factor concerned with the difference that your research will make, but the pathway to impact i.e. how your research findings are implemented. Should your results be positive, will there be an immediate difference to practice or policy? Or, are the findings reliant on other factors to facilitate change? Funders spend large amounts of money funding research and increasingly they want to see that this makes a difference within a specified timeframe. How does this relate to your policy landscape? How well are you connected to key stakeholders to influence change? Planning a role for Patient Public Involvement throughout the life of the project will be an important contribution towards ensuring the research has impact.

Fellowships

Fellowships are similar to project grants, but there is an important additional element – you! In addition to the criteria highlighted above, Fellowship panels are also interested in the following:

- The applicant's previous research experience.
- Evidence of the applicant's potential and on-going commitment to a research career.

- The suitability of the proposed training programme and supervisor or supervisory team
- The suitability of the proposed academic host institutional.

These can be summarised by the three 'P's: Person, Programme and Place.