

Final Project Report

Review of Research Grants Council Documents and External Reviewer Database

For the

Hong Kong Research Grants Council

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1. Executive Summary

1.1 This report presents the overall findings and recommendations of the consultancy project. The project had two components – a review of RGC scheme documentation and a review of the RGC’s External Reviewer Database.

1.2 Through methods of documentary review, stakeholder engagement and reflective revision, we have:

- reviewed and revised all scheme documentation for all funding schemes
- reviewed and revised all policies and procedural documentation inclusive of terms of reference and procedural guidance such as in the case of research misconduct
- engaged with RGC staff on the External Reviewer Database and made recommendations related to:
 - improved performance management of the current ERD;
 - potential future developments of the ERD and its functions, specifically related to sourcing reviewers, training and knowledge.

1.3 Revisions and recommendations related to scheme documentation and the operation of the External Reviewer Database have been grounded in our own experience as funders and from our work with international funding agencies in the UK, the US, Canada, and the EU. We have also drawn upon the growing literature in the field of ‘research on research’¹, which does offer some perspectives on research funding and its management, particularly in relation to peer review and applicant experiences and attitudes towards research agencies.

1.4 In fact, this project has taken place against a backdrop in which major funding agencies such as UK Research and Innovation have directed attention towards improvements, enhancements and efficiencies in their processes which have direct relevance to the future work of the RGC. This is not only relevant to areas such as process or efficiency of application activities. The changes being proposed in the international funding environment are also intervening in the wider research culture of disciplines and (inter)national research communities. For example, UKRI, which is the relatively new umbrella organisation (established in 2018) bringing together all seven disciplinary-focused UK research councils, the other major research funder (Research England, which delivers the Research Excellence Framework and associated Quality Related funding) and the innovation funder (Innovate UK), has recently announced significant ambitions to change:

- research culture² including addressing:
 - issues of equality, diversity and inclusion
 - pressure to apply for funding or a perpetual grant application cycle
 - over pressurised environmental drivers to produce outputs in volume rather than focus on quality

¹ See for example the UK’s Research on Research institute: <http://researchonresearch.org/>

² See the new UKRI CEO, Dame Professor Ottoline Leyser’s announcement of a new approach in September 2020: <https://www.ukri.org/news/viewpoint-we-must-reshape-the-system-so-it-genuinely-values-and-supports-difference/> and also the Wellcome Trust report on research culture: <https://wellcome.org/what-we-do/our-work/research-culture> (January 2020).

- research funding mechanisms³ including:
 - streamlining documentation and variations in schemes
 - reducing applicant and university time spent on completing forms and complying with requirements that have historic but often minor differences between broadly similar schemes and agencies

1.5 We use the UK example here as representative of broader international changes, which can also be seen in the adoption by funders across the world of the principles of joint policy statements such as the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA).⁴

1.6 These changes are relevant to the current work of the RGC and should play a role in its future strategic development. While this review has been focused on documentation and – in the context of the ERD work – elements of review, assurance and assessment, it is not possible to approach the issue as if in a void without due attention to these more fundamental changes and developments in international best practice, quality and standards. Fundamentally, the drive within the global research community – including both researchers and funders – is to focus time on the delivery of research itself, not the associated processes of excessive bureaucracy or the diminishing returns of time spent on modest success-rate schemes.

1.7 As the RGC itself notes, the research community in Hong Kong is internationally recognised for its research quality and excellence. But as a small community one could argue that there is a significant application, assessment and decision-making structure in place. If the RGC seeks to be recognised as an international leader in the delivery of research funding support then it will need to undertake more fundamental work on its schemes and activities than has been possible in a project of the current timescale.

1.8 What this means for the current report and the documentation revisions we have undertaken is that they represent a stepping-stone to future work. The immediate need to improve content and delivery of scheme materials was always presented as the core deliverable for this project and this has trumped the capacity to implement more fundamental recommendations. We have, though, taken the opportunity to provide some of this content and our reflections on it based on our experience of the RGC's documents and review processes.

1.9 In relation to revised scheme and other documentation, copies of the suggested revised documents have been provided as an annex to the current report. Key recommendations – some of which have necessarily been implemented in the revised documentation submitted as part of this project output – are outlined on p.5.

³ See “UKRI Reducing Unnecessary Bureaucracy” (September 2020) <https://www.ukri.org/news/ukri-reducing-unnecessary-bureaucracy/>

⁴ <https://sfdora.org/>

2. Recommendations Overview

Documentation Review

2.1 These recommendations comprise points related to revised documentation where we have already implemented the detail of changes to the scheme materials submitted as part of this project and additional areas that we think the RGC should keep under review/remain alert to as schemes develop further or new schemes are created. The categories broadly correspond to those key revision areas highlighted in the detail of the Documentation Review Overview Report section below.

Area/theme	Recommendations already implemented	Areas for ongoing consideration/checking in future documents
Language	Changes at the level of language (and its intersection with style and tone) have been implemented throughout documents, ranging from gender-neutral (i.e. Chair rather than always Chairman) through to more welcoming language which empowers applicants as partners in research funding process, such as avoiding terms like 'grooming' research talent and so on.	Monitor and challenge the use of gendered language and other terminology which creates passive or dominant authority positions between applicants and the funder (including panellists, reviewers etc)
Tone	Shifts to tone have included: more supportive and engaging language, and a focus on research funding – and the process of applying for it – as an enabler.	Avoid instructions that focus on negative actions i.e. ' <i>an application will be removed</i> ' except in those cases where this relates to unprofessional behaviour. If there is a need for a caution to applicants on a specific item because this is regularly a cause of errors, then the guidance is likely to be unclear rather than applicant motivations.
Style	Changes in style have included (beyond those of language and tone noted above): a more structured presentation of materials and ease of navigation for applicants and other users, including a template for scheme	Ensure a consistent approach to presentation and delivery of content. Treat applicants as partners in the production of high-quality research proposals.

	<p>guidance documents and a clearer mirroring of the support provided in such guidance with the details of the actual application form content and requirements.</p>	
Clarity	<p>Focus on clarity has included: reducing duplication in materials by only providing guidance once in relevant scheme documents or ensuring that there is identical wording of instructions to avoid confusion.</p> <p>At a scheme level, this has also included making the Scheme Guidance Document a single resource for information about scheme aims, key eligibility details, provision of greater structure and linkages, and providing applicants with a clearer pathway through the materials.</p>	<p>Ensure that a terminology for forms and attachments remains the same across schemes</p> <p>Continue to reduce multiple sources of the same documentation or reference points by having a single source of reference i.e. panel structures or disciplinary areas and codes</p>
Consistency	<p>This applies across schemes and within individual schemes: partly, this relates to terminology but where possible it has also resulted in consistent use of the same format for attachments (i.e. CVs, Research Proposal structures etc). Fundamentally, schemes should require consistent lengths of documents for the same purpose.</p>	<p>It is more important to focus on schemes having different aims or purposes rather than having to design or deliver divergent documentation to demonstrate difference.</p> <p>This means starting the documentation for any new scheme for an underpinning example rather than beginning from scratch. Only add further content to the application process if it is absolutely essential. Otherwise, just use a single template, keep all details the same for structure and component elements and only change the scheme guidance concerning purpose and intentions of scheme.</p>

Efficiency	Efficiency for applicants and those processing applications has been encouraged by reduction of repetition, clear direction to a single source for information, reduced use of alternative forms of including the same information.	
Transparency	Applicants often view funding processes as like the 'black box': mysteries of decision-making and peer review need to be explained clearly and at the point of application, not least so applicants can consider the audience(s) for their proposals. We have therefore provided and accommodated more information in the guidance documents for all schemes about the reviewing process.	Scheme documents have multiple users: gauging who needs to know what pieces of information and how they will utilise this knowledge is important. RGC needs to consider how documents enable support for all users – applicants providing the content, reviewers and decision-makers who need to access it and assess it.

External Reviewer Database

2.2 Our options analysis for the External Reviewer Database functionality and refresh are detailed in the External Reviewer Database Overview Report (see below). Recommendations here are therefore for further developments.

Area/theme	Recommendation for further development
Recruitment	Improved transparency and visibility of the recruitment process and the composition of the ERD will enable greater confidence in the reviewer community from applicants.
Training	RGC should consider core training for External Reviewers. International examples are available of online training modules and guidance that recorded/delivered once can be redeployed without additional cost implications.
Performance management	<p>Consideration should be given to performance management on an annual basis for External Reviewers.</p> <p>Appointments should be made for time-limited terms with the possibility of renewal on successful engagement with the RGC's work i.e. delivery of useable peer reviews.</p>
Engagement	RGC needs to decide if the External Reviewer Database members are inside or outside of its structures in terms of engagement by the RGC itself rather than delegation to Panel Members alone.
Ownership and community	If RGC 'owns' the ERD as an asset then it can exert clearer ownership and build a sense of a reviewer community, which is now viewed as a core element of international best practice.
Analysis and data	The RGC needs to know its reviewer group – the composition, diversity, etc – as well as performance at different levels. Such analysis relates to the need to disseminate information to the applicant community as well as to reviewers. Confidence in the process arises from robust and transparent information and its effective communication.

3. Documentation Review Overview Report

Scope of the review

- 3.1 The documentation review phase focused on review and revision to existing documentation related to the RGC's schemes and policy documents, inclusive of application materials, review materials and monitoring and reporting. This also involved reviewing and providing template documentation for panel Terms of Reference, revised guidance documents related to scheme objectives and aims, as well as guidance to reviewers, panel members and those working in support of applicants.
- 3.2 The RGC has a range of schemes and programmes which have developed over time. It is in the nature of major organisations which accumulate funding models and seek to ensure both difference and complementarity in their funding channels that it is often rather easier to add to documentation than it is to subtract or reassess the value of specific components.
- 3.3 It is clear to us from a review of all the schemes and their documentation that the RGC has become a degree more attentive to user needs and more reflective on the most fundamental needs for content in order to assess applications. This has not necessarily been universally the case but in several more recent initiatives there is already a degree of increased accessibility for potential applicants and their organisations. This is not to say that new scheme documentation does not, at times, seem inhibited by some of the questions of tone, style and detailing to be found in the older and most established funding programmes. However, it is sometimes of a lesser concern.

How to interpret a documentation review?

- 3.4 'Review' can mean several things at different scales. The impetus for the current project resides in the recommendation made by the previous Research Consulting supported project under Phase II for a 'light touch review' of scheme documentation. We have done more than this on the basis that a review is not just about tweaks but rather has to take a systematic look at how any organisation presents itself and might be perceived through the lens of its documentation.
- 3.5 Our approach has been to look at everything - from application forms to scheme guidance to project reporting to policies and procedural documentation - in a holistic sense rather than only by scheme or document type. This approach has resulted in a much better sense of where key issues of tone, style and presentation, in particular, can be improved in relation to a common purpose or strategic ethos. This is, though, about ongoing improvements as well as the changes made as part of the current project.
- 3.6 Inevitably, the review process and feedback via consultation routes does highlight aspects of the documentation – i.e, in relation to details about ethics policy, or the usefulness of specific attachments like the Education Plan – which encroach more on the areas of strategic policy, and as such would require decisions by the RGC itself before any changes to scheme-specific materials could be made. In other words, scheme document changes can at a certain point have consequences for the wider objectives of the organisation that, while important and in some cases essential to a publicly-funded body (budgetary details and accountability, for example), may appear less essential to the applicants' themselves. In those areas, we have highlighted issues to the RGC staff but have not undertaken changes to documents that would have consequent policy implications for the RGC and its operations.

Method: Documentary Review

3.7 Our initial review of the documentation provided by the RGC indicated a series of cross-cutting issues, which we brought to the June 2020 RGC meeting, specifically:

- *consistency*: in terms of structure and content there are issues of consistency in the documentation for the same scheme, which is unhelpful; there should also be consistency about the same attachment formats, limits, styles and content across different schemes to support applicants but also to ensure reviewers are appropriately able to work through materials for assessment
- *repetition*: application forms and guidance documentation frequently repeat materials in ways that do not enhance clarity or user benefits; sometimes this repetition is repetition in modified ways, which increases complexity rather than efficiency
- *clarity*: it is not always clear from the outset of documentation what the aims and objectives of a specific scheme are – sometimes this surfaces several pages into a document
- *sequencing and navigation*: some scheme documents do not ‘map’ effectively across document types i.e. guidance notes on a specific application form that are not comprehensive (omit sections, assume no guidance needed) or number things differently
- *alignment*: in some schemes (across application forms, guidance documents and reviewer documents) there is insufficient alignment between the purposes or rationale for specific pieces of information, including usefulness or need to include
- *presentation, style and tone*: a more template structure would improve navigation but also the visual consistency and presentation of materials; in terms of style and tone this can appear a little defensive or even overly procedural towards applicants (i.e. threats to remove applications etc)
- *efficiency*: application forms and guidance notes in particular are quite lengthy even though several schemes require the same information/annexes to guidance: this could be resolved via a single linked document which is consistently used for all schemes.

3.8 In the case of all the revisions to documentation undertaken, we have remained focused on these areas of principle. This has ensured that the primary goals of the review process have been to address central or fundamental issues related to the above areas, rather than a detailed or technical reappraisal of the RGC’s ways of operating funding *per se*. This is an important distinction to make: our role was to review, assess and editorially intervene in the scheme and associated documentation without necessarily making judgements about the way the RGC operates its funding programmes or changing policy and approach.

3.9 In reality, of course, this is easier written than done. Inevitably the medium through which one expresses funding access, principles and requirements touches upon and at times underpins the nature of the funding scheme itself. This has meant that in some of our discussions with the RGC staff, and some of the exchange of commentary on revisions, we have had to balance our interpretation of purpose in the documents with a narrower view of the role of this project.

3.10 Where we felt that bigger questions were important as part of the ongoing evolution of schemes then we have raised them with the RGC leads, including in our report on initial stakeholder feedback. In some cases, these issues may return to the RGC for consideration at a future point, and in support of those discussions we have included some comment on this in the final section ('Concluding thoughts') of the current report.

Method: Stakeholder Engagement

3.11 Stakeholder engagement work was undertaken to provide user perspectives on the revision process. In order to ensure that changes being made to documentation were capable of delivering improvements for a diverse set of purposes all related to research quality (from application ideas through to informed decision-making) we wanted to test out changes with a small number of representative stakeholders, including new structures for documents, advisory content and terminology shifts.

3.12 Our original plan was to deliver a single pack of sample scheme documents for an online survey with a range of stakeholder groups. A survey allows for relative ease in comparing responses to a large body of textual materials from a variety of user standpoints, and an inability to capture detailed feedback where this is offered alongside more quantitative benchmarking feedback on core issues. At the request of the RGC staff we adapted the original project plan, which was to provide a single set of scheme documentation in revised form for a survey response from a range of key stakeholders. The scheme documentation included application form, scheme guidance notes through to completion reports and panel member and external reviewer guidance and assessment forms. The RGC felt that because these user groups would be most familiar with a specific scheme it would be better to provide a range of scheme types in revised format rather than a single scheme. It was felt that this might be especially useful in the context of the project team approaching users from both the 8 UGC universities as well as a selection from the self-financing sector, given the latter have specific schemes for their access.

3.13 We therefore provided four revised sample packs to the relevant RGC staff for comments. Following a further set of adaptations in response to the RGC staff feedback. The sample packs covered four types of scheme:

- strategic (based on Areas of Excellence);
- large open (based on GRF);
- individual (based on Research Fellowships/Senior Research Fellowships);
- and a self-financing sector scheme (based on the Faculty Development Scheme).

3.14 We used a generalised terminology of 'strategic' or 'large open' in order to allow respondents to consider the materials as a scheme pack without necessarily having to compare it to an existing scheme. The point was to gauge their reaction to the 'new' pack of materials rather than have them read or interpret materials as a 'revision' of a previous document. This was with a view to capturing feedback that was about broader, high level issues such as tone and content and structure per se rather than a qualitative assessment of 'change' itself.

3.15 Each scheme sample pack was sent (via email) along with a link to an online survey platform. Respondents received either the scheme sample pack in full or with the specific sections most relevant to the respondent group type. There were five categories of respondent:

- RGC Staff;
- RGC Panel Members;
- RGC External Reviewers;
- Applicants/Researchers;
- Research Office staff in universities.

3.16 Survey respondents were identified by listings provided by RGC staff (for RGC staff; Panel Members; External Reviewers) and by university research offices (for applicants/researchers; research office staff). Where extensive listings were provided – such as all RGC Panel Members – we selected a sample for schemes to ensure a mix of disciplinary fields, international representation, and panel membership type (i.e. chairs, deputy chairs, members).

3.17 Engaging respondent groups in this way and using a range of scheme types has enabled ‘structured conversations’ to take place at scale via the survey format. The extensive nature of the scheme documentation for some respondent groups – Panel Members and RGC staff, for example, received **all** document types for each scheme, amounting to several tens of pages in each case – has meant much more focused and attentive responses at the level of detail than could have been enabled via online focus group discussions; however, this has also potentially impacted on the response rate (see below). Utilising the survey format to explore multiple schemes has also enabled a more systematic comparison of responses to identical and subtly varied phrasings, structures and content e.g. asking the same questions of different respondent groups about scheme documents related to a strategic scheme and a large open scheme offers useful comparative feedback.

3.18 The *core question* behind the survey approach was to test out the scheme sample packs to gauge feedback on the extent and usefulness of the revisions in relation to the questions of consistency, clarity, usability and presentation, style and tone of the materials.⁵ Capturing the feedback from different stakeholders at this stage allowed for the more focused reflective revisions of scheme documentation in the next, final phase of the project. It also allowed us to pinpoint more efficiently where there are significant issues of concern either in relation to the approach to redrafting (in many cases this is has proved a minimal issue for respondents) or to policy contexts that inform the contents of the documentation.

3.19 The feedback was inevitably more wide ranging in nature, raising issues beyond the document review work, and making use of the free-text comments functions in some questions.

Survey response

3.20 The survey distribution numbers and response rate for each stakeholder groups was as follows:

Category	No of responses	Response rate
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⁵ As we indicated in the June highlight report to the RGC: “The key here is to establish how well our proposed revisions of ‘core’ application and guidance materials in particular are: (a) meeting the needs of applicants; (b) serving as appropriate for reviewers and (c) delivering on the needs of the RGC itself in terms of relevant information capture and efficient processing.”

