

ARIA project review and selection process

To build a programme at ARIA, each Programme Director directs the review, selection, and funding of a portfolio of projects, whose collective aim is to unlock breakthroughs that impact society.

This document outlines ARIA's approach to the review and selection of project proposals and the process by which they will be evaluated. The process defined below applies specifically to *project proposals submitted in response to a programme solicitation* (for our approach to evaluating opportunity seed proposals, see [here](#)).

Summary of our approach

- We empower Programme Directors to make robust selection decisions in service of their programme's objectives.
- All Programme Directors follow a consistent review and selection process, designed and implemented by ARIA's central team.
- We take a criteria-led approach to selection: all proposals will be evaluated against consistent criteria. We expect proposals to spike against criteria, demonstrating different strengths and weaknesses.
- Expert technical reviewers (both internal and external to ARIA) evaluate proposals to provide independent views, stimulate discussion and inform decision-making. All reviewers are signed off by ARIA leadership as qualified and conflict-free, and their evaluations are carried out at arms length from the Programme Director.
- Programme Directors make final selection recommendations to optimise the programme portfolio as a whole and its alignment with the overall programme goals and objectives, the diversity of applicants and benefit to the UK.
- Programme Directors must justify their selection recommendations internally, for consistency of process and fairness.
- Programme Directors must recuse themselves from decision-making related to any party that represents a real or perceived conflict. They do not have access to any conflicted proposal information, and the evaluation of those proposals is led by an alternate programme director.

Context: application stages

The application process for a programme consists of two stages:

Stage 1 – Concept paper

Concept papers are designed to make the solicitation process as efficient as possible for applicants. By soliciting short concept papers (no more than three pages) ARIA reviewers are able to gauge the feasibility and relevance of the proposed project, and give an initial indication of whether we think a full proposal would be competitive. Based on this feedback, applicants can then decide whether to submit a full proposal.

Following review of concept papers, applicants will either be encouraged or discouraged from submitting a full proposal.

Stage 2 – Full proposals

This step requires applicants to submit a detailed proposal including:

- **Project & technical information** to help us gain a detailed understanding of the proposal.
- **Information about the team** to help us learn more about who will be doing the research, their expertise, and why the team is motivated to solve the problem.
- **Administrative questions** to help ensure we are responsibly funding R&D. Questions relate to budgets, IP, potential COIs etc.

Context: technical reviewers

In addition to the Programme Director, expert reviewers will be used during the project review and selection process.

Expert reviewers are external to ARIA, and subject to conflicts of interest checks and confidentiality agreements. ARIA leadership will approve the appointment of all external technical reviewers before their appointment.

The role of the technical reviewer:

- The expert review is designed to generate additional data points to shape final decision-making.
- Expert reviewers will only review the specific elements of the proposal.
- They will be asked to provide scores/recommendations as opposed to stack ranking all applications.
- The Programme Director will review the scores and recommendations provided by the technical reviewers (and any subsequent discussion) and integrate that data into their final evaluation and justifications for final selection recommendations.
- No expert reviewer has the power to advance or reject candidates.
- An applicant cannot 'fail' or 'pass' an expert review.

Context: use of criteria

- We take a criteria-led approach to selection: all proposals will be evaluated against consistent criteria.
- We expect proposals to spike against criteria, and demonstrate different strengths and weaknesses).
- Proposals will be evaluated against the criteria outlined in the solicitation.
- Reviewers will score each criterion and each proposal as a whole. Final scores are not numerical sums or averages, but an indication of their overall view of the proposal.

Breakdown of review stages

STAGE 1: CONCEPT PAPER REVIEW



Step 1 – Initial screening of concept papers

Concept papers will pass through an initial screening to verify identity, review any potential national security risks, and identify any conflicts of interest.

Concept papers will also be reviewed for compliance against the solicitation guideline - e.g. number of pages, etc. Where it is clear the proposal is not compliant with the format, these applicants will be rejected prior to the compliance review.

An ARIA staff member leads this step.

Step 2 – Scope review of concept papers

Concept papers will be reviewed to ensure they are within the scope of the solicitation.

Where it is clear that a proposal is outside the scope, these applicants will be rejected prior to a full review on the basis they are not compliant or non-eligible.

