



Mr Griffiths

Sent by email: request-751505-2d570e8b@whatdotheyknow.com

27 May 2021

Dear Mr Griffiths,

Freedom of Information request: FOI2021/00229

Thank you for your Freedom of Information request received on the 28 April in which you requested the following:

Your request:

Please could you provide the following information with regards to assessment policies and standards for the recent loan competitions, specifically the Innovation Continuity Loans: Strand 1, 2, and 3 November 2020.

- 1.Strand 1 – Continuation of a live project*
- 2.Strand 2 – Follow on from a recently completed Innovate UK project*
- 3.Strand 3 – Continuation, completion or follow on of a project not supported by Innovate UK*

Part 1 – Guidance and Marking Scheme

Can you please provide:

- What guidance assessors were provided with to assess applicants and/or IUK's expectations how feedback should be provided to applicants.*
- The scoring criteria assessors (marking scheme or its equivalent) used to gauge how assessor's scored questions.*

Part 2 – Assessment Policies and Standards

Specifically, would you please confirm the current policy on how Innovate UK prepares assessors, and the process, for new competitions, and how assessor standards are assessed continuously to ensure accurate and quality assessments for applicants? My particular concern is not about opinions that assessors form that are different from one another, but situations where factual and numerical information, in particular, is missed by one or more assessors, where the other assessors have clearly read the same information, thus hindering the applicant's scores. Observing numerical information, when stated, is imperative as these items are typically required by the guidance Innovate UK publishes on competitions for applicants to provide/adhere to.

To support the public interest in understanding Assessment Policies and Standards, could you please provide additional information from the below:

- What was the average number of applications an individual assessor was likely to receive from the Innovation Continuity Loans Strands 1, 2, and 3 competitions?*
- How many assessors were used for Strand 1, Strand 2, and Strand 3?*
- What was the average time Innovate UK allocated/allowed per application assessment in the context of the Innovate Continuity Loans for Part A?*

- What was the average time assessors took to complete the individual applicant assessment process? Does this vary greatly compared to the minimum and maximum?

- In what way do Innovate UK track the performance of their allocated assessors to ensure quality assessing is carried out? Is this held to any standard in retrospect, i.e., where assessors peer-review an unknown peer to ensure all criteria are captured, or additionally, can you please provide a policy on standards of assessing? For example, are there feedback mechanisms to improve IUK processes from assessor points of view and mechanisms for IUK to provide feedback to assessors on standards/quality of assessment compared to the marking scheme, guidance, or where information has clearly been missed by the assessor?

- Is training provided, or other reference material provided, in how to assess applications?

- What was the average period (in working days) between when assessors received applications to assess, and when were assessments required to be completed? Were there particular calendar dates for assessors to adhere to?

- If competitions are oversubscribed how does Innovate UK manage the additional load, whilst ensuring assessors are not overburdened? Is there a maximum number of applicants any one assessor is allocated by Innovate UK?

- Is there any feedback from assessors where concerns have been raised about not having enough time to assess applicants? What proportion of the assessors is this, and what proportion of applicants is this compared to the total submitted (which are being assessed)?

- Finally, what are the monitoring procedures taken to ensure compliance and accurate assessments within these standards/policies?

In all information requested it would be much appreciated if you could, alongside your answers, direct me to the specific area of text where such policy is mentioned in any handbook or policy document (complete with issue date, and any possible plans for change/past changes to the document or policy within the next/last 12 months).

Our response:

I can confirm UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) hold some of the information relevant to your request. Please see the information below and attached.

Background Information

Strand 1 Innovation Continuity Loans (ICL) were made available to support live projects with an existing Innovate UK (IUK) award. As these projects had already been through an assessment process these applications were not subject to additional assessment for the quality of innovation.

Strand 2 ICLs were available to projects that had previously received an IUK award and had completed within the last three years. These applications were assessed by Innovation Leads or Monitoring Officers who were familiar with the previous projects. As these projects that had previously been assessed as highly innovative, the role of the Innovation Lead or Monitoring Officer was to confirm that the previous project had successfully completed and whether there was any reason not to consider the proposed follow-on project to also be highly innovative.

Strand 3 ICLs were available to support the continuation of innovation activity that had not been previously supported by an IUK award in the previous three years and, as such, these applications were assessed by three independent assessors.

In all three stands of ICLs, applicant businesses were also evaluated by the Credit Team to consider their suitability to take on a loan. The Credit Committee of IUK Loans Ltd made the decision whether or not to make a loan offer based on the quality of the innovation project and the suitability of a business for a continuity loan.

1) What guidance assessors were provided with to assess applicants and/or IUK's expectations how feedback should be provided to applicants.

IUK provided its standard assessor briefing materials for ICL: Stand 3 assessors.

IUK training of assessors forms part of the assessors' induction which all assessors need to attend in order to become an assessor. Attached are:

- The slides for the assessor inductions, *'FOI2021_00229 IFS Assessor Induction March 2021 Redacted'*,
- The associated case studies, *'FOI2021_00229 Case study results for Assessor Induction Redacted'*.