RGC Staff	10	83%
Panel Members	21	16%
External Reviewers	11	13%
Applicants	90	54%
Research Offices	30	65%
Total	162	

3.21 We recognised that undertaking this kind of engagement work over the summer months and in the context of Covid-19 would impact on response rates. However, given this was about resting where there might be areas of concern with the overarching changings we were proposing – which were consistent across all sample packs – we judged that we would get a good sense of comfort levels to the approach taken alongside some additional pointers on areas that were missed, misunderstood or misjudged, for example. The overall response rate in excess of 50% for 3 of the 5 groupings is therefore very welcome. RGC staff concerned with specific schemes have contributed to the redrafting process and there is a solid response rate from applicant and research offices in universities (including both UCG and self-financing sectors). Panel Members – see below – were also engaged in second stage revisions for relevant schemes: many of those Panel Members we approached for the initial survey stage indicated work commitments (and Covid-19 impacts on existing workloads) prevented their engagement at that point. The area where there was least engagement was External Reviewers: we speculate that this may partly be because ERs generally get approached (a) via Panel Members in their field and (b) with a transactional fee for review work for the RGC. A ‘cold-call’ approach from a consultancy asking them to volunteer up to 90 minutes of time to assess documents may not therefore have met with usual expectations.

3.22 In addition to survey completion, some respondents contacted us via email with further (often detailed) feedback on specific elements of the documentation or comments on other aspects of the RGC’s application and award processes, including the External Reviewer Database (see next section). These views have either been taken into account in this report or via other feedback to the RGC.

Survey feedback high-level messages

3.23 Overall, the response to the sample documentation is positive in many key areas. (A breakdown of the key quantitative responses is provided in Annex II, see pp.26-45.) There was a consistent and sustained level of support for the sample documentation across schemes in terms of:

- more than 90% of respondents finding the Application Form clear and structured appropriately
- more than 90% of respondents finding the Application Form user friendly
- more than 85% of respondents finding sections of the Application Form either ‘Good’ or ‘Fit for Purpose’
- more than 92% of respondents finding the Scheme Guidance document clear and user friendly
- more than 95% of respondents finding the new sections in the Scheme Guidance document on scheme overview clear and effective
- more than 90% of respondents finding sections of the Scheme Guidance document ‘Good’ or ‘Fit for Purpose’
- more than 90% of respondents finding the new Statement on Submission clear on expectations and user friendly.

3.24 Overall, the feedback is suggestive of a number of things: first, that streamlining aspects of the materials to give a 'smoother' feel to the cross-over between scheme application and guidance materials has helped applicants and other users navigate what can be quite technical documentation. Some of this has been about presenting a clearer sense of direction – contents organisation; overview statements for the schemes etc – and in other cases it appears to relate to the change in tone and language. Secondly, the reduction in duplication of materials – including for example in having a simpler 'Statement on Submission' rather than extensive repeat of check-box approvals – has a solid level of support. In some areas, the feedback response – for example around new terminology we tested like 'Case for Support' – resulted in further reflection on our use of language, which has been inflected in the final set of revised documentation.

3.25 Where there remain some issues relates partly to clarity over the content required in specific sections: for example, applicants seem to want more examples in areas like impact and ethics. Evidently, these are areas for work by the RGC and its communities and not specific to the content of an application process per se.

3.26 As these documents are core to each of the sample packs and cover the most extensive revision work, including the introduction of new subsections (Application Form and Scheme Guidance) or new documents (i.e. Statement on Submission) they contain many of the central areas we identified for improvements to be made to current documentation. These positive responses are generally consistent across the scheme examples and stakeholder groups.

3.27 General feedback points common across two or more groups and/or across schemes:

- wordiness and document length:
 - as paper-based application documents these appear to have a degree of acceptability, but there is a strong view that more cutting of materials is necessary and focusing on key information
- language:
 - clarity: evidence of a concern with clarity and comprehension for non-experts or those with less experience of funding processes
 - tone: in some instances still viewed as authoritative rather than supportive or welcoming; described as 'old-fashioned' by multiple respondents
- terminology:
 - use of 'Case for Support' unclear to respondents as a new term, but also terminology around financial tables e.g. non-vote items
- use of attachments:
 - encouragement to reduce the number or merge to cover more sections in a single attachment e.g. references within Case for Support rather than separate
 - suggestion that there should be a checklist to ensure all documents/attachments are included
- structure and content:
 - Case for Support (or under another name) needs broader guidance related to research design, methodology and other related contents
 - Pathways to Impact needs clearer guidance: some respondents unclear on relationship (and perceived duplication) between Pathways to Impact and Project Summary; concern about identifying potential beneficiaries for some types of research project.

- Other attachment types: need to be clearer on added value of these e.g. letters of support or Education Plan; questions about whether these materials are necessary or useful
- budgetary and financial/resources information:
 - terminology issues such as 'one line vote items'; comments about levels of detail required and whether this is too micro-managed; need for specific items queried ranging from PI time to university declarations on equipment
 - clarity on whether Open Access publication costs can be included in project budget
 - difficulties around estimating PI time on a project per week: suggestions range from removing completely or estimating per project month instead
- ethics:
 - various comments made here some of which are beyond revisions to the documentation, including themes such as timing of when ethics approval needed and clearer guidance for both clinical and non-clinical project types
- review processes:
 - more information should be provided to ensure clarity and transparency for all involved in the application process; includes issues such as likely funding cut-off grade levels
- ordering of information:
 - project title and details should be provided before the PI details
- RGC knowledge:
 - views that there are significant information elements in the application forms that the RGC should be able to produce itself, for example information on previous awards and applications.

3.28 It is not necessary to itemise here the series of individual changes that have resulted to the documentation from this feedback. In almost all areas we have revised further and taken on board the steer from stakeholders, except in those cases where further reduction or textual changes impact on the policies of the RGC and require further consideration. Where we have added further text i.e. explanatory notes for things like Pathways to Impact, this has been checked by the RGC staff for the specific scheme in preparation of the final versions.

Survey responses raising additional questions

3.29 Drawing upon the feedback, there were a number of issues and areas where we sought advice from RGC staff ranging from the possibility of reducing documentation lengths further through to guidance about ethics or specific attachments. We have liaised with the RGC staff on some of these issues and it is clear that the parameters of the current consultancy project do not lend themselves to consideration or implementation of some of the more extensive alterations to documentation indicated in some feedback. Indeed, in some areas this would require policy decisions by the RGC itself. In other feedback areas, the RGC is already progressing work on issues where the Phase II report highlighted the need for changes to systems and processes.⁶

⁶ For example, electronic submission for all schemes rather than continuing paper-based exercises, or trialling right-to-reply responses for applicants to the peer reviews on a given proposal.

3.30 The revised documents submitted as the outputs from this project therefore reflect an attempt to take on board as much of feedback as possible.

Post-stakeholder survey engagement with the document revision process

3.31 RGC Staff and Panel Members were engaged in further oversight of the revisions to specific schemes during October and November. In the case of Panel Members, this included sharing revised scheme documentation in full with Chairs and Deputy Chairs in all cases and encouraging them to coordinate in their feedback and where possible take further views from the panel as a whole. (It also involved soliciting further feedback responses from the Panel Members group to a set of sample scheme documentation.)

Feedback and choices

3.32 Inevitably, feedback can contradict either within the same stakeholder group or the same scheme sample pack or both. For example, feedback that asks for *more* guidance to be provided on some elements is often contained within a response that at the same time indicates that the documentation overall is too long or wordy. These are areas where choices will need to be made, largely determined by what the RGC seeks to deliver at the level of overarching or holistic changes.

3.33 We have used our judgement in relation to two aspects. First, the need to balance the feedback voiced by respondent group or scheme. As indicated, some contradictions may be visible here where a respondent group, say research office staff, raise one view in relation to a specific scheme sample pack that is then contradicted in (different) individuals from the same constituency responding on the same issue to another sample pack. In those cases, we have balanced how the views of a specific respondent group sit in relation to a cognate group – for example, research office staff with applicants or panel members with external reviewers.

Method: Reflective Revision

3.34 Our reflective revision process has involved drawing upon our initial issues with the documentation highlighted above, specifically the advantages of undertaking a holistic review of everything. The initial revisions carried out to provide the four sample packs for the stakeholder engagement were adapted via engagement with the relevant RGC scheme teams, and then further review and ownership/authorisation of the changes by the Chairs and Deputy Chairs of the relevant panel.

3.35 This phase highlights in many ways the flexibility of the term ‘review’ highlighted earlier in this report, and in fact present in the initial scope. We have taken the ‘light touch’ review recommended by the Phase II project as a basis. In some respects, the extent of our review suggestions – such as the inclusion of a single Statement on Submission for many schemes to reduce the repetitive tick-box confirmations by both applicant(s) and institution on the same form – and the production of new text summarising scheme aims within guidance documents have gone beyond just editorial revision.

3.36 We have, therefore, delivered on many of the issues about style, length, (in)consistencies highlighted by the previous report by Research Consulting as key areas of feedback from the RGC’s research and user constituencies requiring redress. On the basis of comments and engagement with RGC staff in consideration of the survey feedback from the current project, many of the outstanding issues about consistency in

approach and user-friendliness of documentation are likely to be addressed by the adoption of an electronic system for all schemes over the coming years.

3.37 There is, evidently, scope for more work but not as part of the current project. The stakeholder engagement and our own review of the materials suggests that in some cases beginning to build application materials up from 'scratch' as part of the development of new electronic application systems could be an advantage. Certainly, a deeper and more reflective look by the RGC and its panels concerning the content of application packs in general should be considered sooner rather than later. This should be undertaken on the basis of a frank assessment of what is relevant and required to make funding decisions for a specific scheme. Anything superfluous to the assessment of a research concept and its quality could – and indeed perhaps should – be added later to those applications in clear prospect of being funded or added as information requirements post-panel decision/recommendation. This would not just be about efficiency for applicants but for all stakeholders in the flow of processing an application, and would also require further engagement with key users before changes are made.

4. External Reviewer Database Overview Report

Scope of the review

4.1 The specification for this part of the consultancy noted that we should: “in reviewing the management of the ER database, identify[...] areas where improvement is required and provid[e] recommendations on the related enhancement measures.” More specifically, the tender indicated that we needed to:

review the ER database and to advise the Secretariat on the possible enhancements of the database, such as how to source expert peer reviewers in a more effective manner in order to enlarge the existing pool, how to remove unsuitable reviewers, and how to maintain the database in a more organized manner.

4.2 In the context of this project, the review of the RGC’s External Reviewer Database (ERD) has therefore had two elements:

- i. issues related to the functionality of the ERD
- ii. issues related to the performance of the ERD

4.3 With reference to (i) the ERD’s functionality, it has not proved possible for us to be granted access to the ERD itself. (Stakeholder engagement did indicate anxieties about the functionality of the system, which included suggestions that it is cumbersome, clunky and very time consuming for panel members.)

4.4 In terms of (ii) and the ERD’s performance and improvements to the management of the ERD, working with the RGC staff we have considered various options. Through a process of discussion, we have suggested a set of immediate and near-term steps that can be undertaken to improve the performance aspects of the ERD. We have also made a series of suggestions related to the wider international contexts of peer review at the present time.

Understanding the challenge

4.5 The RGC currently conducts its peer review processes for applications via an electronic system, which contains its ERD. The ERD contains the details – names, affiliations, contact emails, research areas, and some performance/quality assurance information – of approximately 12,000 individual reviewers.⁷

4.6 The ERD is added to on a regular basis by individual Panel Members in the identification and selection of reviewers for specific proposals.⁸ Panel Members provide some (limited) quality assurance feedback on individual reviewers. This information is stored in the ERD but not acted upon in any systematic way.⁹ Individual ERD ‘members’ are not notified of any specific feedback on their reviews and have no awareness of any recommendations not to use them in future made by Panel Members.¹⁰

⁷ This figure is cited in recent funding competition details, but the number appears to grow significantly each year.

⁸ Approximately 2,400 new reviewers were added each year in 2018 and 2019.

⁹ An ERD member needs to have received 5 panel member ratings with more than 50% of these as a ‘No’ to future use for ‘blacklisting’ to take place: this did not happen at all in 2019 and occurred twice in 2020. For those who do not reach this threshold panel members can see the number of Yes/No ratings received and use their discretion on selection of that reviewer in future.

¹⁰ ERD members can see information about the number of review requests that they have received, and assessments made during a current funding round.

4.7 There are no terms or durations for membership in the ERD: once invited to undertake a review even if that review invitation is declined or never submitted, an individual remains on the ERD. ERD members can remove themselves from receiving future review requests, although they remain listed on the ERD.¹¹

4.8 The use of ERD for peer review costs the RGC approx. HK\$21M p.a.

Previous feedback and international context

4.9 The report by Research Consulting highlighted a series of recommendations related to the review process, including specific items related to quality of reviews and the use of the External Reviewer Database. We have taken these observations into account in coming forward with the Options below. In addition, we also draw upon the recent Publons publication in the 'Global State of Peer Review' series, *Grant Review in Focus* (2019). This report takes as its key message that 'greater recognition of peer review would improve the peer review process'.¹² In terms of the future for grant peer reviewing, the report identifies the following central themes:

- improved recognition of peer reviewer contribution (but not necessarily via cash/payment for review)
- increased transparency: for example having a published list of reviewers used by an agency, which could be provided as a simple table in PDF (which is something provided by several of the UK research councils, for example);
- enhanced feedback for peer reviewers as well as applicants i.e. closing the 'feedback loop' so individual reviewers see how other reviewers graded a proposal and the final panel outcome (this might necessitate further system changes at the RGC);
- consistent and informative training and support
- recruitment processes for peer reviewers.¹³

4.10 These trends are consistent with our own experience running peer review systems and processes for UK research funders, and our work with agencies in the US, Canada, Australia and the EU in particular.

Peer review as a process

4.11 As the Publons report and other research in the field makes clear, peer review is both a quality assurance mechanism driven by expert knowledge and a (usually) electronic workflow system for the processing of grant applications from initial application to funding outcome. Research funders globally operate different internal systems ranging from 100% in-house (most common) to 100% outsourced (such as the work of the European Science Foundation for various agencies), or something in-between.

4.12 Such peer review systems need to balance the input of resources into their management and delivery of informed decision-making with the strategic levers of organisational planning and intention.

Peer reviewers: asset or resource?

¹¹ Over 300 ERD members asked not to receive invitations in future during 2018 and 2019.

¹² *Grant Review in Focus*, Publons Global Peer Review Series (2019), p.3.

¹³ *Ibid*, pp.30-36.

4.13 Some funders view their peer review mechanisms as an asset to the organisation: expertise and strategic advice ranging from individual applications through to strategic advisory groups and advocacy/networking contributions all coming within the purview of 'peer review' as a category. Given the scale of the RGC's ERD and its significant international element, it could be an organisational asset for the global presence of Hong Kong research excellence and its visibility in the international research arena.

4.14 Currently, the RGC relies heavily upon Panel Members' advice in the management and operation of the ERD and its members' activities. This does mean, however, that the RGC views the reviewer function as 'external' in some specific ways that may inhibit the capacity to create the kinds of reviewer communities or College of Experts that are much more commonly being deployed by other funders. We have shared information with the RGC staff on peer review collectives – be they colleges or groups, experts or peers – related to funding in the UK, Australia and the EU. There are different models available here but the key element which the RGC itself may take a view on is whether it views the ERD as an asset or just a resource. If it is a resource, then it is merely a database recording details which are accessed as and when needed and treated as an arms-length function of the work of a funder. If it is an asset, then a dataset of 12,000 individual researchers needs much more active management and engagement to build a sense of community and collective purpose.

Options for the External Reviewer Database and some fundamental questions

4.15 Our understanding is that there are some current challenges around the operation of the ERD and its contribution to the work of the RGC. From discussions with RGC staff and our reading of the previous stages in the RGC's review of its operations, it is clear that these challenges reside in both processes and outcomes of the ERD's use. For RGC staff (and Panel Members) the return rate of reviews on applications (c.55%) is viewed as a risk to the RGC's ability to operate an efficient and effective peer review system for its schemes. The agility of the ERD to take on new members via Panel Member invitations means that the ERD is a growing resource but one in which the RGC as an organisation has limited knowledge: for example, there is no information available about some core aspects of the ERD's population (gender, nationality, age, experience, subject balance/spread etc), which is an important factor in international comparisons related to equality, diversity and inclusion in peer review activities. Greater knowledge about these aspects might, for example, lead to a better understanding of whether there are unconscious biases in the review process or insufficient diversity of viewpoints within the reviewer community accessed by the RGC. There is also – as noted above – limited performance management activity to ensure the ERD is working to best effect, which does present some risks in the context of international comparator agencies.

4.16 Based on our experience, and the increasing trend of many funding agencies towards a more proactive approach to peer review experience as an organisational asset, we suggest that there are three main options available to the RGC, none of which is mutually exclusive:

- Option A: Continue with existing External Reviewer Database with minor modifications
- Option B: Adapt and re-model the existing External Reviewer Database
- Option C: Move from an External Reviewer Database to a more proactively managed College of Expertise

4.17 We have discounted options such as complete devolution of peer reviewing to a third-party because of the scale of the ERD's existing peer review assets, and the reputational risks of complete outsourcing.¹⁴ However, upfront investment in outsourced elements (such as the delivery of a recruitment exercise or online training packages for external reviewers) could be considered in the options outlined below.

4.18 Each option will have resource implications and a full cost benefit analysis would need to be undertaken before changes are made. All options are underpinned by the requirement that the RGC takes greater ownership of the ERD (or its successor) as an asset that needs to be managed and cultivated.

4.19 Fundamental questions which remain for RGC to consider in relation to current and future needs in all options are:

- Does the RGC view the External Reviewers as a manageable asset (intelligent added-value) or a purely functional resource (a stage-gate for assessment of individual proposals)?
- Does the RGC view the ERD as a community? In other words, is the ERD a database/repository of names or a group of individuals supportively engaged with the work of the RGC?
- Does the RGC seek to have a better understanding of the composition of the ERD? i.e. how it is constituted or requiring greater input into strategic considerations about its growth, scale, performance, and contribution?
- Does the RGC seek to have clearer performance management information concerning the ERD's activities?
- Does the RGC view its role as strategic ownership of the ERD including proactive management of performance, quality assurance, expectations of membership etc, or is this to remain in essence devolved to the constituent members of individual panels?

4.20 Without some degree of policy consideration in relation to the answers to these questions, improving the performance of the ERD is difficult if this is about anything more than short-term fixes rather than sustainable options.

Option A: Continue with existing External Reviewer Database with minor modifications

4.21 Minor modifications would, at a minimum, require:

- Removal of ERD members who have already been identified for 'blacklisting'
- Assessment of underperforming/non-active members of the ERD
- Analysis of invitation patterns to gauge specific subject needs/issues/questions of diversity

ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES
Familiarity of Panel Members and RGC staff with existing process	Low return / acceptance rate for review requests leading to redundant effort

¹⁴ In some respects, of course, the RGC does already 'outsource' elements of the ERD to its individual Panel Members in terms of de facto recruitment, selection and appointment of reviewers both within the existing ERD and as new members. This process is not, however, managed with any specific strategic organisational direction.

