

# Horizon Europe European Research Council (ERC) Frontier Research Grants

# Guide for Peer Reviewers to the Synergy Grant call 2026



Established by the European Commission

Version 5.0 October 2025

Version	Publication Date	Description	
<u>1.0</u>	28.10.2021	Guide for Peer Reviewers to the ERC Synergy Grant 2022 call	
2.0	15.11.2021	Guide for Peer Reviewers to the ERC Synergy Grant 2023 call	
3.0	15.11.2023	Guide for Peer Reviewers to the ERC Synergy Grant 2024 call	
4.0	25.11.2024	Guide for Peer Reviewers to the ERC Synergy Grant 2025 call	
5.0	30.10.2025	Guide for Peer Reviewers to the ERC Synergy Grant 2026 call	



## **European Research Council**

**Executive Agency** 

Established by the European Commission



# European Research Council (ERC) Frontier Research Grants

## **Guide for Peer Reviewers**

Applicable to the ERC Synergy Grants (ERC Work Programme 2026)

Version 5.0 October 2025

#### **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 2026<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 criterion.
- ➤ the <u>ERC Rules of submission and evaluation under Horizon Europe</u> establishes the rules of submission of proposals and the related evaluation process, selection and award procedures relevant to the Specific Programme of <u>Horizon Europe</u> the Framework programme for Research and Innovation (2021-2027).
- the Contract<sup>2</sup> or the Letter of Appointment<sup>3</sup> for ERC experts and ERC Remote Referees respectively, which 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 - <u>Associated Country</u>

AdG - Advanced Grant

cHI - corresponding Host Institution

**CoG** - Consolidator Grant

**cPI** - corresponding Principal Investigator

**ERC** - <u>European Research Council</u>

**ERC WP** - <u>ERC Work Programme</u>

**ERC panel** - ERC peer review evaluation panels

**ERC NCP** - <u>ERC National Contact Points</u>

**ERCEA** - <u>ERC Executive Agency</u>

F&T portal - EU Funding & Tenders Portal

HI - Host Institution

PI - Principal Investigator

PM - Panel Member

**PEV** - Panel Evaluator

PIC - Participant Identification Code

**SEP** - <u>Submission and Evaluation of Proposals System</u>

 $\textbf{SO} - \underline{\textbf{ERCEA}} \text{ Scientific Officer (ERCEA staff)}$ 

**StG** - <u>Starting Grant</u>

SyG - Synergy Grant

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> European Commission C(2025)500 of 8 July 2025.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Version 1.2 as published on the F&T Portal:

https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/docs/2021-2027/experts/model-contract en.pdf

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> ERC Rules of submission and evaluation under Horizon Europe (p. 27)

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#### 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) 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 and ambition 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 relationship between the ERCEA and the peer reviewers is governed by a signed Expert Contract for Panel Members, Panel Chairs and Panel Evaluators (PEVs) and by a Letter of Appointment for Remote Referees (see the <u>Model Contract</u> for Experts and the <u>Letter of Appointment</u> for ERC Remote Referees, respectively). By signing these documents, the reviewer accepts the conditions regarding confidentiality and conflict of interest (see points 2. IMPARTIALITY and 3. CONFIDENTIALITY of Expert Code of Conduct, <u>Annex 2 to this document</u>), and use of personal data by the ERCEA. The ERCEA cannot make proposals available to a reviewer who has not been officially contracted/appointed.

A breach of the Expert Code of Conduct<sup>4</sup> or other serious misconduct by a reviewer may be qualified as grave professional misconduct and may lead to the termination of the Contract appointment.

#### 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. Furthermore, peer reviewers should not engage in any contact with applicants or beneficiaries (affiliated entities or other third parties involved in the proposals/actions or team members

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Expert Code of Conduct

or persons linked to them) about the evaluation that they are participating in (neither during nor after the evaluation). 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>5</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 should the proposal (or any other proposal submitted to the same panel) be accepted or rejected.
- I am employed or contracted by one of the entities involved in the proposal (applicant, affiliated entity, named subcontractor or other participant involved in the proposal) or have been so in the past 3 years.
- I am a director, trustee or partner or involved in the management of any entity involved in the proposal (applicant, affiliated entity or other participant involved in 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.