Further briefing of assessors takes place for each competition, please find attached:

- *'FOI2021_00229 IFS Assessor Briefing Loans strand 3 Jan2021 v2 Redacted'*.
- Also attached is a briefing document on IUK and UKRI, *'FOI2021_00229 Introduction to Innovate UK and UKRI'* and
- Further guidance for assessors in the document *'FOI2021_00229 the Innovate UK Assessment Process – for assessors'*.

Personal, company, and competition details contained in the documents are largely dummy names and details. However genuine competition names and company details have been exempted under section 43(2) commercial prejudice on:

- Pages 8, 18, 26 and 28 of the *'FOI2021_00229 IFS Assessor Induction March 2021 Redacted'* document
- Pages 3, 11 and 17 of the *'FOI2021_00229 Case study results for Assessor Induction Redacted'* document and
- Pages 15, 16, 23, 27, 28, and 29 of the *'FOI2021_00229 IFS Assessor Briefing Loans strand 3 Jan2021 v2 Redacted'* document

Section 43(2) is a qualified exemption, and we are required to carry out the public interest test in favour of or against releasing the information.

Public interest in favour of disclosure

- There is a public interest in transparency and accountability of public sector institutions and the way in which they spend public money.
- There is a general public interest in the disclosure of this information to ensure transparency and openness of a public organisation.

Public interest in favour of withholding the information

- There is a public interest in protecting commercially sensitive information including business plans such as cost information, and technical project plans.
- This is confidential information and release would prejudice the operational success of the company.
- Release would also undermine the competitiveness of the company and hinder decision making.

Having considered the balance of the public interest in releasing and withholding the information we have concluded that the public interest in favour of maintaining the exemption at section 43(2) commercial prejudice outweighs the public interest in disclosure.

Section 41(1) of the FOIA, information provided in confidence, also applies to exempted competition names and company details on:

- Pages 8, 18, 26 and 28 of the *'FOI2021_00229 IFS Assessor Induction March 2021 Redacted'* document
- pages 3, 11 and 17 of the *'FOI2021_00229 Case study results for Assessor Induction Redacted'* document
- Pages 15, 16, 23, 27, 28 and 29 of the *'FOI2021_00229 IFS Assessor Briefing Loans strand 3 Jan2021 v2 Redacted'* document.

As organisations submit research applications in confidence, we consider the information in relation to their applications is exempt under Section 41 of the FOIA. To explain further, applicants submit their grant applications in confidence with the understanding that details of their application will remain confidential. If released, we believe it would result in an actionable breach of confidence. As this exemption is absolute there is no requirement to conduct a public interest test.

Personal information has been redacted under section 40(2) of the FOIA on:

- Page 8 of the '*FOI2021_00229 IFS Assessor Induction March 2021 Redacted*' document
- Pages 3, 15, 19 and 37 of the '*FOI2021_00229 IFS Assessor Briefing Loans strand 3 Jan2021 v2 Redacted*' document.

Section 40(2) exempts personal information such as names of individuals, job titles and payment information from disclosure if that information relates to someone other than the applicant, and if disclosure of that information would, amongst other things, contravene one of the data protection principles. Disclosing this information would contravene the first Data Protection Principle as defined under Section 86 of the Data Protection Act 2018 and Article 5 of the UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR). Section 40(2) is an absolute exemption and does not require a public interest test.

An IUK email address that is outside the scope of the request has been redacted on:

- Pages 1, 10, 47 and 49 of the '*FOI2021_00229 IFS Assessor Induction March 2021 Redacted*' document
- Page 20 of the '*FOI2021_00229 Case study results for Assessor Induction Redacted*' document
- Pages 17, 37 and 40 of the '*FOI2021_00229 IFS Assessor Briefing Loans strand 3 Jan2021 v2 Redacted*' document

2) The scoring criteria assessors (marking scheme or its equivalent) used to gauge how assessor's scored questions.

We believe the information you have requested on scoring criteria falls under the scope of Section 43(2) of the FOIA. This exemption is used where disclosure would likely result in a person's (an individual, a company the public authority itself or any other legal entities) commercial interests being prejudiced.

This is a qualified exemption, meaning that a test was carried out to determine whether the public interest outweighs the requirement for commercial confidentiality.

Public interest in favour of disclosure

- There is a general public interest in the disclosure of this information to ensure transparency and openness of a public organisation.
- There is also a public interest in transparency in order to ensure the accountability of public organisations and how they spend public funding.
- It would be in the public interest to view the guidance notes as public monies are used to fund this activity. As this is the case it is important that the guidance has a positive impact and is beneficial to all parties involved. Seeing copies of the guidance enables the public to independently assess that Innovate UK is consistent and compliant with their own assessor guidance and criteria.