Large number of ERD 'members' on system to select from	Entirely Panel Member run, rather than RGC owned process, which could be liable to perceived bias
Easy for Panel Members to add new members to the ERD on a needs basis	Risk of lack of consistency or quality assurance in how reviews are undertaken
Draws on added value of Panel Members' own knowledge and expertise (and leveraged influence) in the field in inviting external reviewers	No centralised / organisational perspective on reviewer training and engagement
	Does not meet recommendations from previous Research Consulting report concerning feedback and quality assurance around reviewing
	Continuing reputational risk associated with inability to manage effectively the consistency and quality issues
	Lack of consideration of equality, diversity and inclusion issues or practices

Option B: Adapt and re-model the existing External Reviewer Database

4.22 Adapting and re-modelling would, at a minimum, require:

- removal of ERD members who have already been identified for 'blacklisting'
- removal of non-active (i.e. those who have asked not to be approached in future and those who never respond/consistently decline) ERD members
- systematic assessment of underperforming/non-active members of the ERD
- systematic analysis of invitation patterns to gauge specific subject needs/issues

ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES
As under Option A	As under Option A
Continuity of process and systems	Would require staff resource investment in modification process
Ensures some quality assurance mechanisms – largely 'filtering' of members - introduced	Issue of running modifications during 'competition' and application process
	Not sufficiently visible 'change' for applicants or reviewers

Option C: Move from an External Reviewer Database to a College of Expertise

4.23 This option requires a more significant investment in changes to the current way of working, although not a total break with existing scale or international status of the ERD. It will require, at a minimum:

- a recruitment and appointment process for membership
- terms of membership (duration expectations) and terms of service (contribution expectations)
- performance management and quality assurance mechanisms built-in to the system
- active collection of contextual data on membership
- greater visibility and ownership of the peer review asset by the RGC
- enhanced direction for Panel Members on selection of reviewers (i.e. balance of genders, career stages, etc)

ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES
Creates a 'clean break' rather than Options A + B	Resources involved and staff investment required
Focuses on changes required for now and the future	Timing and transition period means this is a medium-term solution, so transition phase of running 'two' systems
Could build resilience and create efficiencies	Would need to design new recruitment and training programmes but once delivered these are models that can then be reused
Potential to speed up reviewer matching / reviewer identification through use of keywords in applications	
Profile-raising role of RGC's peer reviewing commitment and community	
In line with international best practice	
Cultivation and development of a community of reviewers	
Effective and transparent performance management information for both the RGC and its College of Expertise membership	
Allows inclusion of 'best elements' of current ERD into new model i.e. offers opportunity to filter existing poor performance and maintain excellent reviewer contributions	
Valuing of peer review activities i.e. through esteem notifications for high performing reviewers etc	

Responses to the Options

4.24 Liaising with RGC staff on the thinking behind these three options, we agree that at this stage in the context of time and resources, Option B is the most viable and deliverable programme with the addition of some elements from other areas. RGC staff will therefore proceed to undertake the:

- removal of ERs who have already been identified for 'blacklisting'; removal of non-active (i.e. those who have asked not to be approached in future and those who never respond / consistently decline) ERs;
- systematic assessment of underperforming / non-active ERs;
- systematic analysis of invitation patterns to gauge specific subject needs / issues;
- performance management and quality assurance mechanisms built-in to the system; and
- enhanced direction for Panel Members on selection of ERs (i.e. balance of genders, career stages, etc).

4.25 One of the RGC's key concerns is the sourcing and recruitment of External Reviewers, and clearly these needs will be likely exacerbated when implementation of those under-performance rectifications begins. We have suggested that there are alternative options here ranging from open recruitment of new members via a public call and nomination process through to further consultancy work which would scope out a viable, at-scale invitation list from which the RGC could identify and appoint new members.

4.26 Performance management processes work best when all parties have agreed acceptable performance levels / benchmarks in advance. Our suggestion would be if any of the below are to be implemented, then ERs would need to be aware that these are measures they will be assessed against as this in itself may influence behaviour. For example, informing all ERD members that they are expected to undertake up to a set/indicative number of reviews per annum.

4.27 Our recommendations in this area, which we have discussed with RGC colleagues, propose that work is undertaken to deliver performance measures as follows:

Performance management measure	When assessed/checked	What does 'flagged' performance mean?	Resultant action if below measure
Not contacted to undertake reviews	Every 4 years	Nil usage by RGC panels/RGC	Remove from ERD
Responsiveness to review requests	Annually checked looking at multi-year period	Nil responses to review requests	Remove from ERD
Declining review requests	Annually checked looking at multi-year period	Reviewer declines all requests	Check reasons for declines: if largely 'too busy' then remove from ERD
Declining more than half of review requests	Annually checked looking at multi-year period	Fewer than 50% of review requests accepted	Check quality of the reviews: if fine, then ERD membership continues if quality issues raised by panel members then assess value/contribution to ERD (i.e. how active previously) consider removal from ERD
Accepting review requests but perfunctory/overly brief review comments	Each panel member usage of reviewer	Panel members commenting that the review is too brief (even if comments are pertinent / grading is fine)	Panel Members/Secretariat to feedback to ER that reviews are useful but fuller commentary needed in future
Accepting review requests but poor quality reviews	Annually	Panel members indicating there are quality issues/wouldn't recommend using reviewer in future but <i>lower</i> than the existing 50% rule on ER feedback for 'black-listing'	Consider removal from ERD based on assessment of previous activity/quality levels
Accepting review requests but poor quality reviews	Annually	As above but 50% or greater negative panel member feedback	Remove from ERD

5. Concluding thoughts

5.1 As we have indicated throughout this report, the need to be alert and attentive to the full picture of the RGC's schemes and documentation is important. During the project, some of the tensions around changes we proposed to schemes became apparent partly when we engaged with those who 'owned' the relevant scheme. The challenge with this approach to the review is that most of those we engaged – not only RGC staff but panel members, applicants and institutions – were necessarily thinking of changes to 'their' or 'a' scheme rather than the implications of changes and improvements across the RGC's provision as a whole; while we tried to mitigate this through the use of scheme-type templates, it was not always possible to remove the idea that this is really 'scheme x'. This is not in itself a problem and does not invalidate the changes and adaptations made as part of this review but it does mean that rather than begin with the question '*what are the core things we need to include in an application process and why?*' the position has sometimes been more '*what are the things we are prepared to remove or change in the way we do things now?*'

5.2 At a fundamental level, this points to the need for the RGC to consider this project as essentially between a 'light touch review' and a more underpinning re-evaluation of schemes and their documentation.

5.3 The process has, though, also been suggestive of a range of other issues that the RGC itself might want to take into consideration related to:

- the approach to peer review
 - the need for more detailed and systematic analysis of the composition of the ERD against the needs of the RGC
 - understanding and awareness among the research community of what decision-making looks like for the RGC
 - engagement with the community of panel members, reviewers, applicants, and institutions
- feedback indicates ongoing concerns about how responsive the RGC is to the needs of its communities through documentation right up to visibility of policy and strategy
- international best practice in areas such as:
 - efficiency
 - impact of RGC documents and processes on sector (in)efficiency
 - transparency and accountability
- visibility and awareness of what the RGC does with applications
 - how much the RGC holds in terms of information on its researchers, and the inefficiencies of repeat information provision
- community building
 - potential for engagement and communication plans related to the RGC's schemes but also the necessary demystification of what the RGC does in terms of supporting a research ecosystem that involves multiple forms of knowledge and expertise
- equality, diversity and inclusion
 - impact of documentation and processes on the research community can be both positive and negative in terms of perceptions and realities.

Annex 1: International Funding Agencies reviewed as part of this report

During the course of this project, we have looked at the work of various international funding agencies in terms of the documentation and application processes and also the use of peer review. These perspectives have informed our delivery of the documentation review and also our recommendations in relation to further development of the External Reviewer Database. These agencies have included:

- Arts and Humanities Research Council – UK
- Australian Research Council – Australia
- Economic and Social Research Council - UK
- Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council – UK
- European Research Council - EU
- European Science Foundation - EU
- Leverhulme Trust – UK
- National Endowment for the Humanities - US
- National Institutes of Health – US
- National Research Council – Canada
- UK Research and Innovation - UK
- Wellcome Trust - UK

ANNEX 2: Statistical responses to specific questions:

Summary

The survey asked a series of questions seeking respondents' feedback on four scheme sample packs. These included packs for a Large Open scheme, a Strategic scheme, a scheme focused on Individual research awards, and a scheme directed at the self-financing sector.

Each sample pack included a range of documentation. This included an Application Form, Application Guidance, the Statement on Submission, the Panel Member and External Reviewer Guidance and Review Forms, and the Reporting Form.

A total of 162 responses were received to the survey. Not all stakeholder groups were asked to review all of the materials, instead focusing respondents on those documents that they had most experience in using, and therefore the possible number of responses to some of the questions is lower than 162. This is indicated in the descriptions below. All stakeholders were asked to comment on the Application Form and Scheme Guidance for the relevant sample pack.

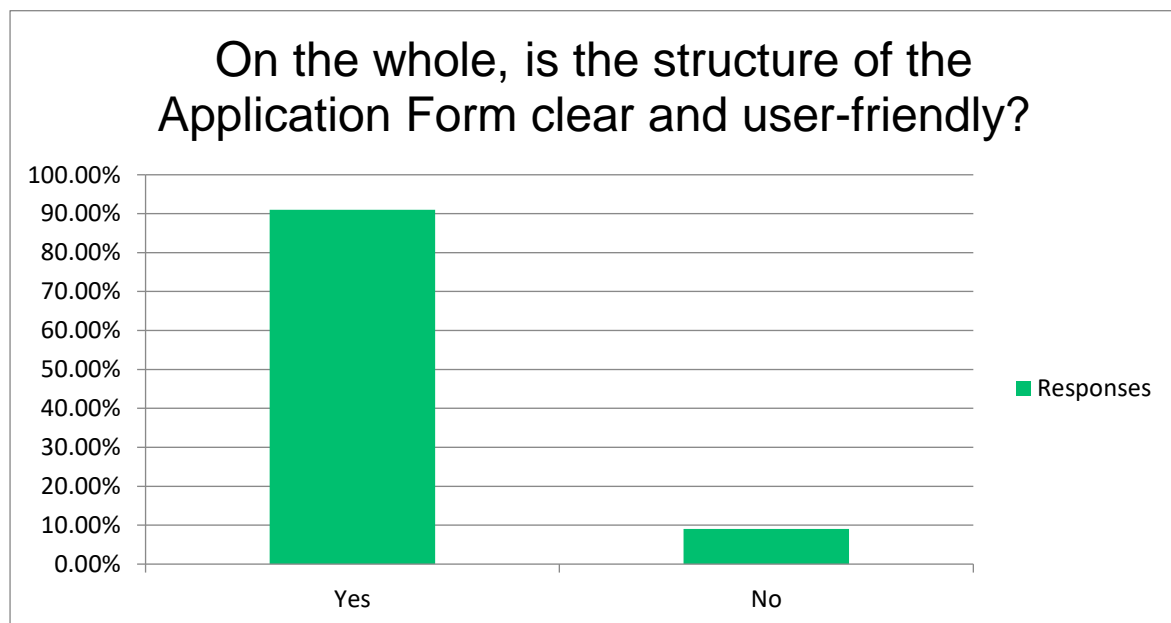
This Annex provides an overview of the statistical responses to each of the questions in the survey. It merges the responses from across the different stakeholder groups and across the different document packs to provide an overall response. However, it also points out where divergences occur in relation to different stakeholder group reactions or where responses were markedly different for a specific sample pack.

Questions and responses

Questions 1-4 were contextual information gathering questions about respondents. Any further "missing" questions below are because they were open text fields.

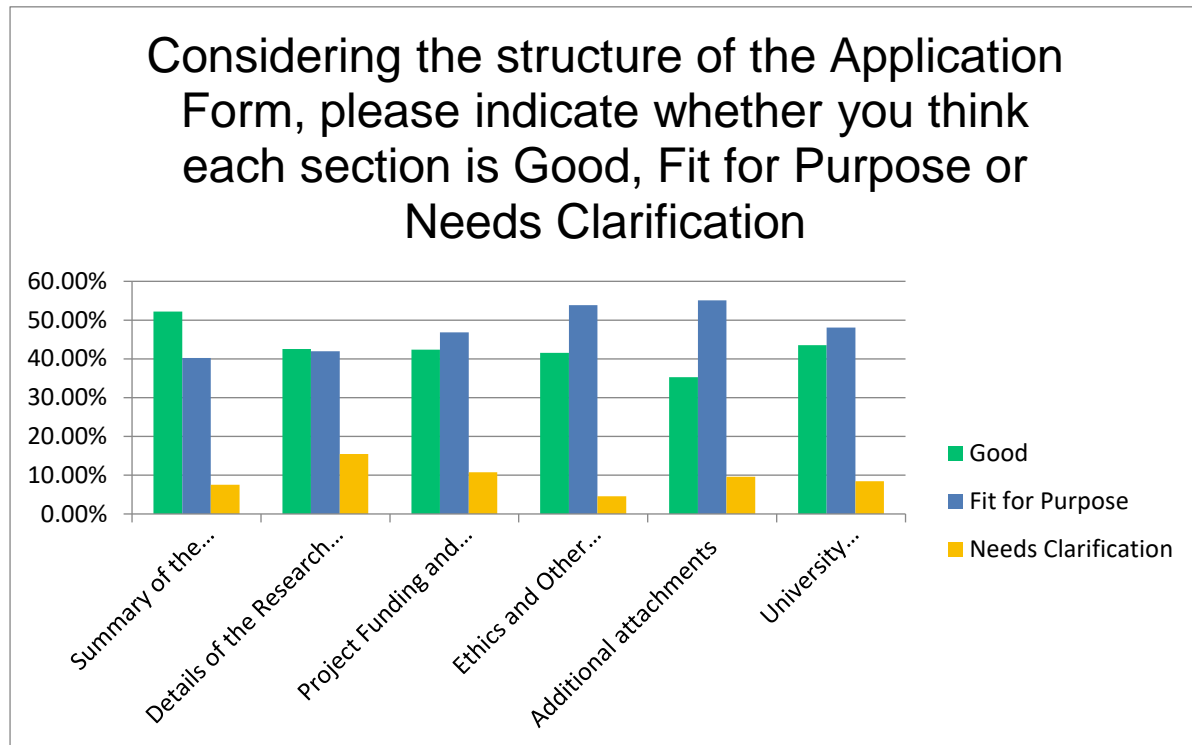
Application Form

Question 5



All respondents across all stakeholder groups answered this question (162 in total) and overall the response was positive (91%). Of those that responded No (9%), the majority fell into either Applicant or Research Office stakeholder groups and reasons for responses have been factored into the summaries above.

Question 6

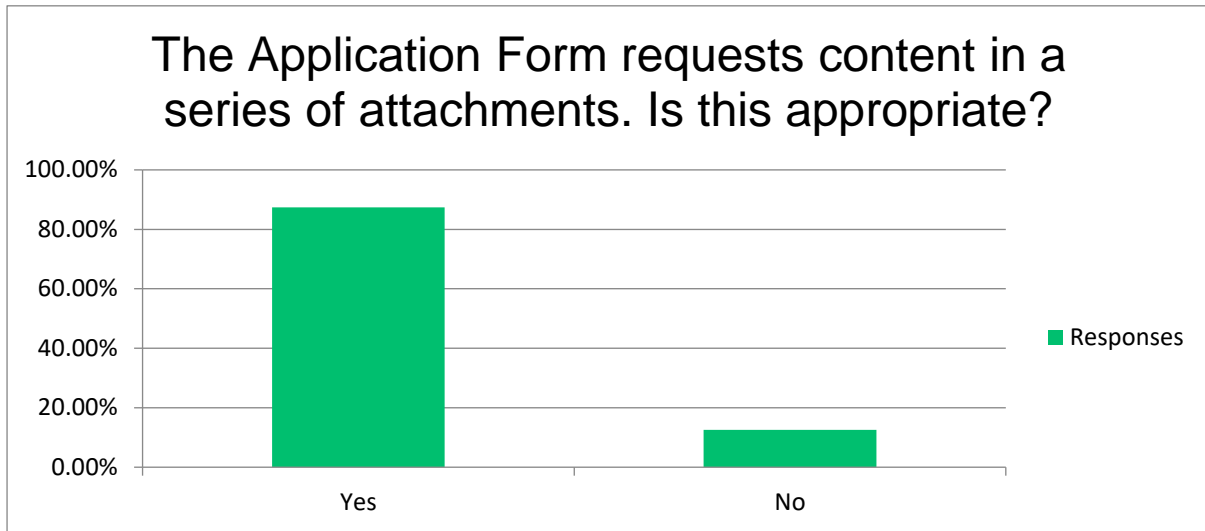


Again, all respondents answered this question about the different sections of the application form and the majority regarded the documentation as either ‘Good’ or ‘Fit for Purpose’.

There were three sections where ‘Needs Clarification’ either reached or exceeded 10% of responses. These were: Details of the Research Proposal (15%), Project Funding and Resources (11%) and Additional Attachments (10%). Across the different sample packs and stakeholder groups this was particularly the case amongst RGC staff for the Individual Scheme and for Panel Members in relation to the Large Open Scheme (though it should be noted that the numbers of respondents are small in both cases).

The schemes with higher proportions of ‘Fit for Purpose’ were Self-Financing and Strategic.