#### **ROLES OF ERC PEER REVIEWERS**

**ERC Synergy Panel(s)** - The Synergy call foresees a single submission of full proposals (Part B1, B2 and Budget table annex to part B2), followed by a three-step evaluation, including interviews. The Step 1 panels will be formed from approximately 110 panel members and chairs. For Step 2, panels will be composed using the Step 1 Panel Members, Vice Chairs and Chairs grouping them into panels of comparable size. 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

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Please note that the above-mentioned briefly outlined examples of the conflict of interest situations are fully described in the <u>Code of Conduct</u> annexed to the <u>Experts Contract</u> (p. 32) and to the <u>Letter of Appointment for ERC Remote Referees</u> (p. 27), including the actions that the ERCEA might put in place in order to ensure the strict impartiality of evaluations.

scientific reputation and following the criteria set up by the <u>ERC ScC Standing Committee on Panels</u>. They have specialist and generalist competence and should not act as representatives of a single discipline or of a particular line of research, which should reflect openness to inter- and multi-disciplinary research perspectives, as well as by actively participating in the Panel meetings. 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. Depending on how many Step 2 or Step 3 panels are formed some of the Vice Chairs may take up the role of a Chair at the end of the Step 1 evaluation. 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>6</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 around the submission deadline of the call. The names of Vice Chairs and Panel Members will be published after the call deadline and before Step 1 evaluation, provided that their consent for this publication has been obtained. In addition, the names of all Panel Members will be 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. However, they may raise questions that the panels could ask the applicants during the interview. 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 have been communicated to all the applicants.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Panel meetings usually take place at ERCEA premises in Brussels, in exceptcional cases remotely, using teleconferencing IT tools.

#### 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				
	Write Individual Assessment Reports				
	Identify Remote Referees, who w generalist reviews of Panel Memb				
Panel Member			Prepare questions for the interview		
		Participate in the Step 2 and 3 pan to pass to Step 3, or recommended comments)			
	Write Individual Assessment Repo	orts			
Panel Vice Chair	Identify Remote Referees, who w generalist reviews of Panel Memb	· · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · ·			
(Panel Vice Chair takes up the tasks of Panel Chair in case of need)			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 Initial Panel Chairs' meeting: familiarise with the proposals and assign proposals to reviewers				
	Write Individual Assessment Repo	orts			
	Identify and approve Remote Referees, who will complement in Step 2 the generalist reviews of Panel Members				
Panel Chair		Form 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 peer reviewers 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>7</sup>

Such a request will be treated confidentially by the authorised ERCEA staff 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 also delegate its members to be present during the panel meetings as observers. The role of these delegates is to monitor the evaluation process and ensure and promote coherence between panels.

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 <u>ERC Rules of submission and evaluation under Horizon Europe</u>.

#### 1.3. EVALUATION PROCESS

#### Step 1: 1 panel

- •Remote reviews: Only part B1
- Mainly generalists: Panel members, Panel evaluators
- Meeting: only Panel Chairs and Vice Chairs
- Select proposals for Step2, with score 'A' invited
- •No. of proposals that can be passed to Step 2: max 7x budget
- Feedback to applicants: Evaluation reports for rejected proposals scored 'A - not invited', 'B' and 'C'

#### Step 2: panels

- •Remote reviews:

  <u>Parts B1, B2 and Budget</u>

  <u>table annex</u>
- Mainly generalists: panel members
- •Specialists: independent external experts
- Meeting: all panel members
- Select proposals for Step 3, with score 'A'
- •No. of proposals that can be passed to Step 3: max 3 x budget
- Feedback to applicants: Evaluation reports for rejected proposals scored 'B'

#### Step 3: panels

- No remote reviews
- Panel members: re-assess proposals (parts B1 & B2) based on Step 2 reports and prepare questions for the interview
- Meeting: all panel members; interviews with all PIs → rank proposals
- •Feedback to all applicants, including evaluation reports:
- •Top 'A' scored main list ~ 48 funded in total (up to call budget)
- •'A' score below funding limit reserve + rejected
- 'B' score- rejected

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> See section 3.3 of the <u>ERC Rules of submission and evaluation under Horizon Europe</u>

#### ADMISSIBILITY AND ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA OF ERC PROPOSALS

Admissibility and eligibility criteria are legally-binding. Their interpretation does not involve scientific judgement. Therefore the assessment of admissibility and eligibility<sup>8</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 and HI eligibility are verified by the ERCEA prior to the completion of Step 1 evaluation. 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 Chairs and Panel Members are also briefed at the beginning of the Step 1 remote evaluation phase.