This step is conducted by a technical member of staff and reviewed by the Programme Director.

Step 3 – Merit review of concept papers

Reviewers will assess the concept papers against the evaluation criteria identified in the solicitation. At least one Merit reviewer must be based in the UK (to ensure knowledge of the UK eco-system).

This step will be conducted by the programme director and at least one external reviewer.

ARIA leadership will approve the appointment of all external expert reviewers before their appointment. Any external reviewers will be subject to conflicts of interest checks and confidentiality agreements.

Concept paper response: recommendations and approval

Following review of the concept papers, Programme Directors will recommend and justify which applicants should be encouraged or not encouraged to submit a full proposal.

These recommendations will be reviewed and approved by ARIA's CEO.

Applicants will be informed as to whether their concept paper is:

- not compliant or non-eligible
- encouraged for submission of a full proposal or
- not encouraged, based on the concept paper review

STAGE 2: FULL PROPOSAL REVIEW



Steps 1 and 2 – Initial screening & compliance review of full proposals

The same process detailed above for Step 1 and Step 2 will be followed.

Step 3 – Merit review of full proposals

Reviewers will assess the full proposals against the evaluation criteria identified in the solicitation. At least one Merit reviewer must be based in the UK (to ensure knowledge of the UK eco-system).

This step will be conducted by the Programme Director and at least three other expert reviewers, two of whom must be external to ARIA. Additional internal and external expert reviewers may be required and added where a COI arises or additional specific expertise is required.

The Programme Director will review the scores and recommendations (and any subsequent discussion) provided by expert reviewers and integrate that data into their evaluation and justifications of final selection recommendations.

Step 4 – Merit review meeting

The Programme Director and all reviewers will meet to discuss each proposal reviewed.

If during the merit review meeting the Programme Director identifies that to finalise selection recommendations further clarification is needed related to specific proposals, depending on the nature of the clarification a discussion with the applicant can be arranged or written questions can be submitted to the applicant.

Step 5 – Project selection approval

Having completed the evaluations process and finalised discussion of all proposals with technical reviewers, Programme Directors will develop, document, and present a hypothesis of the optimal programme portfolio and recommended funding recipients.

A formal project selection meeting is held to test the hypothesis and selections to ensure the review has been done fairly and robustly, and to ensure that project selection is in line with the programme's objective. Programme Directors can make changes based on discussion in that meeting.

Final project selection will be approved by ARIA's CEO.

Use of generative AI tools in proposal review and selection

ARIA recognises that generative artificial intelligence ("AI") tools present opportunities and bring benefits in the context of research and development.

However, the use of generative AI tools in the funding application and assessment process also presents potential risks for research in areas such as rigour, transparency, originality, reliability, data protection, confidentiality, intellectual property, copyright, and bias. We want to protect against potential ethical, legal and integrity issues in the use of generative AI tools to maintain the high standards of the research and innovation we fund.

Use of AI by ARIA when reviewing applications

As set out above, every application will be reviewed in full, and all funding decisions will be made, by a human.

As part of ARIA's project review and selection process, ARIA staff may use generative AI tools during the solicitation process and, where relevant, across the project lifecycle for funded projects.

These tools may be used as assistive review tools, including to:

- + support the analysis of proposals,
- + surface potential strengths, weaknesses, risks, or themes across submissions,
- + help identify connections, inconsistencies, or areas for further human scrutiny, and

- + improve the efficiency and consistency of internal review processes
- + provide technical insights

In this context, ARIA may use generative AI tools to act as additional reviewers, providing structured feedback or analytical input alongside human assessment. These tools do not replace human judgment, decision-making, or accountability.

Every proposal, output, or insight generated with the support of AI will be reviewed by an ARIA staff member. A human decision-maker will always read, interpret, challenge, and contextualise AI-assisted outputs, including by testing assumptions, following up on flagged issues, and ensuring that conclusions are sound and appropriate. Final decisions remain the responsibility of a human.

ARIA does not rely solely on AI-generated assessments to make funding decisions.

Use of AI by external reviewers

ARIA requires all external reviewers to agree to legally binding confidentiality provisions. Additionally, ARIA informs external reviewers that they must not input any content from applications into generative AI tools.