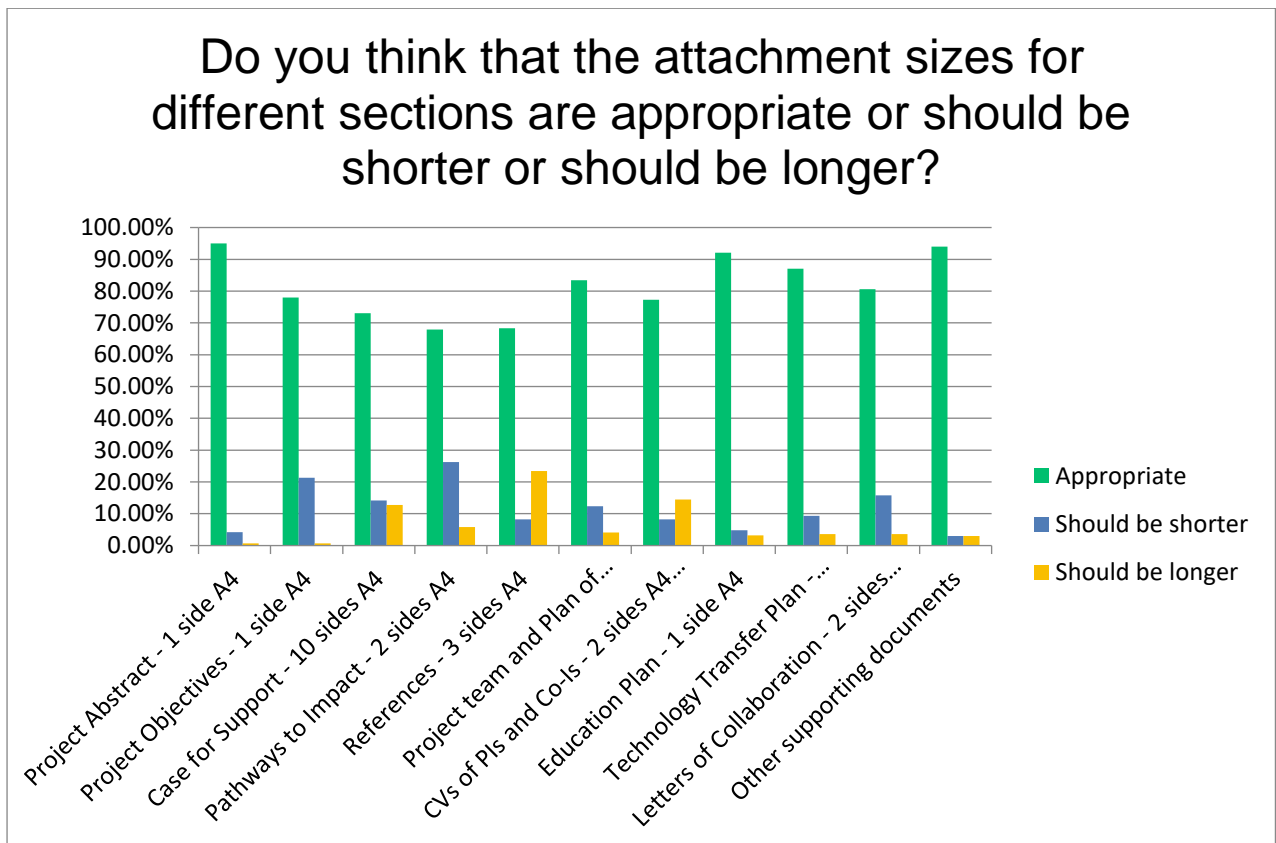
Question 8



All respondents answered this question with 142 of 162 indicating that the use of attachments was appropriate. This included 90% of Applicants (the stakeholder group with the highest number of respondents)

Of the 20 respondents that did not feel attachments were appropriate, 13 of these were reacting to the Self-Financing sample pack (and of those 7 were from the Research Staff stakeholder group) and the remainder were responding to the Large Open scheme (evenly distributed across different respondent groups).

Question 9

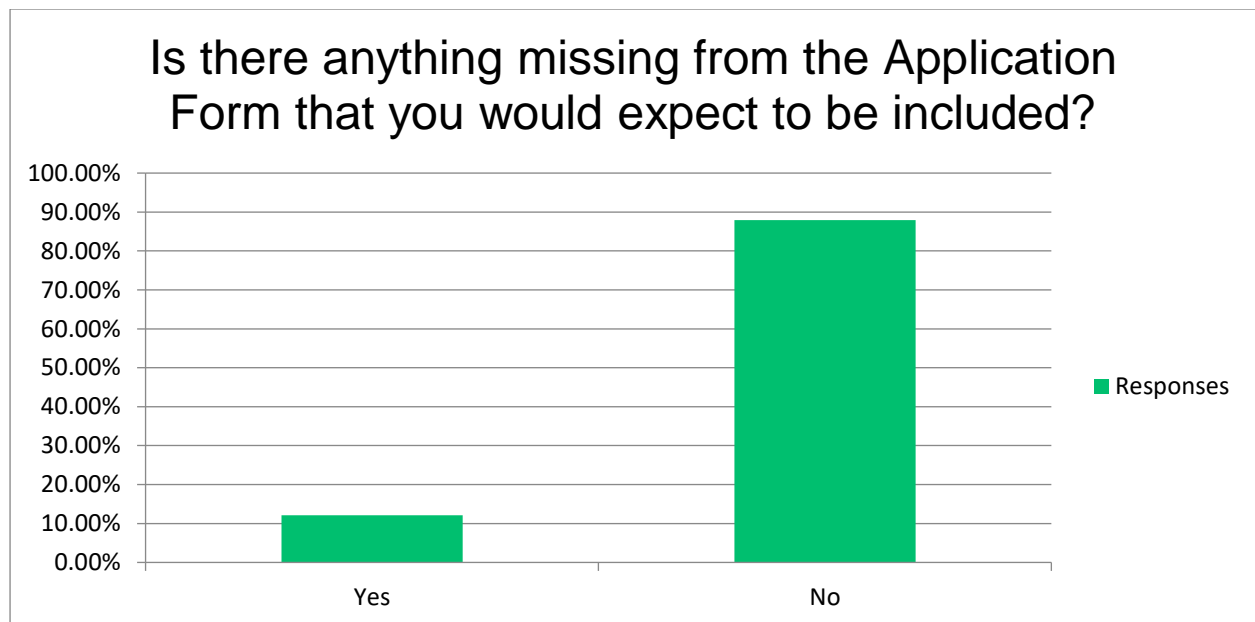


The majority of respondents answered this question averaging at 131 responses across the different attachment types, though there were fewer responses re. the Education Plan attachment (63) which had an impact on the average.

- ‘Appropriate’ responses were the majority across all attachment types and highest for the Project Abstract (95%), Education Plan (92%) and Supporting Documents (94%).
- ‘Should be shorter’ responses were higher (relative to other attachment categories) for Pathways to Impact (26%) and Project Objectives (21%).
- ‘Should be longer’ responses were higher relative to other categories for References (23%)

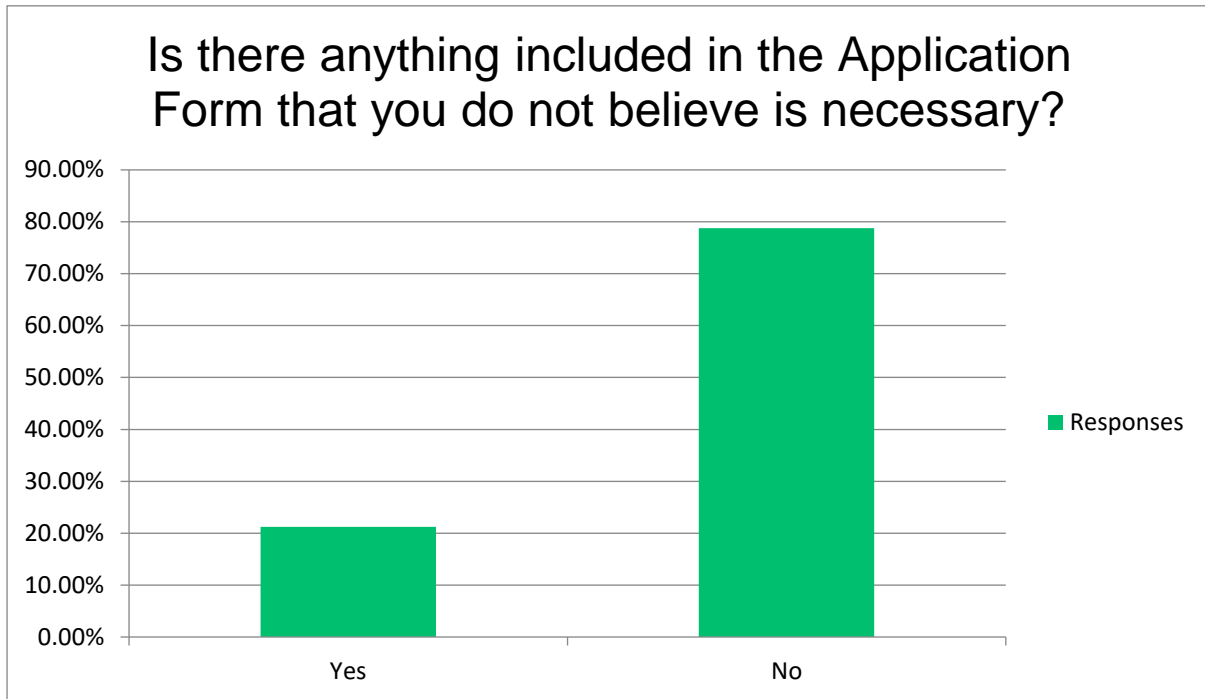
Our report explores some of the qualitative feedback provided in relation to attachments and appropriate lengths.

Question 10



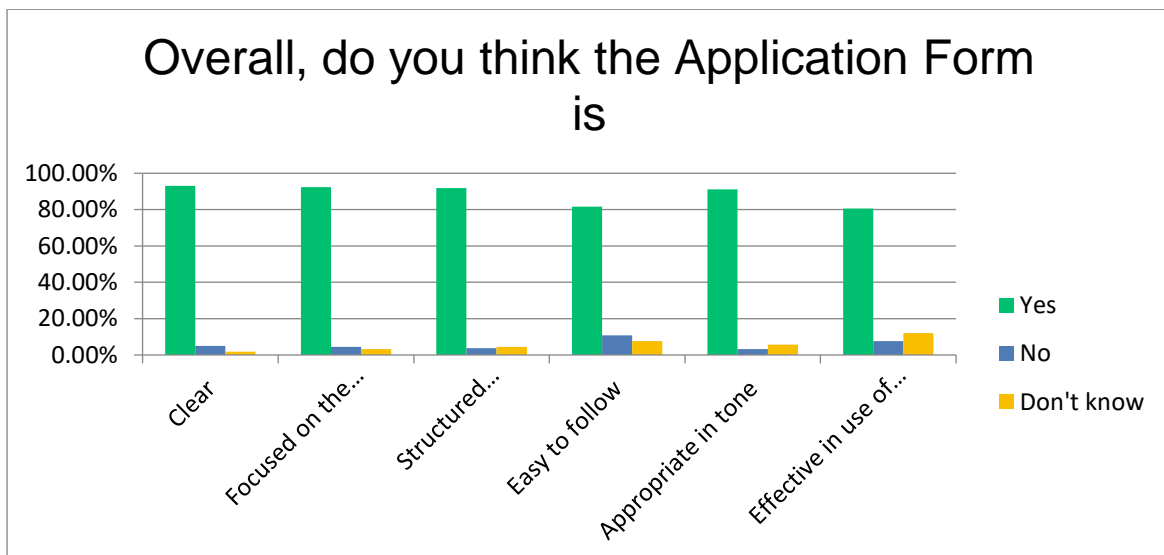
All 162 respondents answered this question with 12% observing that items were missing and providing feedback accordingly. The ‘Yes’ responses were quite evenly distributed across scheme pack and stakeholder group with most (5 out of 21) coming from Applicants in relation to the Large Open scheme. Feedback on what was missing ranged from the specific (e.g. tick boxes for attachments) to the more strategic (e.g. career development plans for researchers) and is incorporated into our overall analysis.

Question 11



There were 159 of a possible 162 responses to this question and 21% felt that there were unnecessary items in the application form. 18 of these were from the Applicant stakeholder pool (mainly Large Open and Self-Financing sample packs) with the rest being more evenly spread across the remaining stakeholder groups. Feedback provided in the open text field varied though a significant cluster of responses related to the grant record of applicants being unnecessary.

Question 12

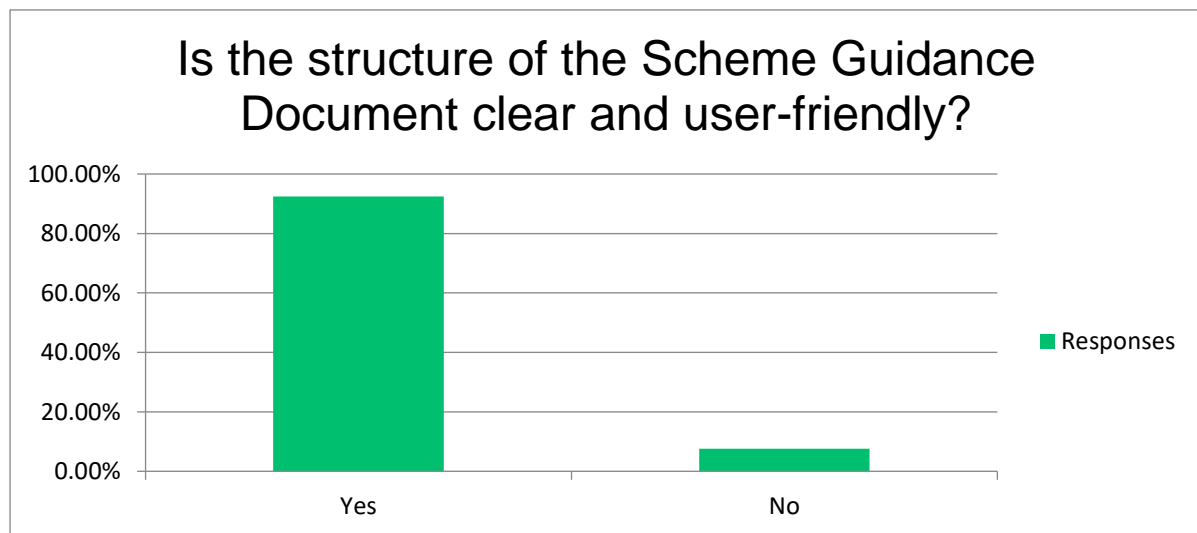


All 162 responded to this question and the vast majority (90%+) found the application clear, structured appropriately and focused on the right information. This positive response dipped to 80% or higher in relation to two sub questions: whether the application form was 'Easy to follow' and 'Effective in its use of attachments'.

A range of feedback was provided by those who responded 'No' or 'Don't know' in these categories; this has been analysed and incorporated into the report. This ranged from feedback on the formatting of the document through to suggestions for merging particular attachments. A cluster of responses related to broader issues e.g. encouraging RGC to make more/wider use of electronic systems to enhance user friendliness of the application process.

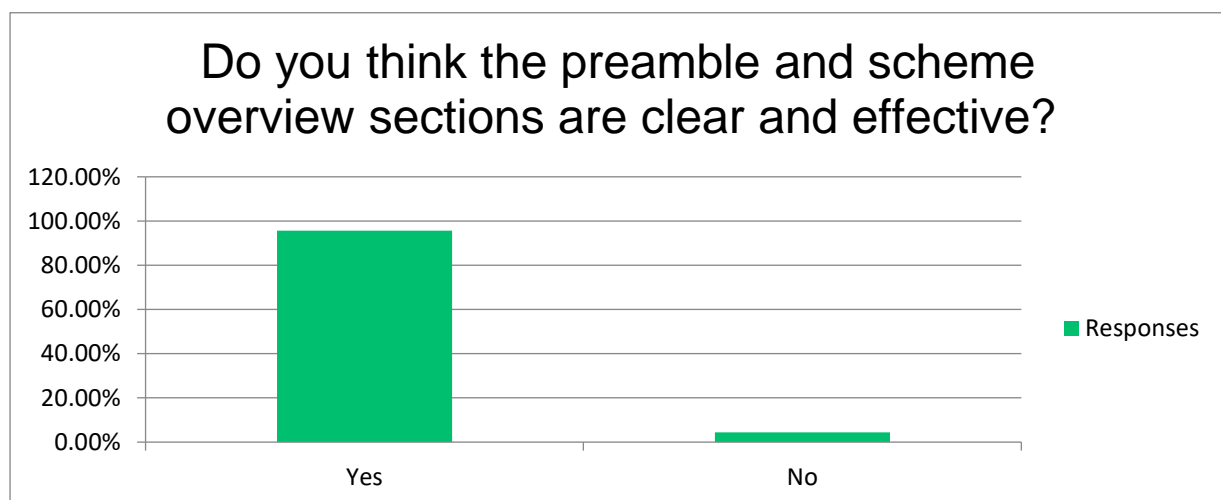
Scheme Guidance Documents

Question 14



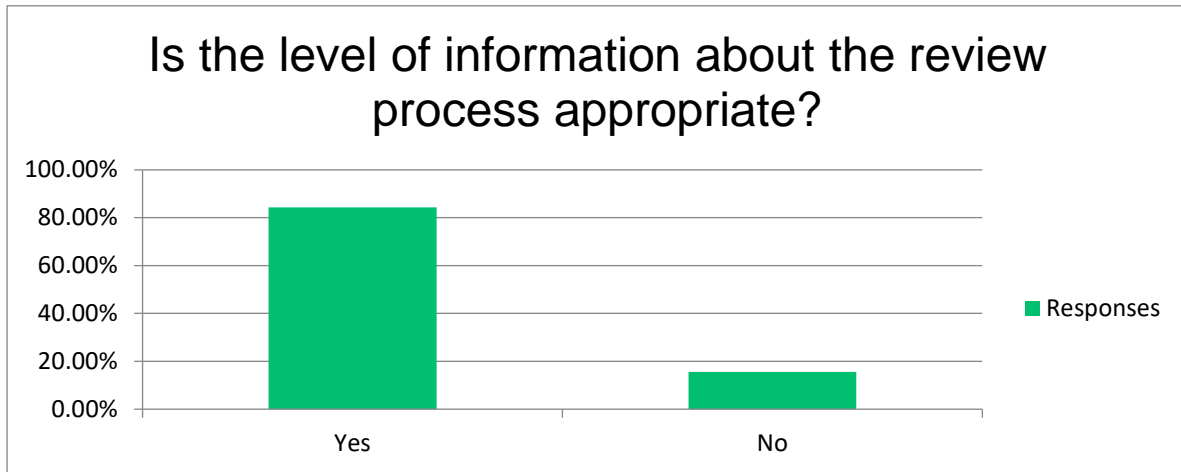
All 162 respondents answered this question and 92% found the Guidance documents to be clear and user-friendly. Those responding no were evenly distributed across stakeholder groups and schemes. Of the feedback provided some indicated that the layout of the Guidance could be improved to help navigation.