#### A THREE-STEPS EVALUATION

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 and ambition of the research project. At the same time, the panels will evaluate the intellectual capacity and creativity 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 where individual reviewers work independently (see Section 2 – Individual Reviews) and deliver the reviews for each proposal assigned to them. The remote evaluation phase is performed through an online evaluation system, SEP Evaluation (see Section 3 – Electronic tools used in evaluation).

After the remote phase, the panel meetings are organised. 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>9</sup>. During these meetings, Panel Members discuss, score and rank the proposals assigned to the panel. <sup>10</sup> Each proposal is assigned to a Lead Reviewer (see Annex 2 – Role of the ERC Peer Reviewers), who introduces the proposal to the panel for discussion and is responsible for drafting the panel comment. <sup>11</sup> The panels assess, score, and rank the proposals based on the individual reviews received and on the panel's discussion. At Step 3, the assessment by the panels will also take into account the interview with the applicant.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> See section 1.4 on Admissibility and eligibility criteria of the <u>ERC Work Programme 2026</u>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> See section 3.6. 1(1) – 'Briefings of the panels' in the ERC Rules of submission and evaluation under Horizon Europe

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> A not invited and C score proposals in Step 1 as well as B score proposals in Step 2 are not ranked within their category, applicants for those scores will receive a rank range of the entire category. Step 1 Bs are ranked with 10% intervals within the B category, which the applicants receive in their Evaluation Report.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Proposals that receive a numerical mark of 3.5 or lower from all reviewers, do not need to be discussed unless the panel explicitly decides otherwise. An applicant whose proposal is not of sufficient quality to pass to Step 2 of the evaluation and is scored C at Step 1 will receive an Evaluation Report with a standard panel comment and individual reviews.

The deliverables of the panel meetings include the following documents:

#### 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.

#### Annexes:

- 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 details 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 Recommendations: feedback from the panel to the ERC Scientific Council (at Step 3);

Besides the final rank list, the crucial output of the panel meetings is the feedback to applicants. The **Evaluation report** of each evaluated proposal contains:

- 1. the recommendation of the panel and the ranking range;
- 2. the panel comment;
- 3. the individual reviews for this proposal (see Section 2).

Once the scores and the ranked list of the proposals are decided, Lead Reviewers draft panel comments for A not invited and B scored proposals at Step 2 and for all proposals at Step 3, reflecting the main points of the panel discussion, and the panel agrees upon and approves their final version. The panel comment details the decision taken by the panel based on the individual reviews, the panel discussion on the proposal and, at Step 3, the interview with the applicants. 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 the scientific feedback to applicants (which may or may not be taken into account) is clearly distinct from their budget recommendations to the ERCEA (which are binding).

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>. In such cases, the panel comment may reflect this aspect.

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 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.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> In accordance with section 3.8 of the <u>ERC Rules of submission and evaluation under Horizon Europe</u>, 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>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> For limits on the number of proposals that can be passed at each step see p.35-36 of <u>ERC Work Programme 2026</u> and p. 13-14 of this document.

#### Step 1 evaluation

Proposals that fulfil the eligibility criteria<sup>14</sup> are evaluated by a single panel made of about 110 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 Step 1, both Panel Members and Panel Evaluators, act as generalists and review remotely Part B1 only (Part I of the scientific proposal together with the PIs' CVs and Track Records). Part I of the Scientific Proposal should present the envisaged research and should lay out the current state of knowledge, explain the scientific question and the objectives of the project, and present the overall approach or research strategy to reach the goals of the project.

It forms the basis for the panel's decision whether to evaluate the proposal in the next step. Therefore, all essential information must be covered in this section.

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 based on 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 <u>ERC Work Programme</u><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.

For the rejected proposals (**B** or **C** scored) short and predefined 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>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;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 2026.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> See footnote <sup>34</sup> of the <u>ERC rules of submission and evaluation under Horizon Europe</u>

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

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> See Restrictions on submission of proposals under "Admissibility and eligibility criteria" of the ERC WP 2026.

