



[REDACTED]

14 April 2020

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Freedom of Information request: FOI2020/00071

Thank you for your Freedom of Information request received on the 8 March in which you requested the following:

Your request:

I am writing to request information under The Freedom of Information Act 2000 about the recent award of coronavirus grants by the MRC-UKRI. In particular I would like to know the following:

1. *How many vaccine applications were received?*
2. *Who or which organisations made applications?*
3. *What was the criteria used to make the awards?*
4. *Who was on the panel which made the decisions and what was each of their backgrounds?*
5. *To whom were awards made and in what amounts?*

Our response

I can confirm UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) does hold information relevant to your request.

Some introductory information is provided below on the recent calls for proposals followed by responses addressing the information you have requested.

The Department of Health and Social Care/UKRI COVID-19 Rapid Response Calls rapid response initiative involved two calls for proposals:

- 1) Active intervention development. This call focussed on vaccines and therapeutics, with prioritisation of those with potential for rapid clinical development (closing date 13th February 2020 panel meeting 2nd March)
- 2) Diagnosis and understanding of COVID-19. The second call focussed on diagnostics, clinical, epidemiology, anthropology, underpinning and other research projects that would make a significant contribution to the understanding, diagnosis, prevention and/or management of the COVID-19 outbreak (closing date 27th February, panel meeting 17th March)

Further information can be found at the following link: <https://mrc.ukri.org/funding/browse/2019-ncov-rapid-response-call/2019-ncov-rapid-response-call/> and the MRC expects to publish further information on the calls when funding decisions have been confirmed and administrative functions completed.

We have provided a response on each of your questions below. However, we consider that a number of exemptions under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA) would apply to some of the information you have requested. The relevant exemptions include:

- Section 22: Information intended for future publication, which relates to some information on awards made which is due to be published shortly

- Section 40: the exemption for personal information, which relates to your request for the names of researchers who submitted proposals, and
- Section 41: the exemption for information provided in confidence, which relates to your request for the names of research organisations which submitted proposals.

A Public Interest Test has been considered for Section 22 and Section 41 and we find that there is a greater interest in maintaining these exemptions compared to disclosure of this information into the public domain at the present time. Our arguments for each of the exemptions are set out below. Section 40 is an absolute exemption, so a public interest test is not required.

1. How many vaccine applications were received?

Applications relating to vaccines were received under both calls. In total 213 applications were received.

For the first call, Active intervention development, there were two themes: vaccines and therapeutics. Of the 58 applications received through this call, 24 applications related to vaccines.

The second call, Diagnosis and understanding COVID-19, had six themes: diagnostics, clinical investigation, epidemiology, anthropology, underpinning research and other. Proposals involving vaccines were submitted to the second call, but proposals have not been coded to allow a figure to be provided at the present time.

2. Who or which organisations made applications?

As research organisations submit research proposals to UKRI and its councils in confidence, we consider that information on the research organisations which submitted proposals would be exempt under Section 41 of the FOIA, Information Provided in Confidence.

To explain further, applicants submit their proposals in confidence with the understanding that details of their proposals will remain confidential unless an award is made, at which point some information on the funded research is published. This duty of confidence aims to protect the research ideas proposed, support peer review and allow unsuccessful researchers the opportunity to revise their proposals to seek future funding, either from UKRI or another funding body. We consider that to release information on all proposals submitted, against the expectations of the research organisations and proposed investigators, may result in an actionable breach of confidence.

As this exemption is absolute there is no requirement to conduct a public interest test however, we have considered the case for and against disclosure and, on balance, have found the public interest favours withholding this information at the present time. In our assessment we considered that we routinely publish information on the awards made by UKRI councils, which includes information on the research organisations and research investigators awarded funding and statistical information on calls for proposals, including success rates by research organisation. We also routinely publish information about our assessment and decision-making processes which outlines how the public money we award is allocated.

In addition, releasing information that would identify individual applicants would contravene the provisions of the General Data Protection Regulation and the Data Protection Act 2018. Therefore, we consider that Section 40(2) of the FOIA would apply to your question on who applied. We believe that disclosure would contravene the data protection principle of fairness, as the individuals concerned would have no expectation of their name being disclosed, unless the proposal had been successful in being awarded funding. As section 40(2) is an absolute exemption a public interest test was not required.

3. What was the criteria used to make the awards?

The information you have requested is publicly available.

Information on the assessment process for the Covid-19 Rapid Response call can be found on the call page at: <https://mrc.ukri.org/funding/browse/2019-ncov-rapid-response-call/2019-ncov-rapid-response-call/>

Proposals were assessed directly by Expert Panels. Panel members were asked to consider the assessment criteria outlined for funding panels, which can be found on the MRC's Peer Review page at:

<https://mrc.ukri.org/funding/peer-review/>

There were also additional requirements laid out in the call text and outlined in the section on expectations:

<https://mrc.ukri.org/funding/browse/2019-ncov-rapid-response-call/2019-ncov-rapid-response-call/>

4. Who was on the panel which made the decisions and what was each of their backgrounds?

The information you have requested is publicly available.

Information on the membership of the Expert Panels available on the MRC's website on the call page at:

<https://mrc.ukri.org/funding/browse/2019-ncov-rapid-response-call/2019-ncov-rapid-response-call/>.

5. To whom were awards made and in what amounts?

Information on the outcome of the first call has been published, the outcome of the second call will be published shortly.

The outcome of the first call which invited proposals on Active intervention developments was published on 22 March 2020 on the MRC's website at: <https://mrc.ukri.org/news/browse/covid-19-vaccine-therapy-research-boosted-by-six-new-projects-in-rapid-response/>.

Information on the second call, which focussed on Diagnosis and understanding of COVID-19, will be published when all funding decisions have confirmed. We consider that to release any information on individual awards at the present time, while the call outcome and individual awards are still being confirmed, would not be in the public interest. We would consider that Section 22 of the FOIA, information intended for future publication would apply.

UKRI routinely publishes information on the awards our councils make, this includes information on the project, research investigators, research organisations, the award value and duration and abstracts summarising the proposed research. We consider that releasing incomplete information on outcomes while awards are still being confirmed and administrative details finalised would not be in the public interest. This is because any information released here may appear inaccurate and potentially misleading when compared with the planned publication. We have therefore determined that the outcome of this test is that the public interest is insufficient to justify immediate disclosure. However, we do expect this information to be available shortly and published by early May.

If you have any queries regarding our response or you are unhappy with the outcome of your request and wish to seek an internal review of the decision, please contact:

Head of Information Governance

Email: foi@ukri.org or infogovernance@ukri.org

Please quote the reference number above in any future communications.

If you are still not content with the outcome of the internal review, you may apply to refer the matter to the Information Commissioner for a decision. Generally, the ICO cannot make a decision unless you have exhausted the review procedure provided by UKRI. The Information Commissioner can be contacted at: <http://www.ico.gov.uk/>

If you wish to raise a complaint regarding the service you have received or the conduct of any UKRI staff in relation to your request, please see UKRI's complaints policy: <https://www.ukri.org/about-us/policies-and-standards/complaints-policy/>

Yours sincerely,

[Redacted Signature]

Information Governance

Information Rights Team

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