Question 15



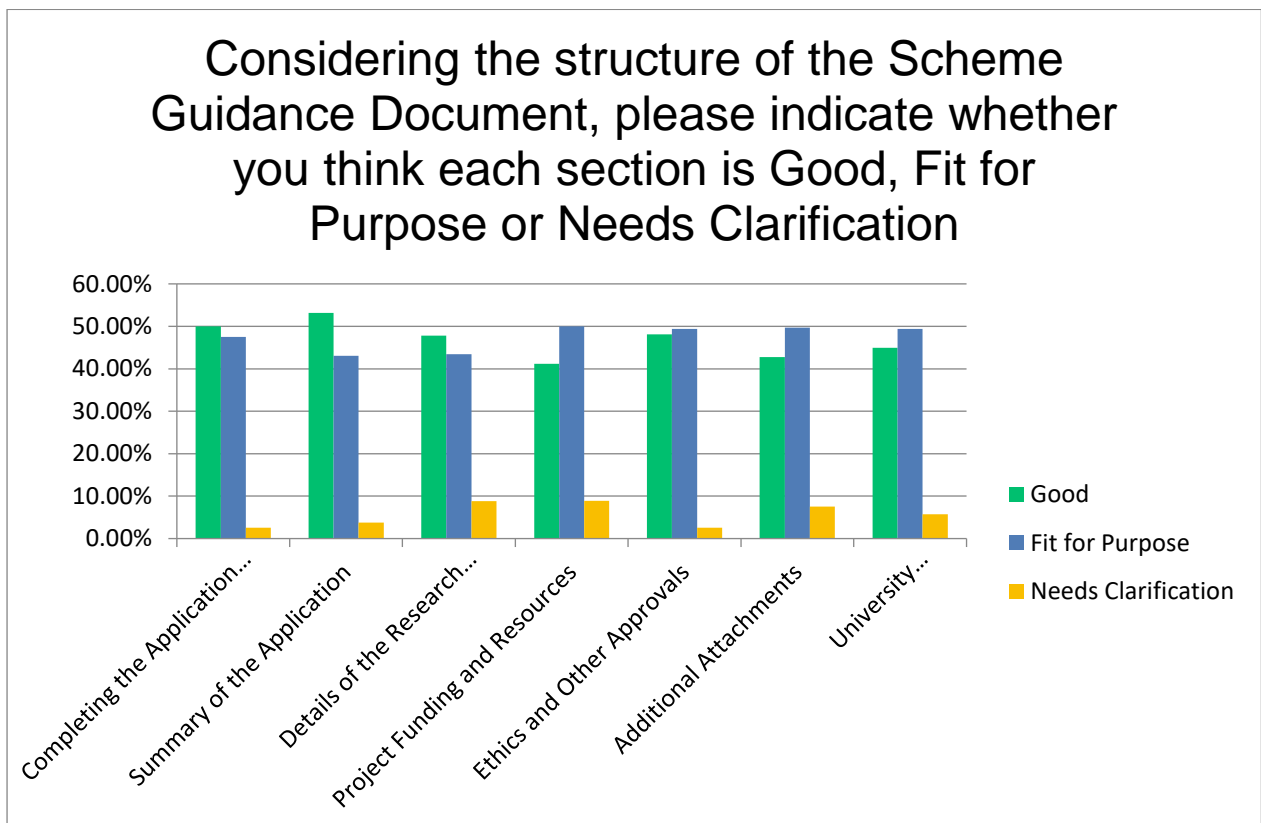
Of the 162 responses, 96% felt the scheme overview section of the Guidance was clear and effective.

Question 16



A total of 162 responses, of which 16% answered 'No'. Overall, the feedback provided by the 'No' respondents clearly pointed to an appetite for more information on the review process. 15 were responding to the Large Open scheme and a further 10 to the Self-Financing scheme. 16 were applicants; remaining respondents fell across all stakeholder groups, including Panel Members and External Reviewers but excluding RGC staff.

Question 17

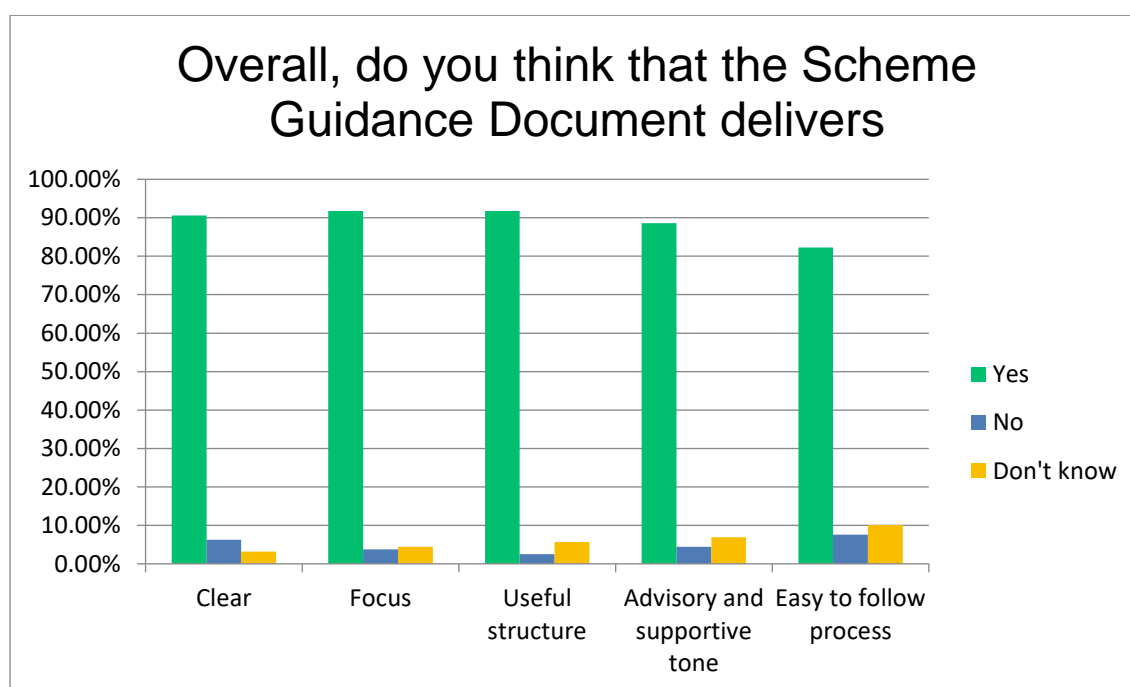


This question asks respondents for a judgement on the different sections of the Guidance (the final section relating to the University declaration/Statement on Submission). All respondents answered the question with the vast majority (over 90%) finding each section either 'Good' or 'Fit for Purpose'. The 'Fit for Purpose' responses were more prevalent among Applicants and

Research Office staff, however they also dominated the RGC staff responses on the Individual Scheme (though there are low numbers in this category).

Those sections that had a higher proportion of respondents asserting ‘Needs Clarification’ (relative to other sections) were Details of the Research Proposal (9%), Project Funding and Resources (9%) and Additional Attachments (8%). The feedback provided varies, but there are clusters of responses that seek more detailed guidance on what should be included in the Details of the Research Proposal including the Case for Support and Pathways to Impact attachments. There are a further cluster of comments about guidance around Ethics approval. These are incorporated into our commentary above.

Question 19



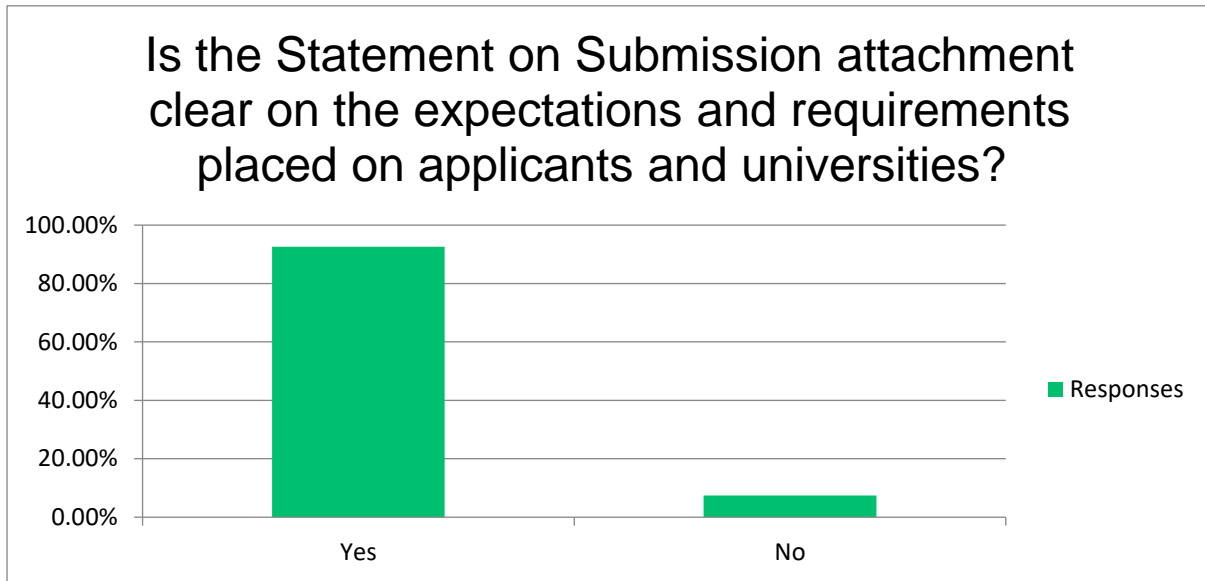
All 162 respondents provided an answer to this question with 160 answering it in full. The vast majority of respondents (90% or higher) found the scheme guidance to be clear, focused and structured appropriately. A slightly lower number (80% or higher) found the tone to be appropriate and it to be easy to follow.

The views of respondents were largely harmonious with the greatest difference of opinion being amongst the Research Office staff responding to the Large Open sample pack.

Statement on Submission

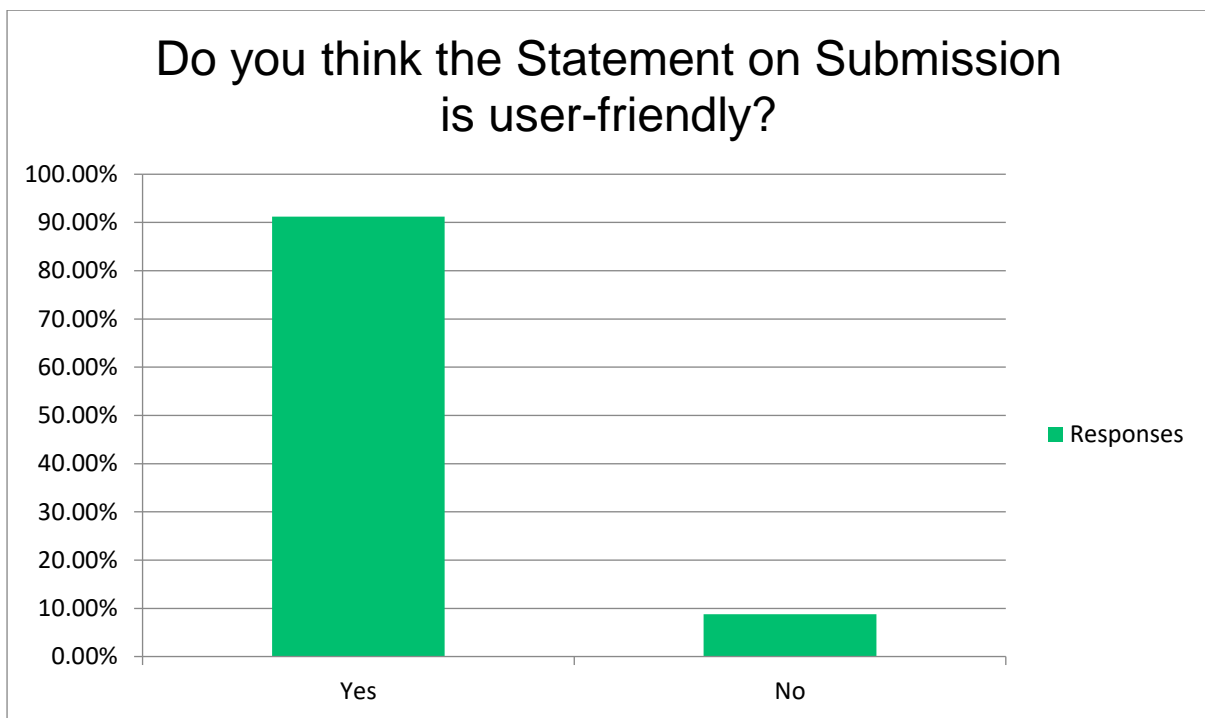
Questions 20 – 24 ask questions about the Statement on Submission. This is a new piece of documentation introduced into the process with the intention of reducing the amount of duplication in tick box format completed by both the applicants and the submitting institutions. The Statement on Submission seeks to consolidate this into a single sign off with various subsections to streamline materials. While the overarching response to each question is supportive, there was a minority of respondents to each question who felt the Statement could be clearer or that things needed removal or addition. The feedback provided has been incorporated into our recommendations in the report.

Question 20



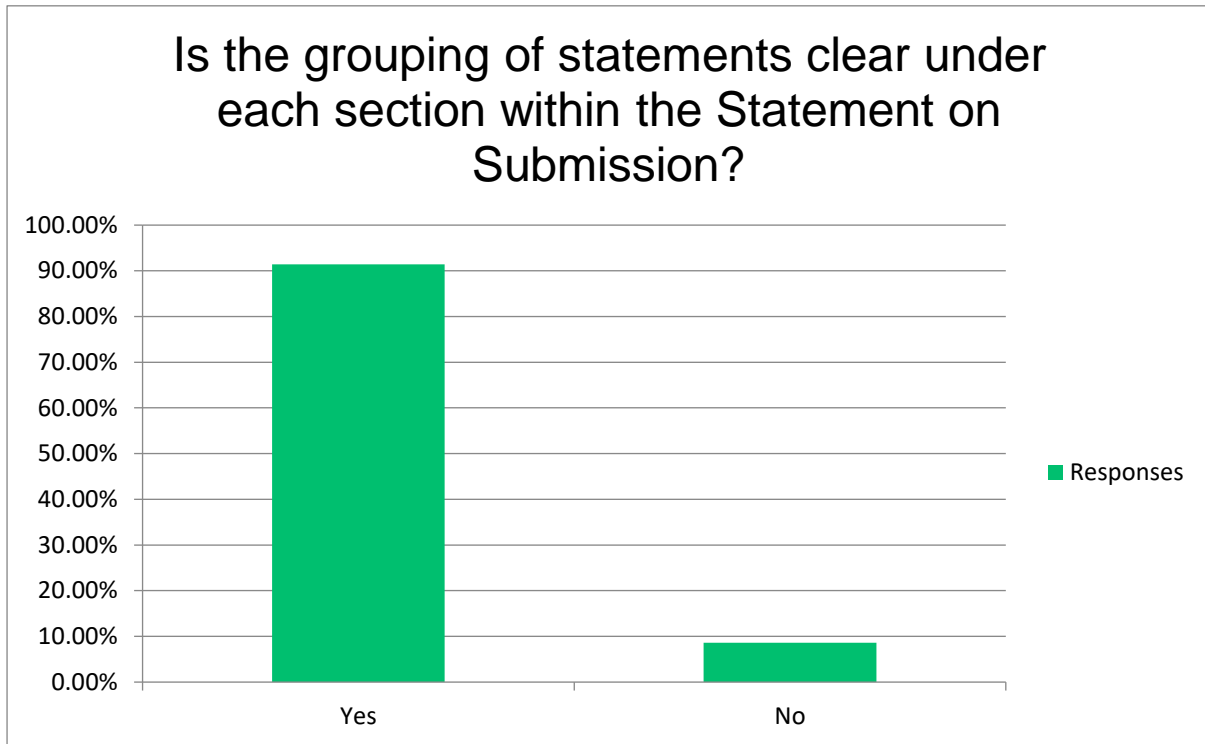
There were 151 responses to this question with 93% responding 'Yes'. 'No' responses were spread across the different stakeholder groups and scheme sample packs.

Question 21



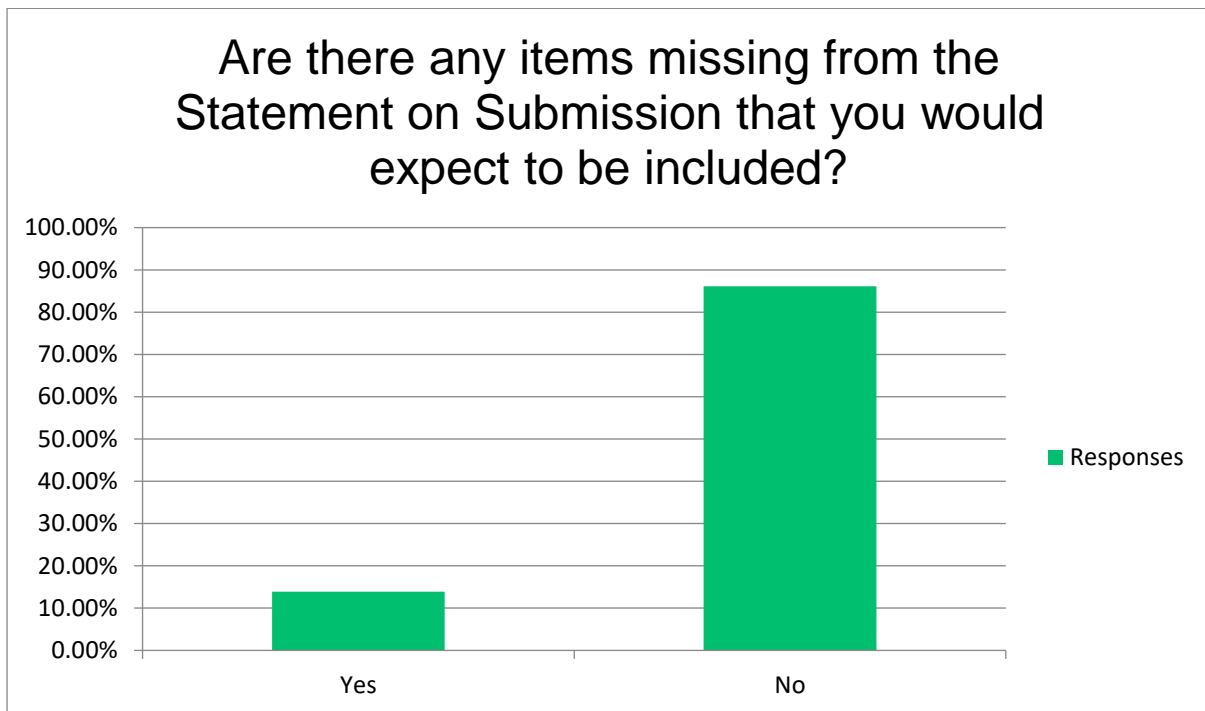
Of the 151 responses to this question 91% found the Statement on Submission user-friendly. As with the previous question, those responding 'No' were dispersed across stakeholder group and scheme sample pack type.