<sup>&</sup>lt;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.

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 Step 2 evaluation panels to ensure the best expertise for the proposals (i.e. the most appropriate Panel Members) in each given panel. At that moment one or two of the Vice Chairs will take up the role of a Chair to ensure seamless operations in Step 2 and 3. 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 comparable number of 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 (Part I of the Scientific proposal, Curriculum Vitae and Track Record), B2 (including Part II of the Scientific proposal) and Budget table annexed to Part B2 — providing generalist and specialist reviews respectively.

Part II should be a detailed explanation of the project implementation, including research methodology, work plan, risk assessment and mitigating measures, justification for the requested budget and resources, and any further necessary background not included in Part I.

After this remote evaluation phase, all Panel Members take part in the Step 2 meetings. The 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 at this step. This important principle ensures comparable success rates across the individual panels regardless of how many proposals each panel evaluates.

Proposals will be retained for Step 3 based on the outcome of the evaluation at Step 2 and a budgetary cutoff level of up to three 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 meet 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 comments 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

<sup>&</sup>lt;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>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> See Restrictions on submission of proposals under "Admissibility and eligibility criteria" of the WP 2026.

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

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. 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>&</sup>lt;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>&</sup>lt;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>&</sup>lt;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 and ambition of the Research Project, and at the same time to the intellectual capacity and creativity 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.

Part I should present the envisaged research and it should lay out the current state of knowledge, explain the scientific question and the objectives of the project, and present the overall approach or research strategy to reach the goals of the project.

Part II should explain in the project implementation in detail, including research methodology, work plan, risk assessment, and mitigating measures, justification for the requested budget and resources.

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 <a href="Work Programme">Work Programme</a>. In evaluating the applicants' track records, preprints properly referenced and with the DOI (Digital Object Identifier) 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 <u>ERC</u> <u>Work Programme 2026</u>, must be considered when evaluating a proposal. Evaluation questions are listed in <u>Annex 1</u>.

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 reevaluation 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 <u>ERC Rules of submission and evaluation under Horizon Europe</u> stipulate that each proposal shall be reviewed by at least three peer reviewers.

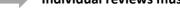
During the individual remote review evaluation, there shall be no discussions of the proposals between reviewers and they should not disclose the proposals assigned for their evaluation to other experts. When a Panel Member considers that they have insufficient expertise to evaluate any of the assigned 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.

- Award an overall qualitative assessment (multiple choice format) for the Principal Investigators
  (explanatory comment for the Principal Investigators can be optionally provided at Step 2), with
  the following five options: Outstanding/Excellent/Very Good/Good/Non-competitive (Annex 1).
  Optionally, provide explanatory comments indicating to which extent they agree with the
  statements related to the Principal Investigators.
- 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 a so called 'Flag' question: 'Do you think this proposal should be further evaluated in Step 2'? At the Step 1 panel meeting the participating Chairs and Vice Chairs consider carefully the response on this question alongside the content of the individual reviews.
  - 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 must 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, the overall qualitative assessment of the PIs and the response to the 'Flag' question are not communicated to the applicants; only the final outcome 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 formulate their comments carefully in the 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, and should address the evaluation questions described in Annex 1.

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.
- Abstain from commenting on 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<sup>25</sup> declaration and signed the Agreement on
  Reforming Research Assessment.
- Note that the funding ID is requested to allow the ERCEA to assess potential overlap during the grant preparation. The funding ID should therefore include <u>only current grants</u> 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 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).

#### 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:

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> It has been shown that unconscious bias applies equally, regardless of the evaluators' gender. 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: <a href="PowerPoint Presentation">PowerPoint Presentation (europa.eu)</a>) Experts are requested to be vigilant and aware so such elements are not introduced in the evaluation process.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> Read the Declaration | DORA

PRIOR TO STEP 1 MEETING	Reviewers individually and remotely review assigned proposals and recommend specialist 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 and with the written individual reviews.		
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 and with the written individal reviews.		
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.		
3 WILLTHVO	Panel Members participating in the meetings familiarise themselves with the proposals in their panel, with the reviews written in Step 2 and with the concerns raised .		