Public interest in favour of withholding the information

- As noted above, the assessor marking scheme has previously been released. This is because it always relates directly to the guidance provided to applicants, therefore we would expect that if an applicant addresses the question as detailed in the guidance then they would be addressing the assessment marking scheme. Although the assessor marking scheme has previously been released, the further assessor guidance is not publicly available or routinely provided to all applicants. Releasing this information could therefore give an unfair advantage to any future applicants with access to these documents. To explain further, the document will be utilised for future competitions and we therefore believe that releasing the document would negatively affect the commercial interests of all applicants who do not have access to this information, and give those applicants with access an unfair advantage in future

competitions. In our view, we do not consider the release of such information would enable fair competition between the organisations that apply.

- As the additional guidance is intended to be used in future competitions, the unfair advantage of disclosure in this way would in turn would affect the integrity of Innovate UK competitions. This would impact on the commercial interests of Innovate UK and our reliance on running a fair and transparent competition process.
- If the process is undermined it is likely to harm the trust in the Innovate UK application process. This would adversely affect the application processes for future calls and could damage the reputation and commercial interests of Innovate UK and future investments.
- We follow the government guidance on [managing public money](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/742188/Managing_Public_Money_MPM_2018.pdf)¹. Standards expected of all public services include integrity, reliability, spending money in the public interest and achieving value for money. Our current thorough process ensures that only the best projects receive public monies. Releasing this information could jeopardize the fair and transparent competition process and undermine our function to fund the best projects. In turn, undermining this process would go against our responsibilities to manage our use of public funds.

Taking the above arguments into consideration, we reached the decision that the need for commercial confidentiality outweighs the public interest in disclosure; therefore the information is exempt from disclosure.

3) Would you please confirm the current policy on how Innovate UK prepares assessors, and the process, for new competitions, and how assessor standards are assessed continuously to ensure accurate and quality assessments for applicants?

There is no policy on how IUK prepares assessors, however the process on how assessors are prepared by IUK is explained in our response to Q1. Please refer to 'FOI2021_00229 the Innovate UK Assessment Process – for assessors' for further information.

To ensure the quality and standards of assessments for applications, IUK appoint three independent assessors to each application in order to ensure there is no bias or anomalies in the assessment process. This is further supported by the moderation process and the Credit Committee. All assessors are independent to Innovate UK and therefore the assessments are not usually individually checked once completed, however in the case of ICLs the Innovation Lead for Loans checked all assessments for projects that were recommended for a loan.

4) What was the average number of applications an individual assessor was likely to receive from the Innovation Continuity Loans Strands 1, 2, and 3 competitions?

For Strand 3 ICLs the average number of applications received by assessors was 3.67. The number of applications received ranged from one to seven, with the most common being received by an individual assessor being four.

5) How many assessors were used for Strand 1, Strand 2, and Strand 3?

As previously explained, assessors were not used for Strands 1 and 2. For Strand 3, 150 assessors (out of a pool of 186 assessors for the competition) were used.

6) What was the average time Innovate UK allocated/allowed per application assessment in the context of the Innovate Continuity Loans for Part A?

Assessors were allowed 11 days to complete the assessments allocated to them for Strand 3 ICLs.

7) What was the average time assessors took to complete the individual applicant assessment process? Does this vary greatly compared to the minimum and maximum?

This information is not held. Assessors complete individual applications in their own time, so the time taken per application is not recorded.

¹ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/742188/Managing_Public_Money_MPM_2018.pdf

8) In what way do Innovate UK track the performance of their allocated assessors to ensure quality assessing is carried out? Is this held to any standard in retrospect, i.e., where assessors peer-review an unknown peer to ensure all criteria are captured, or additionally, can you please provide a policy on standards of assessing?

The process by which IUK monitors assessor standards is explained in response to Q3.

9) Is training provided, or other reference material provided, in how to assess applications?

As explained in response to Q1, all assessors are required to attend an induction, which includes training on how to assess applications.

10) What was the average period (in working days) between when assessors received applications to assess, and when were assessments required to be completed? Were there particular calendar dates for assessors to adhere to?

As explained in response to Q6, assessors are given 11 days (including weekends) to complete the assessments allocated to them. Since assessors typically have other roles and are not employed by IUK they often complete assessments outside of their normal working hours. Assessors are given a specific deadline for completion of their assessments.

11) If competitions are oversubscribed how does Innovate UK manage the additional load, whilst ensuring assessors are not overburdened? Is there a maximum number of applicants any one assessor is allocated by Innovate UK?

If a competition receives more applications than was anticipated, IUK will assign additional assessors to manage the additional load. The maximum number of applications one assessor can be allocated by IUK is 12.

12) Is there any feedback from assessors where concerns have been raised about not having enough time to assess applicants? What proportion of the assessors is this, and what proportion of applicants is this compared to the total submitted (which are being assessed)?

When applications are assigned to an assessor through the Innovation Funding Service (IFS) system, an assessor must accept the number of applications they have been allocated. The assessors are therefore able to self-manage the workload assigned to them based upon their own personal availability.

13) What are the monitoring procedures taken to ensure compliance and accurate assessments within these standards/policies?

The process by which IUK monitors assessor standards is explained in response to Q3.

14) Any possible plans for change/past changes to the document[s] or polic[ies] within the next/last 12 months.

IUK is continuously reviewing and updating its assessor induction where necessary, in particular when there are changes to the IFS system.

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,

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