Question 22



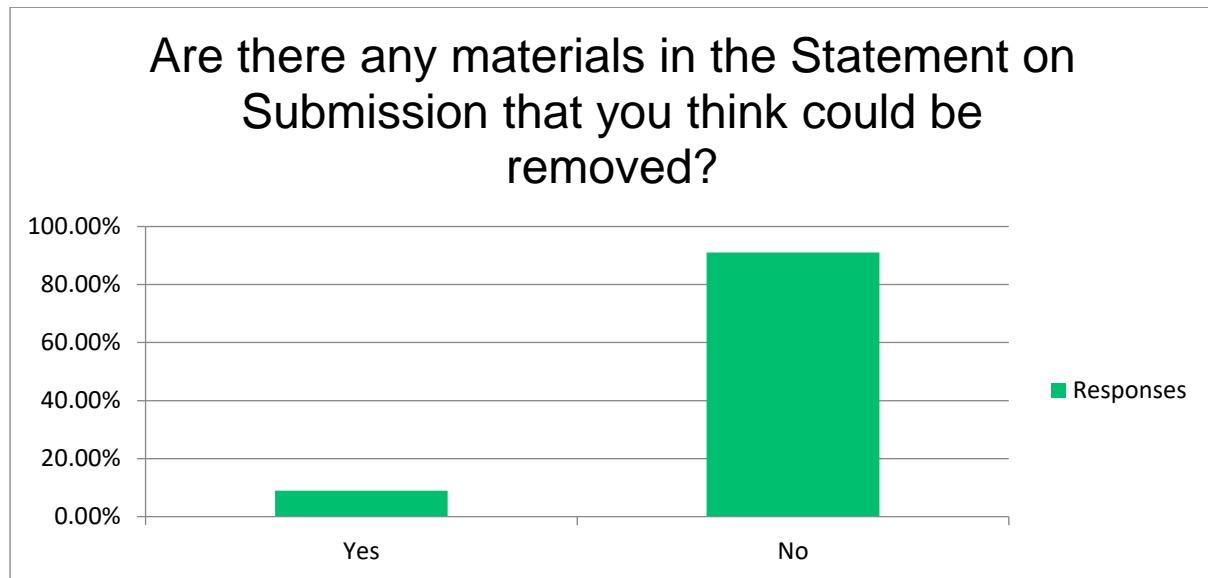
91% of the 151 respondents found the grouping of the statements to be clear. The majority of those who responded 'No' were Applicants or Research Office staff. A range of feedback was provided to help improve the clarity of the Statement.

Question 23



Of the 151 respondents to this question, 14% felt there were elements missing from the Statement on Submission but largely these related to procedural points that had previously appeared in both the applicant and institutional declarations. The majority of these respondents were either responding to the Large Open scheme pack or the Self-financing scheme pack.

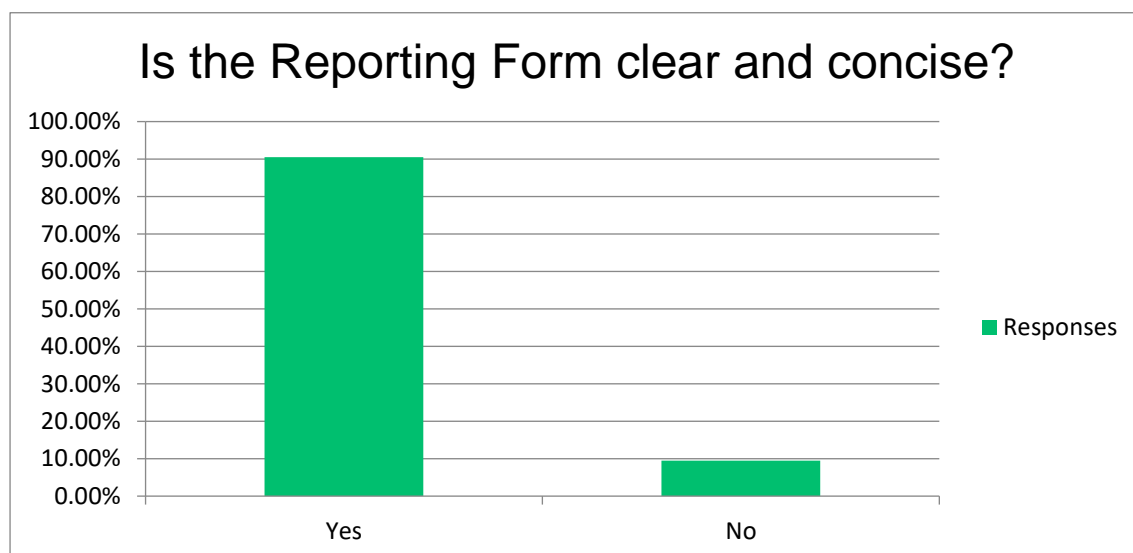
Question 24



Of the 150 respondents, 10% (15) felt there were elements that could be removed from the Statement on Submission. The majority of these (9) were responding to the Large Open sample pack.

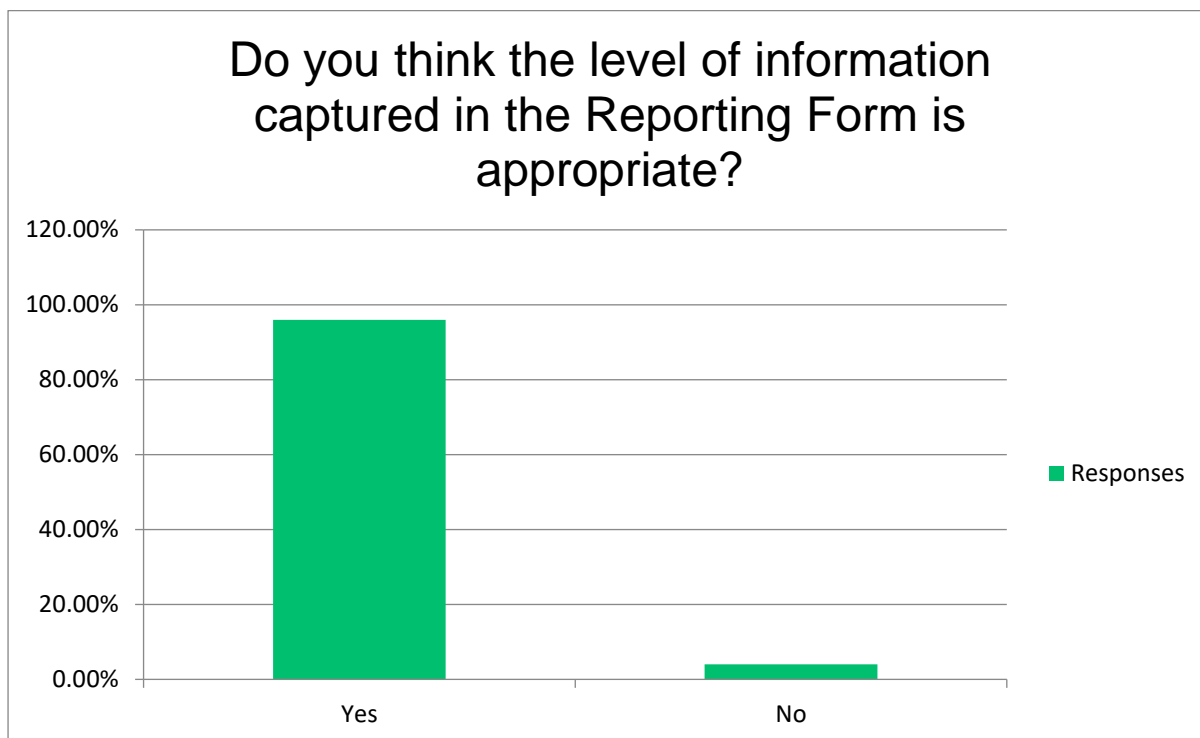
Reporting Form

Question 25



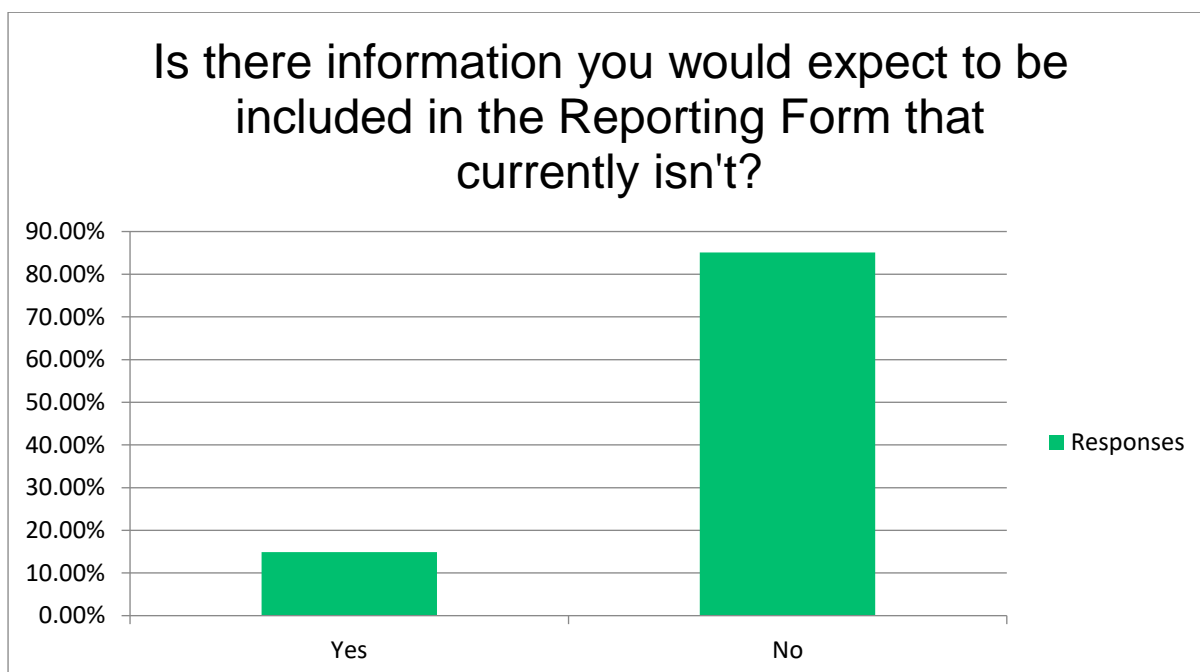
90% felt the Reporting Form was clear and concise.

Question 26



96% of the 150 responses agreed that the level of information collected was appropriate.

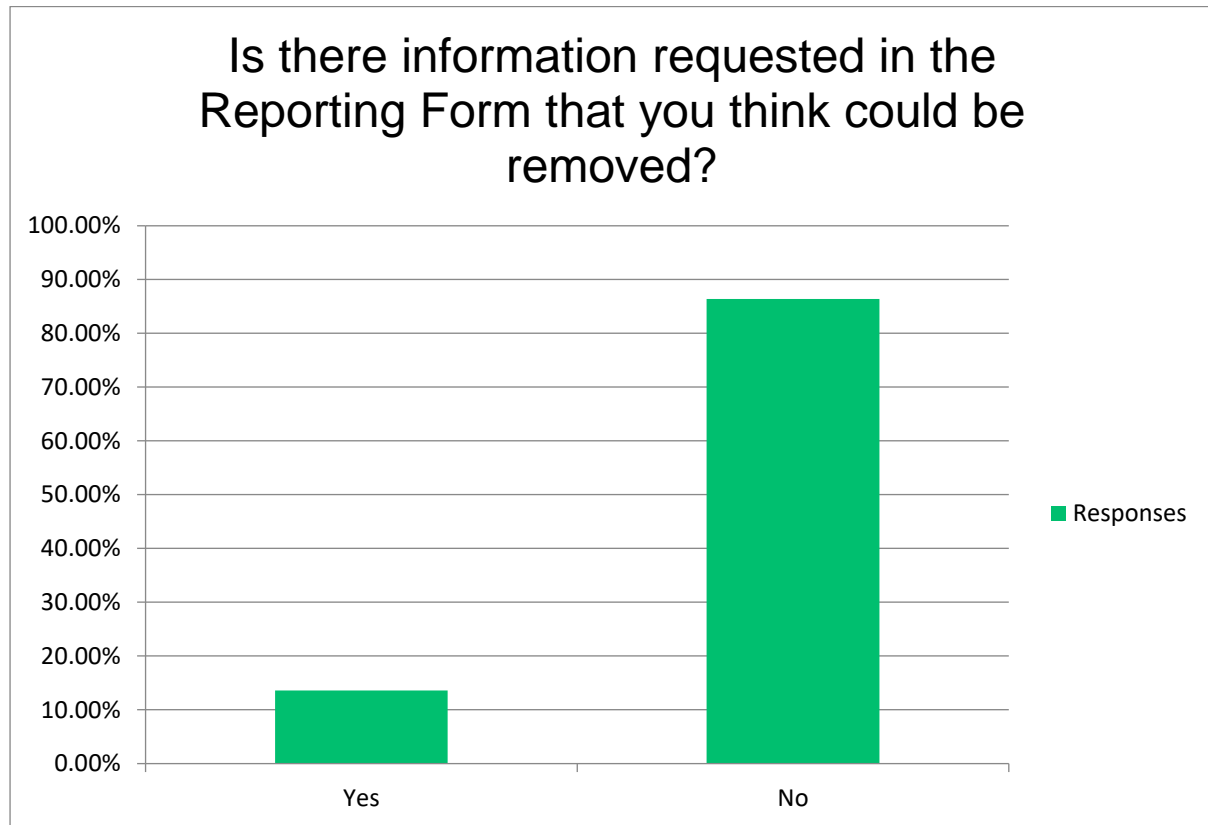
Question 27



15% of respondents felt there was information that they would expect to be collected in this form that was not. Half of those responding "Yes" to this question were applicants, and the main concern appears to be whether there is sufficient reporting on the actual time spent by

applicants delivering projects (i.e. record of the hours spent on activities for each grant as part of the monitoring and reporting process).

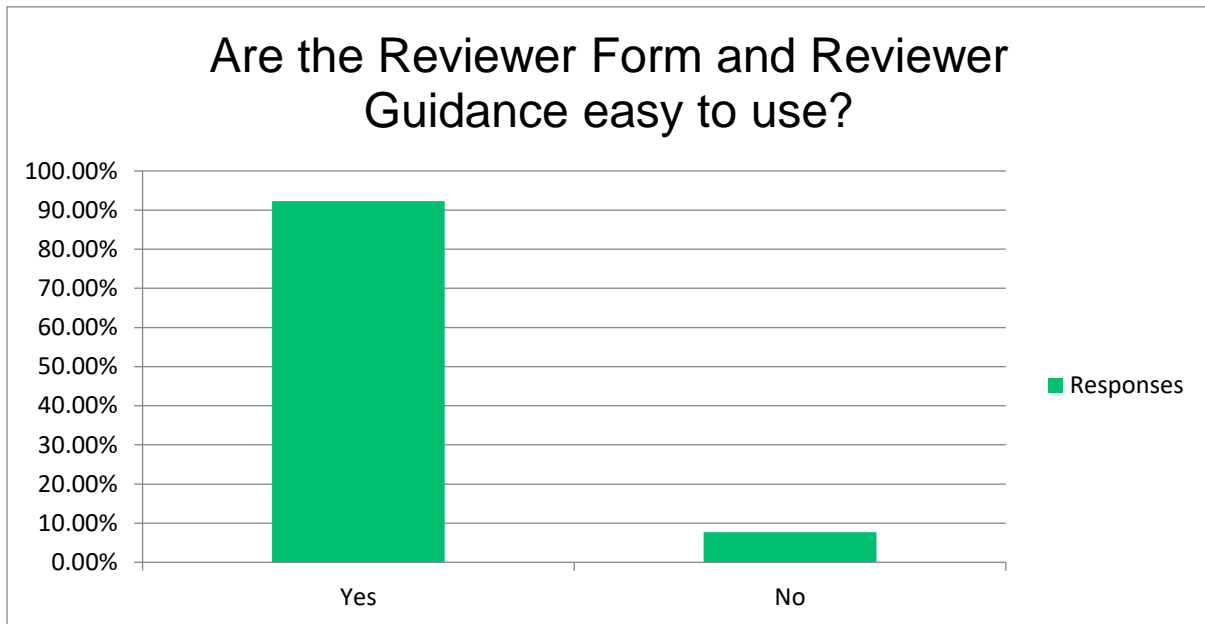
Question 28



14% of respondents felt there was information requested that could be removed. These were quite evenly spread across different stakeholder groups. More than half of those responding 'Yes' (12) were reacting to the Large Open pack.