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 <u>online Commission's Evaluation</u> <u>tool (SEP)</u>. Useful information on SEP are reported below:

- Quick Guide on SEP Evaluation tool can be found here: <a href="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</a>
- Information on EU Login is available here: <a href="https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/funding-tenders-opportunities/display/IT/IT+How+to">https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/funding-tenders-opportunities/display/IT/IT+How+to</a>

#### **ANNEX 1 – EVALUATION FORM**

#### 1. Research Project

#### At Step 1

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

To what extent does the proposed research address important scientific quesitons?

To what extent are the project's objectives ambitious and beyond the state of the art and will advance the frontier of knowledge?

To what extent does the proposal go beyond what the individual Principal Investigators could achieve alone?

#### At Step 2

To what extent does the research address important scientific questions?

To what extent are the project's objectives ambitious and will it advance the frontier of knowledge?

To what extent does the proposal go beyond what the individual Principal Investigators could achieve alone?

To what extent are the research methodology and working arrangements appropriate to achieve the goals of the project?

To what extent are the timescales and resources adequate and properly justified?

Synergy Grants only: 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?

#### 2. Principal Investigators

#### Intellectual capacity and creativity at Step 1 and Step 2

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 tinking?

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 – EXPERT CODE OF CONDUCT**

#### 1. PERFORMING THE WORK

**1.1** Experts must work independently, in a personal capacity and not on behalf of any organisation.

#### **1.2** Experts must:

- (a) perform their tasks in a confidential and fair way, in accordance with the applicable rules
- (b) perform their work to the best of their abilities, professional skills, knowledge and applying the highest ethical and moral standards
- (c) follow the instructions and time-schedule given by the contracting authority.
- **1.3** Experts may not delegate the work to other persons or be replaced by other persons.
- **1.4** If a person or entity involved in a proposal, application or EU funded action approaches an expert before or during the course of their work, the expert must immediately inform the contracting authority.
- **1.5** Experts which act as observers must not evaluate and must not express any views on the proposals or applications that are being evaluated (nor on the experts' evaluations).
- **1.6** Experts may not be (or have been or become) involved in any projects they have assessed for the contracting authority (in any capacity, evaluation, observer, project review, monitoring etc).

#### 2. IMPARTIALITY

**2.1** Experts must perform their work **impartially** and take all measures to prevent any situation where the impartial and objective implementation of the work could be compromised for reasons involving family, emotional life, political or national affinity, economic interest or any other direct or indirect interest (**'conflict of interests'**).

For **evaluators** assisting in the various stages of the evaluation of proposals, applications and tenders, the following situations will automatically be considered as conflict of interest. The precise consequences vary depending on the situation:

- 1. exclusion from the evaluation for a *proposal*, if they:
  - are a director, trustee or partner or involved in the management of any entity involved in the proposal (applicant, affiliated entity or other participant involved in the proposal)
  - are employed or contracted by one of the entities involved in the proposal (applicant, affiliated entity, named subcontractor or other participant involved in the proposal).

In this case, the evaluator must normally be excluded from the entire evaluation process for the proposal concerned. They may normally NOT do the individual evaluation, nor take part in the consensus group or panel review (including hearings/interviews) when the proposal is being discussed.

Exceptionally, the contracting authority staff may decide to nevertheless allow the expert to take part in the panel meeting, if all of the following apply:

- they work in a different department from the one where the project is to be carried out
- the departments within the organisation concerned operate with a high degree of autonomy
- their participation can be justified by the requirement to use the best available expertise and that there is a limited number of qualified persons (and this is documented).

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

- 2. exclusion from the evaluation for a *proposal* AND for *all proposals competing* for the same call budget-split, if they:
  - were involved in the preparation of a proposal submitted to the same topic/other topic within the same call budget-split
  - would benefit if a proposal submitted to the same topic/other topic within the same call budget-split is accepted or rejected
  - have close family ties (spouse, domestic or non-domestic partner, child, sibling, parent, etc) or other close personal relationship with a person (including affiliated entities or other participants) involved in the preparation of a proposal submitted to the same topic/other topic within the same call budget-split or with a person which would benefit if such proposal is accepted or rejected.

In this case, the evaluator must be excluded from the entire evaluation process for the proposal concerned AND competing proposals.

- 3. exclusion from the evaluation for the entire *call*, if they:
  - are a member of an advisory group set up by the EU to advise on the preparation of work programmes or work programmes in an area related to the call
  - are a national contact point (e.g. National Contact Points or National Focal Points) or working for specific stakeholder groups tasked with promoting the programme (e.g. Enterprise Europe Network (EEN) for Horizon and SMP COSME)
  - are a member of a EU Programme Committee (if applicable).
- 4. potential exclusion from the evaluation (for proposal, proposal and competing proposals or entire call) if the responsible contracting authority so decides, if they:
  - were employed by one of the entities involved in the proposal (applicant, affiliated entity or other participant involved in the proposal) in the last 3 years
  - are involved in a contract, grant, management structure (e.g. member of management or advisory board etc) or business or other collaboration with an applicant, or have been so in the last 3 years

 are in any other situation that could cast doubt on their ability to participate impartially in the evaluation, or that could reasonably appear to do so (appearance of impropriety).

For Horizon Europe ERC proposals, evaluators will also be excluded:

- from the evaluation for the proposal concerned, if they have (or have had) a relationship of scientific rivalry or professional hostility with the principal investigator of the proposal, or if they have (or have had) a mentor/mentee relationship with the principal investigator of the proposal, or if they have (or have had during last 5 years) a scientific collaboration with the principal investigator of the proposal
- from the evaluation for the proposal concerned AND for all competing proposals, if they have 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
- from the evaluation of the entire call, if they have submitted a proposal as principal investigator or team member, under the same call.

For monitors assisting in the implementation follow-up, the following situations will automatically be considered as conflict of interest. The precise consequences vary depending on the situation:

- 1. exclusion from the monitoring of an action, if they:
  - were involved in the preparation of the action
  - would benefit or be disadvantaged, as a result of the monitoring of the action
  - have close family ties (spouse, domestic or non-domestic partner, child, sibling, parent etc.) or other close personal relationship with a person (including affiliated entities or other participants) involved in the action
  - are a director, trustee or partner or in any way involved in the management of an applicant (or affiliated entity or other participant involved in the action)
  - are employed or contracted by one of the beneficiaries or affiliated entities, named subcontractors or other participants involved in the action

In this case, the expert must be excluded from the monitoring of the action concerned. Any monitoring work already carried out by the expert must be declared void. If necessary, the expert must be replaced.

Exceptionally, the contracting authority staff may decide to nevertheless allow the expert to participate in the monitoring of the action, if all of the following apply:

- they work in a different department from the one where the project is to be carried out
- the departments within the organisation concerned operate with a high degree of autonomy

 their participation can be justified by the requirement to use the best available expertise and that there is a limited number of qualified persons (and this is documented).

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

- 2. potential exclusion from the monitoring of the action concerned if the responsible contracting authority so decides, if they:
  - were employed by one of the entities involved in the action (applicant, affiliated entity or other participant involved in the action) in the last three years
  - are involved in a contract, grant, management structure (e.g. member of management or advisory board etc) or business collaboration with an applicant, or have been so in the last 3 years
  - are in any other situation that could cast doubt on their ability to monitor the action, or that could reasonably appear to do so (appearance of impropriety).

For Horizon Europe ERC actions, monitors will also be excluded:

- from monitoring an action if:
  - they have (or have had) a relationship of scientific rivalry or professional hostility with the principal investigator of the action, or if they have (or have had) a mentor/mentee relationship with the principal investigator of the action, or if they have (or have had during the last 5 years) a scientific collaboration with the principal investigator of the action
  - if they have close family ties (spouse, domestic or non-domestic partner, child, sibling, parent etc.) or other close personal relationship with the principal investigator of the action

or

 if they have submitted a proposal as principal investigator or team member, under the same call.

For other types of experts (e.g. ethics experts, gender experts, financial experts, policy experts, etc), the following situations will automatically be considered as conflict of interest. The precise consequences vary depending on the situation:

- 1. exclusion from the work assigned, if they:
  - have vested interests in relation to the questions on which they are asked to give advice
  - are linked to an organisation or a person which would benefit (directly or indirectly) or be disadvantaged, as a result of the work of the expert
  - are in another situation that compromises their ability to work impartially,

independently and in the public interest.