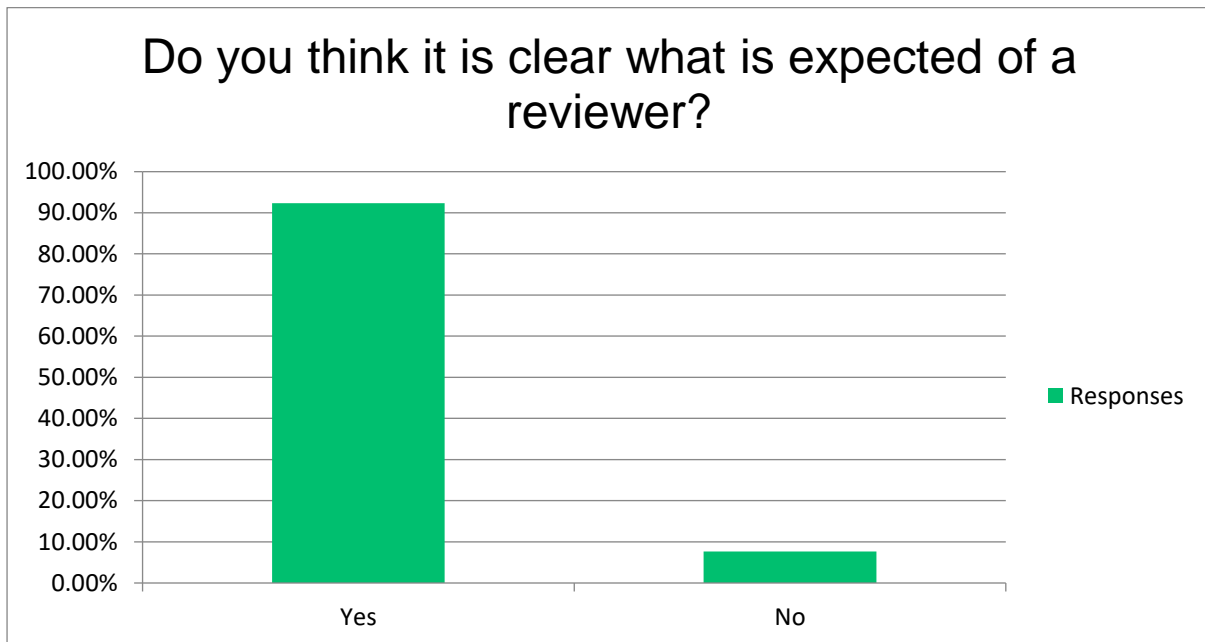
Reviewer Form and Guidance

Question 29



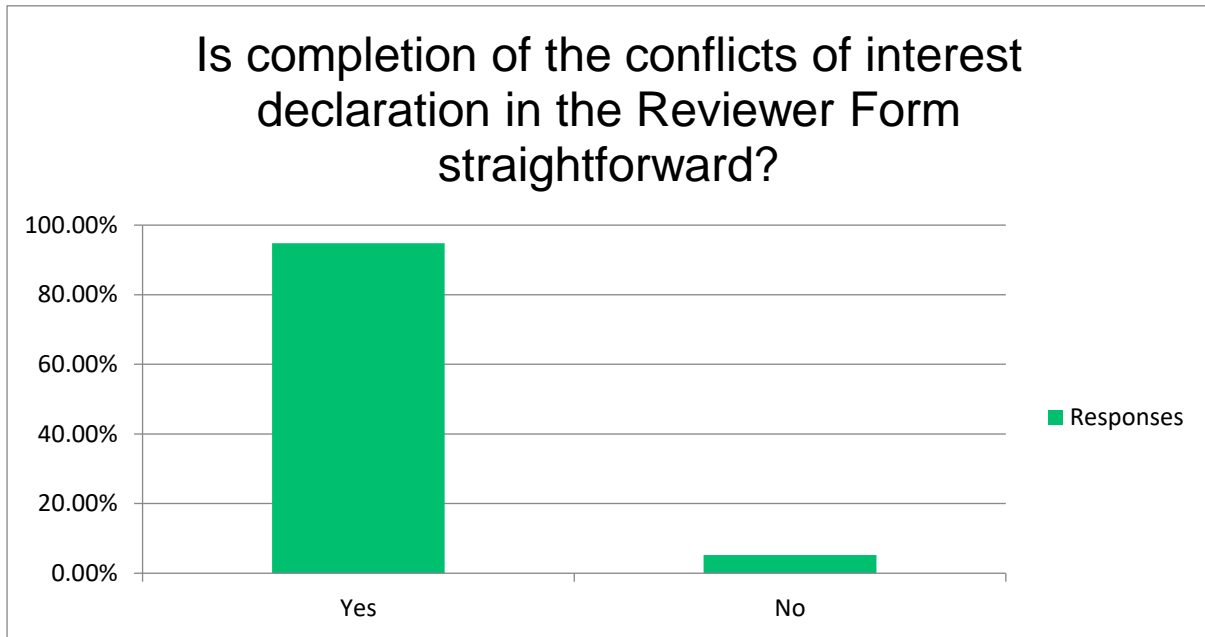
92% found the form and guidance easy to use.

Question 30



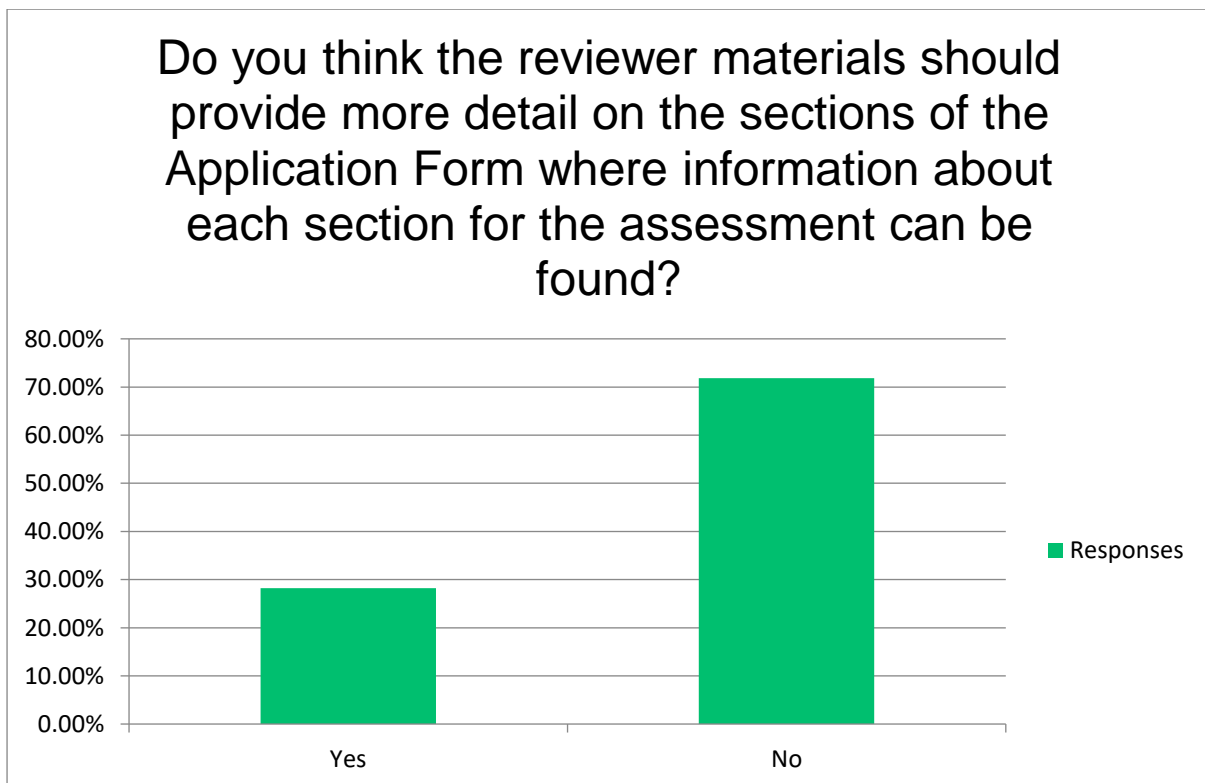
92% of 42 respondents also felt it was clear what was expected from a reviewer

Question 31



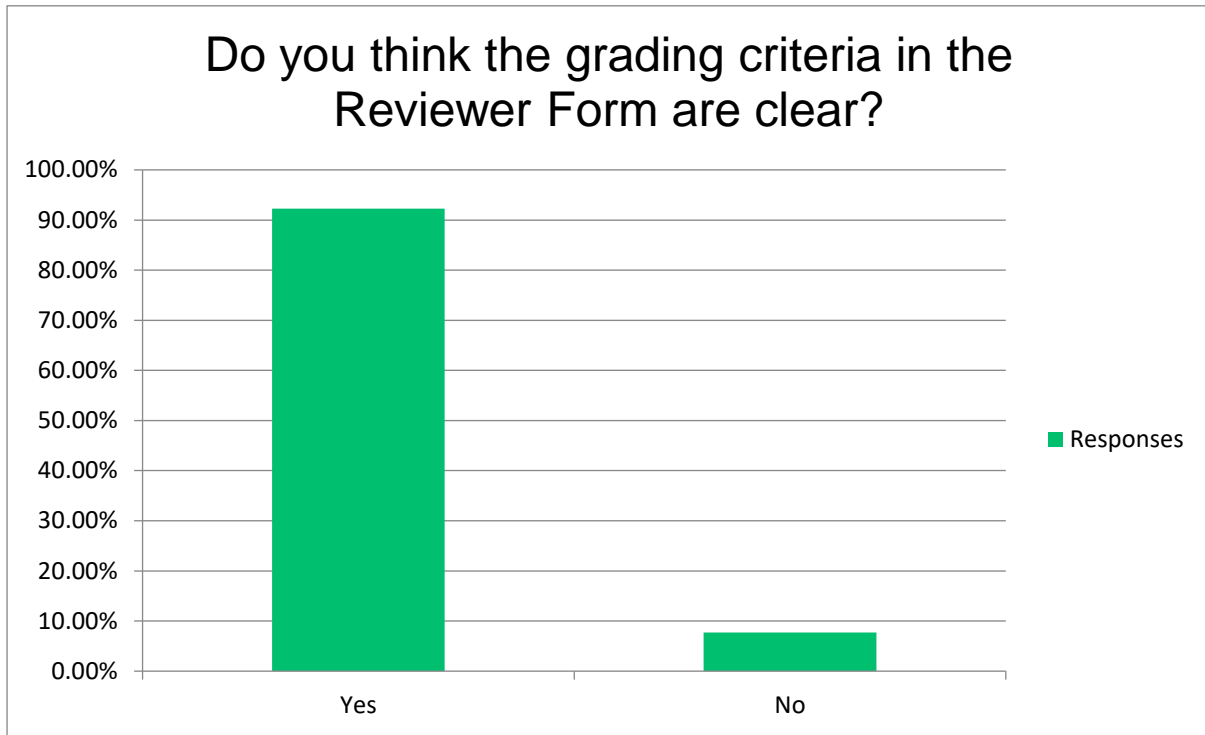
95% of 42 respondents found this to be straightforward. Those who found it less than straightforward (though noting this is a small number given overall response rate) were Panel Members and provided suggestions for improvement that have been taken into account in the revised versions.

Question 32



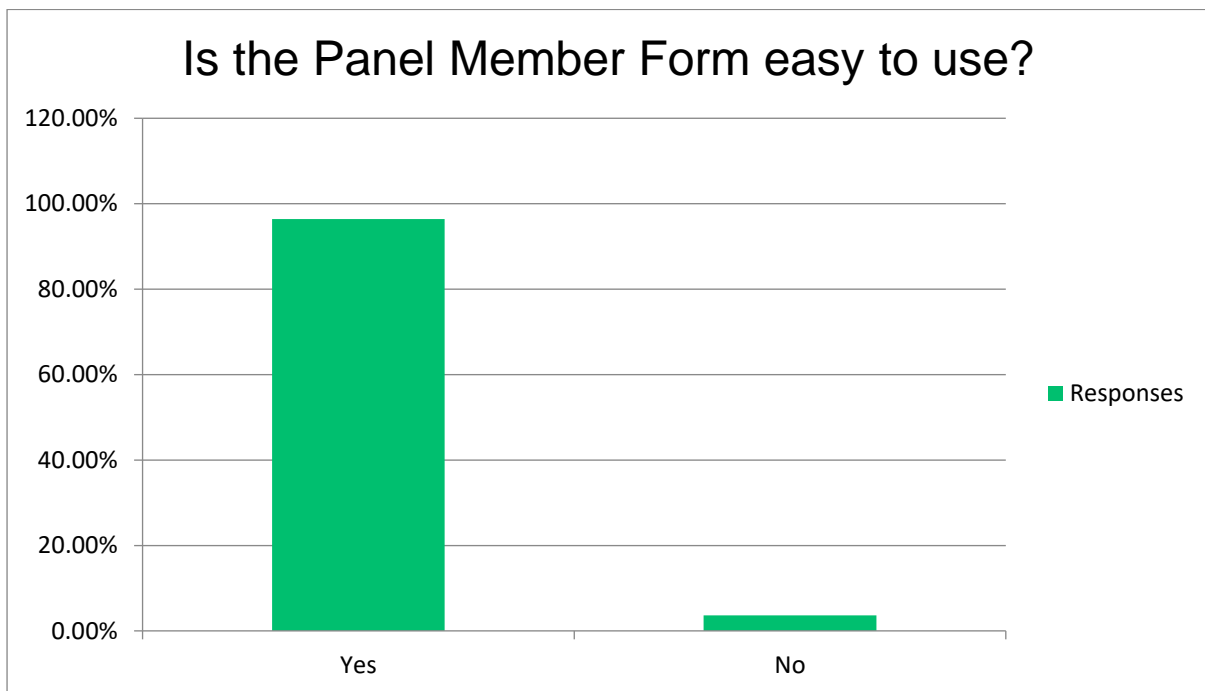
28% of the 42 respondents felt this would be useful.

Question 33



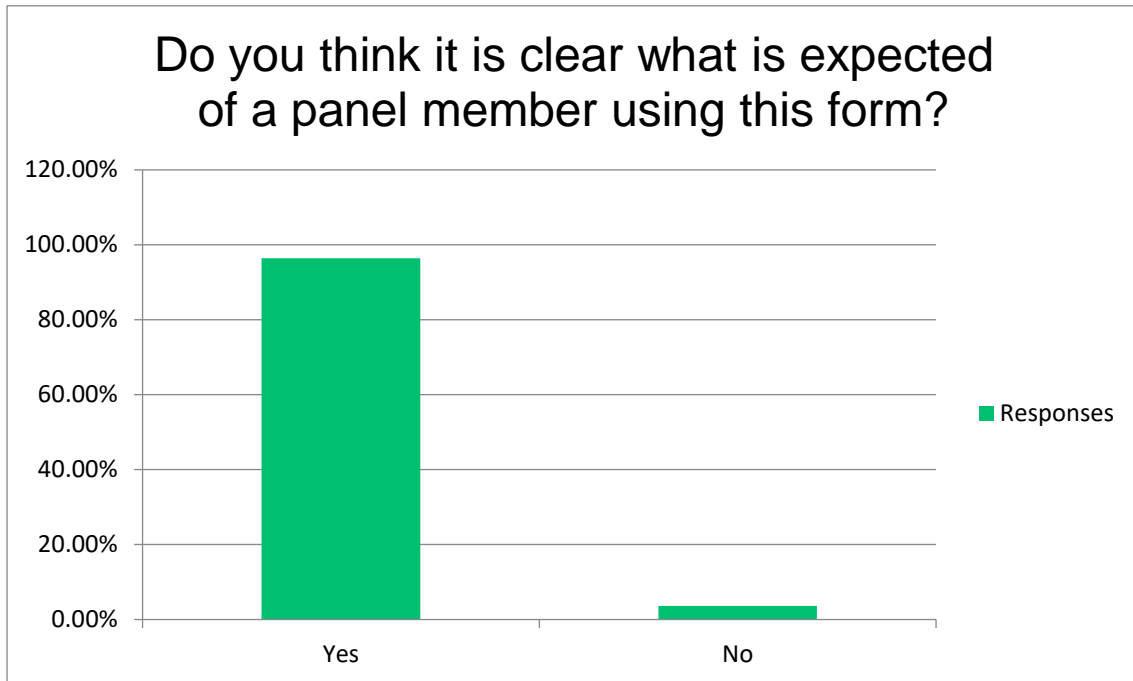
92% of respondents felt the grading criteria were clear. This said, there were additional comments from respondents (both yes and no responses) indicating a couple of potential areas for further clarity, which we have taken into account in final wording.

Panel Member Form
Question 34



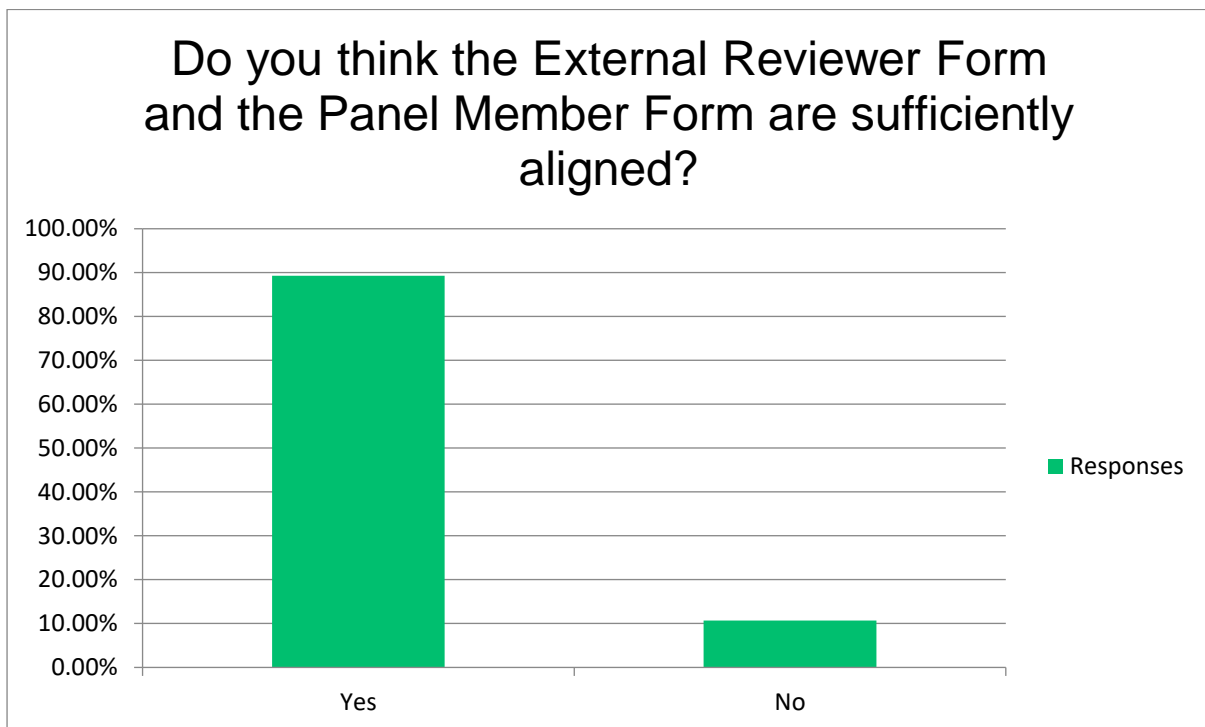
Of 31 responses, 96% (29) found this easy to use.