- 2. potential exclusion from the work assigned if the responsible contracting authority so decides, in view of the objective circumstances, the available information and the potential risks, if they:
  - are in any other situation that could cast doubt on their ability to accomplish the
    work impartially, independently and in the public interest, or that could reasonable
    appear to do so in the eyes of an outside third party.
- **2.2** Experts will be required to **confirm** for each proposal, project or any other action they are tasked with that there is no conflict of interest.

If experts are (or become) aware of a conflict of interest, they must immediately **inform** the responsible contracting authority staff and stop working until further instructions.

**2.3** Experts which breach their obligations under Points 2.1 and 2.2, may be made subject to the measures set out in the Expert Call for Expression of Interest, and in particular terminate the Contract.

#### 3. CONFIDENTIALITY

**3.1** During implementation of the Contract and for five years after the date of the last payment, experts 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 ('sensitive information').

Unless otherwise agreed with the responsible contracting authority staff, they may use sensitive information only to implement the Contract.

Experts must keep their work under the Contract strictly confidential, and in particular:

- (a) not disclose (directly or indirectly) any confidential information relating to proposals, applications, actions or participants, without prior written approval by the contracting authority
- (b) not discuss proposals, applications or actions with others (including other experts or contracting authority staff that are not directly involved in the tasks, except during meetings and with prior approval by the responsible contracting authority staff
- (c) not disclose:
  - details on the evaluation or monitoring process (or any other type of work) or their outcome, without prior written approval by the contracting authority
  - details on their position/advice
  - the names of other experts participating in the evaluation or monitoring process, or other type of work.

(d) not communicate with applicants or beneficiaries (including affiliated entities, other third parties involved in the proposals/actions or team members or persons linked to them — except when organised by the contracting authority (such as panel interviews, progress meetings or project review meetings, etc).

If the contracting authority makes documents or information available electronically, experts are responsible for ensuring adequate protection and for returning, erasing or destroying all sensitive information after the end of the evaluation (if so instructed).

If experts work on contracting authority premises, they:

- (a) may not remove from the premises any documents, material or information on the proposals, applications or actions or on the evaluation or monitoring process
- (b) are responsible for ensuring adequate protection of electronic documents and information and for returning, erasing or destroying all sensitive information after the end of the evaluation or monitoring (if so instructed).

If experts use outside sources (for example internet, specialised databases, third party expertise etc) for their evaluation or monitoring, they:

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

The confidentiality obligations no longer apply if:

- the contracting authority agrees to release the expert from the confidentiality obligations
- the sensitive information becomes public through other channels
- disclosure of the sensitive information is required by law.
- **3.2** Experts which breach their obligations under Point 3.1, may be made subject to the measures set out in the Expert Call for Expression of Interest.

#### 4. DATA PROTECTION

- **4.1** Experts must process personal data only on the basis of documented instructions from the contracting authority. Experts may act only under the supervision of the contracting authority, in particular regarding the specific purposes of the processing and the categories of data which may be processed.
- **4.2** The processing of personal data by experts may take place only for the duration specified in their contract.

#### **4.3** Experts must:

 not use the personal data for any purpose other than fulfilling their obligations under the contract, unless explicitly authorised in writing in advance by the contracting authority

- ensure the protection of personal data with the same level of protection they use to protect their own data, and in no case with less reasonable care
- not disclose personal data directly or indirectly to third parties, unless explicitly authorised in writing in advance by the contracting authority.
- **4.4** Experts must deal promptly and adequately with any questions of the contracting authority relating to the processing of personal data and must cooperate and assist the contracting authority in ensuring compliance with the contracting authority's obligations.
- **4.5** Experts must adopt appropriate measures to ensure the security of personal data, proportionate to the risks inherent to the processing and the nature of the personal data concerned. This includes appropriate protection against security breaches leading to accidental or unlawful destruction, loss, alteration, unauthorised disclosure, or access to personal data (personal data breaches).

In the event of a personal data breach, the expert must immediately inform the contracting authority and cooperate and assist the contracting authority in ensuring compliance with the contracting authority's obligations.

4.6 At the end of the contract, experts will be asked by the contracting authority to either delete all personal data processed on behalf of the contracting authority (and certify this), or to return all personal data to the contracting authority and delete all existing copies.