Question 35



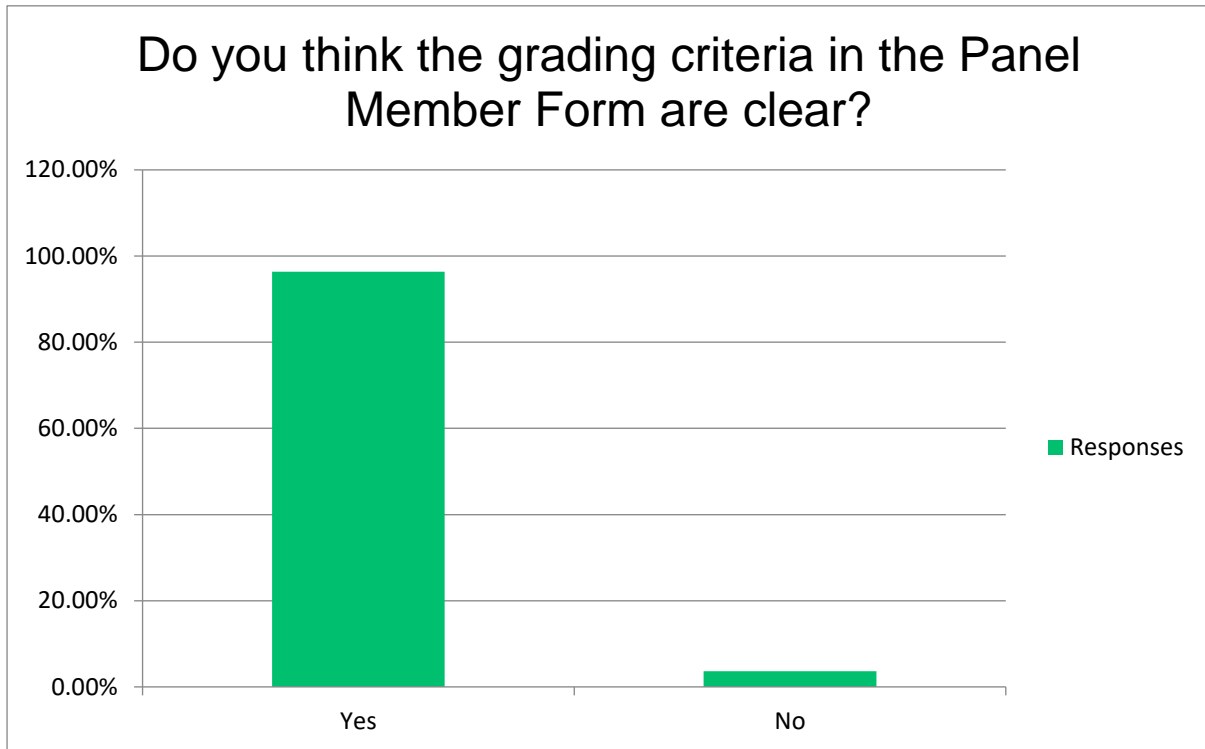
Likewise, 96% felt what was expected of a panel member was clear.

Question 36



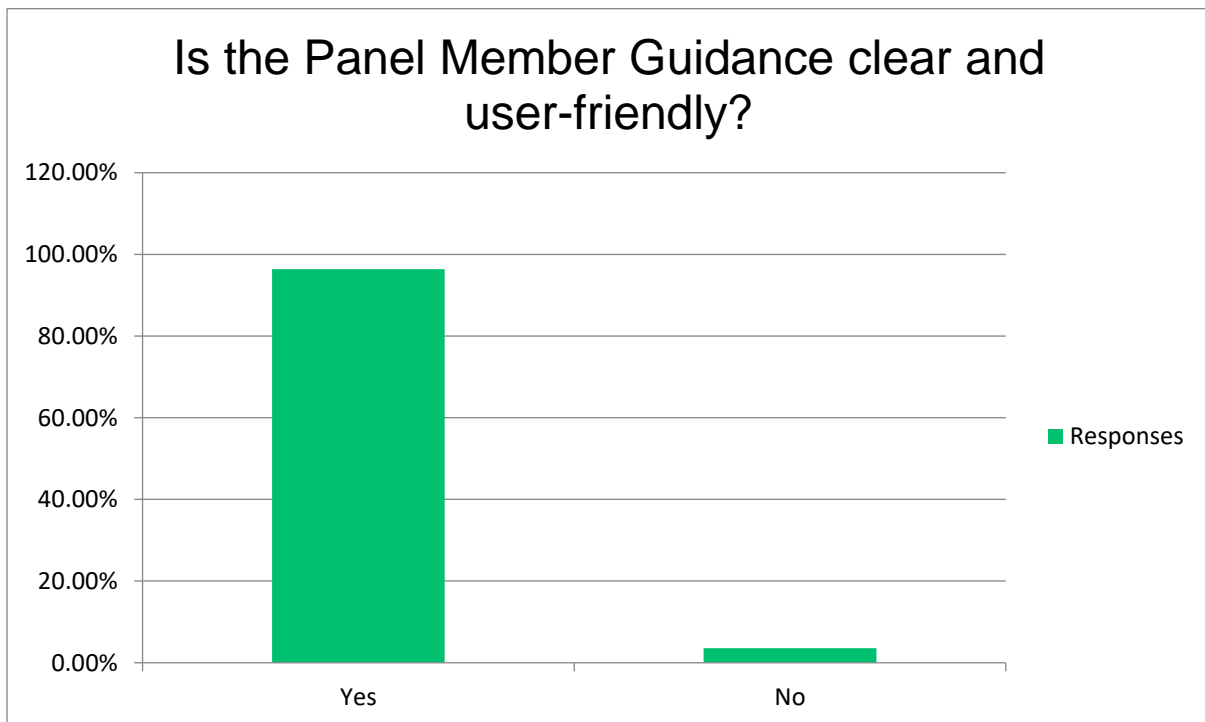
89% of respondents felt these were sufficiently aligned

Question 37



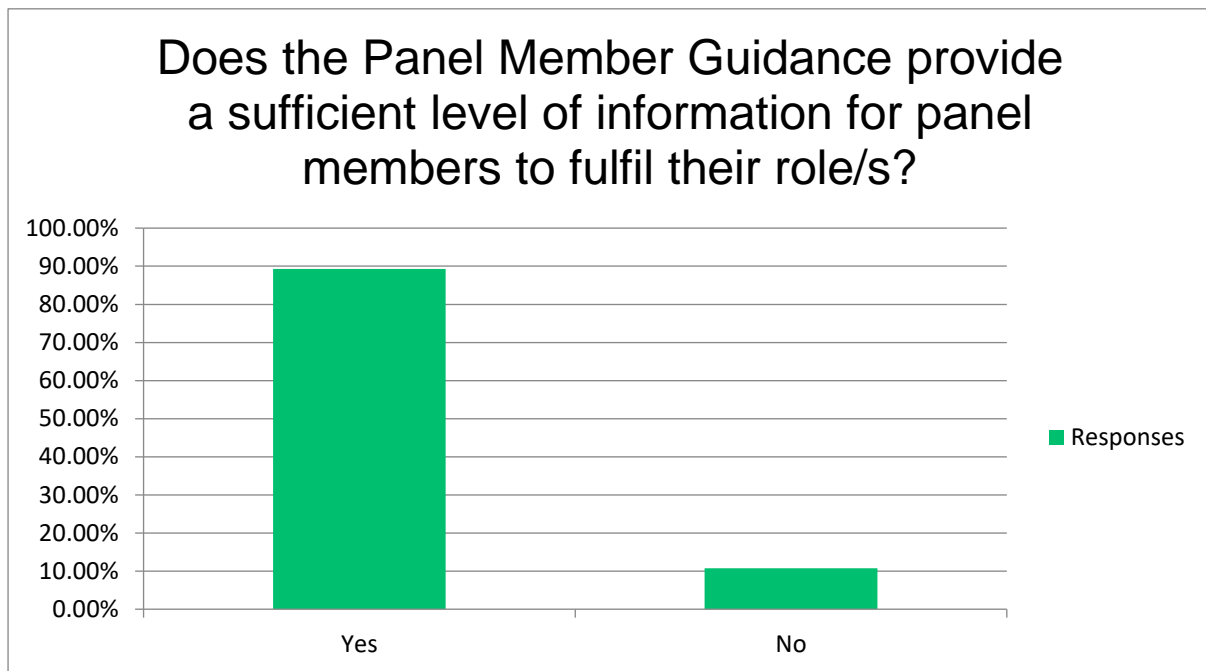
96% think the Grading Criteria is clear.

Question 38



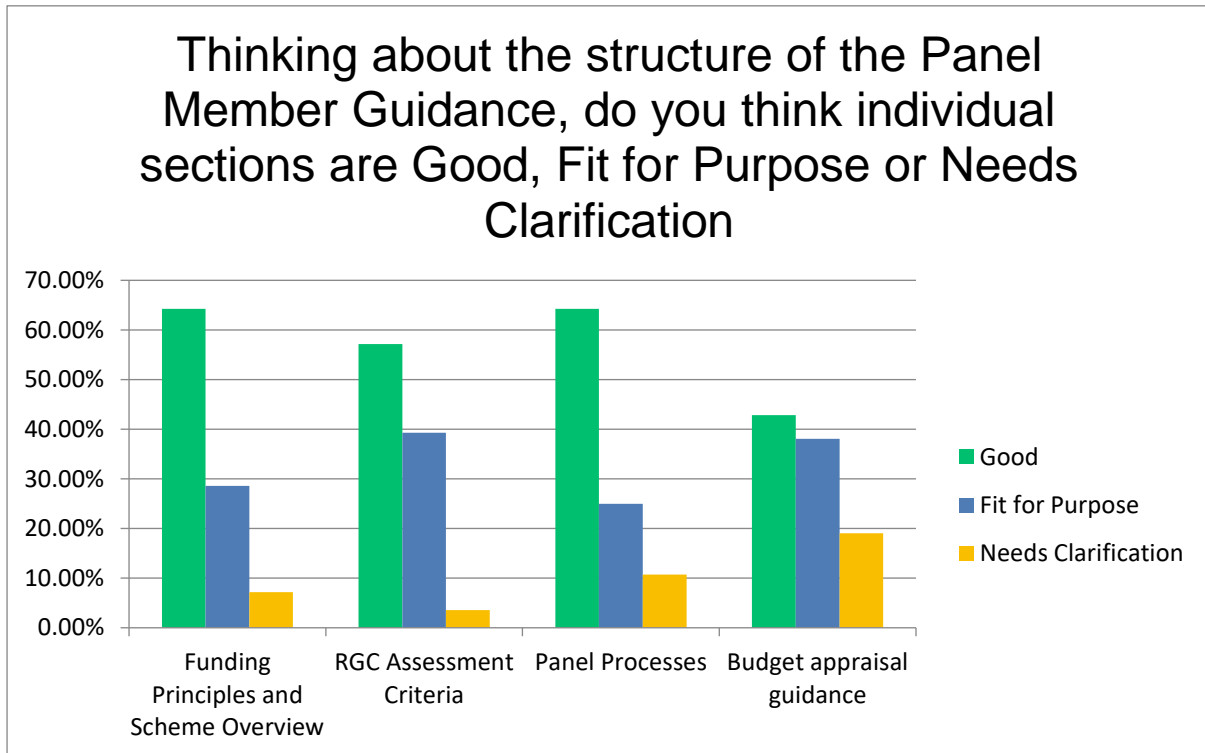
96% find the Guidance clear and user-friendly.

Question 39



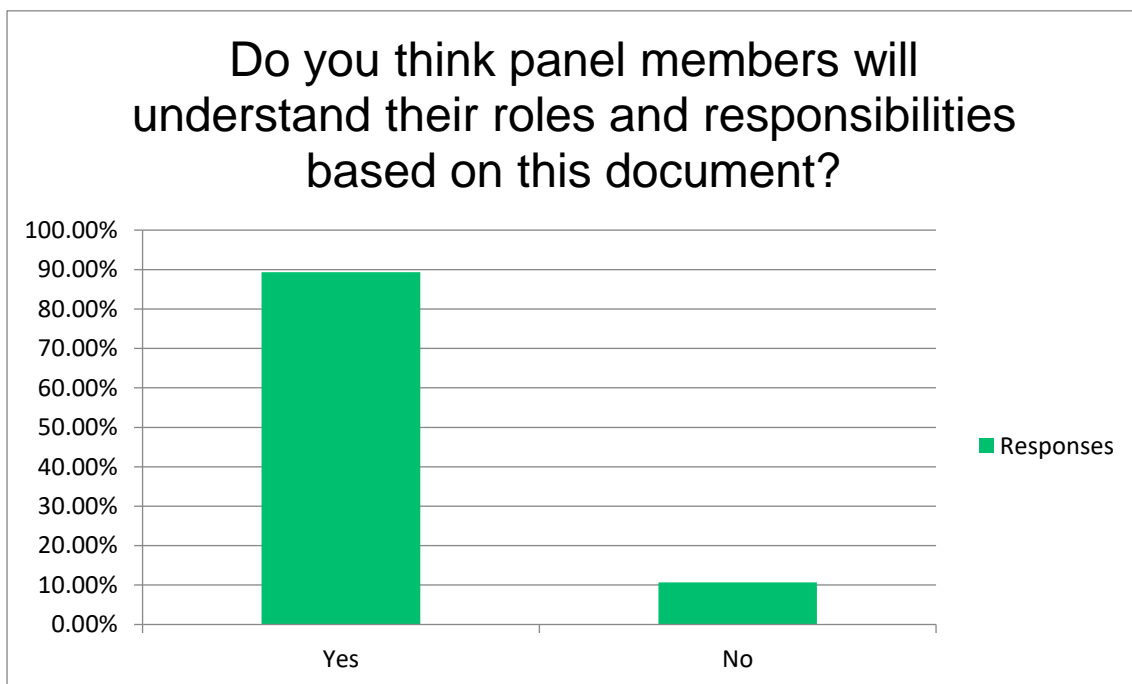
89% think the level of detail is sufficient. Some of the comments elsewhere in the survey indicate panel members do not really feel you know what is expected until you attend your first panel meeting when the process becomes much clearer.

Question 40



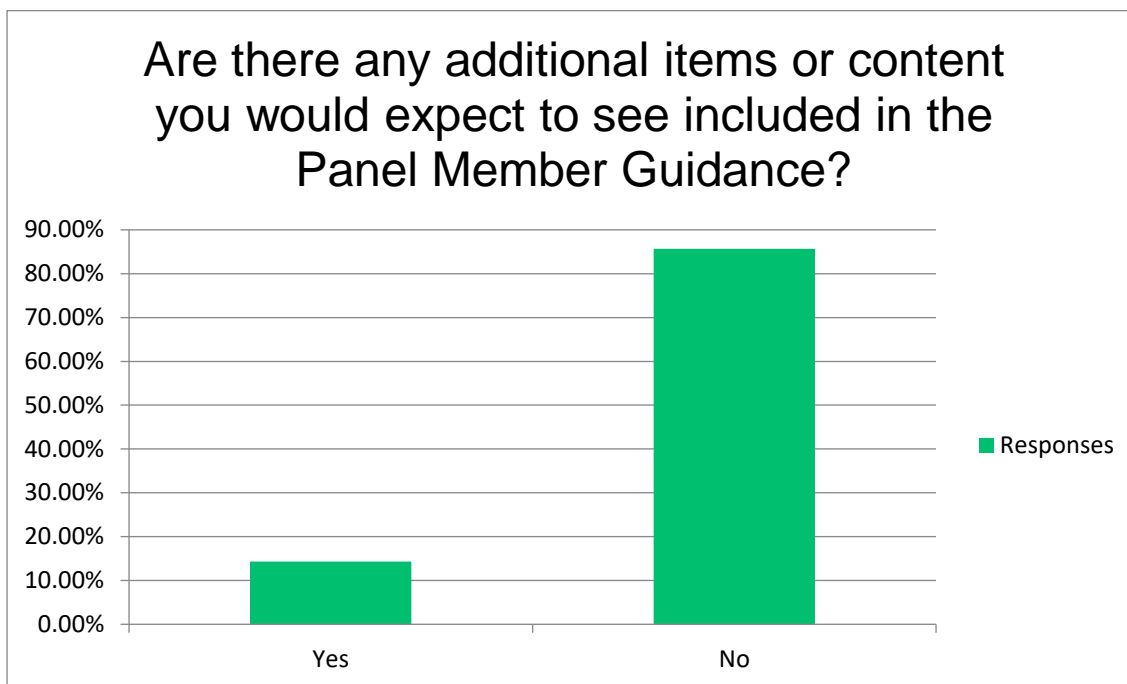
The majority felt the individual sections on Funding Principles, Assessment Criteria and Panel Processes were 'Good' or 'Fit for Purpose'. The section on Budget appraisal guidance had a more mixed set of responses, though the total respondents to that section was smaller (22 in total) therefore the % are large. For example, the number finding this section 'Needs Clarification' is 4 respondents

Question 42



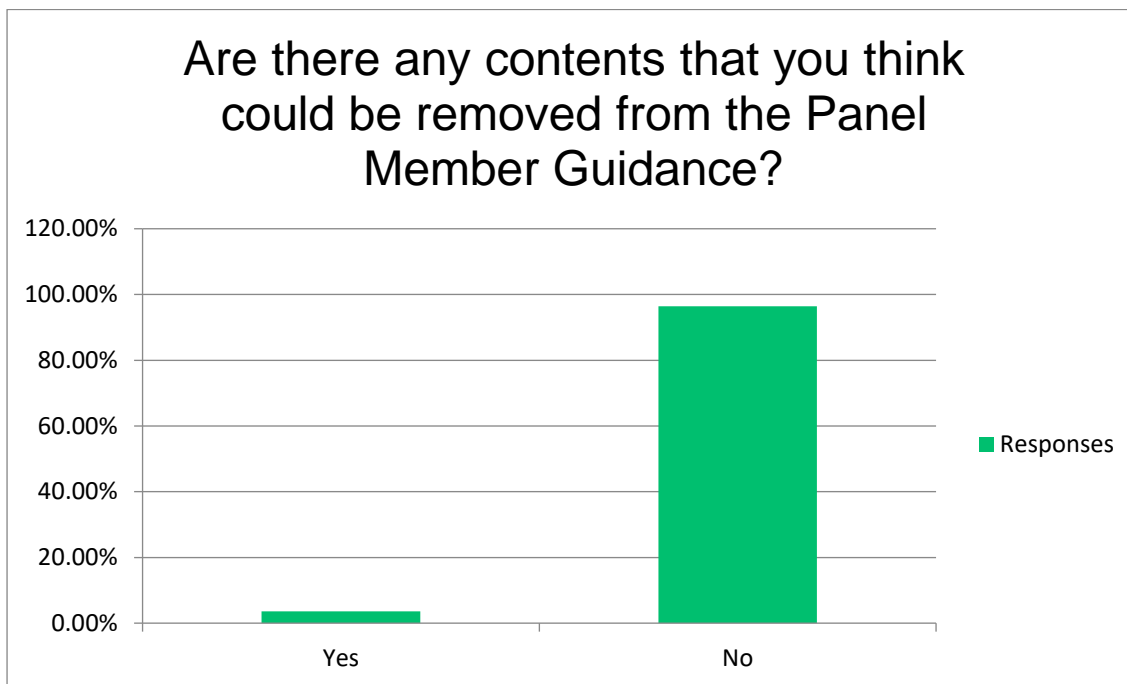
89% of respondents felt they would.

Question 43



14% of respondents felt there were additional items/content to include. Respondents were 50/50 Panel Members and RGC staff. The textual feedback indicates this is again connected with details of what happens at the panel meeting rather than in the guidance for review of specific proposals.

Question 44



96% felt there were no content/items that should be removed from the Panel Member Guidance.