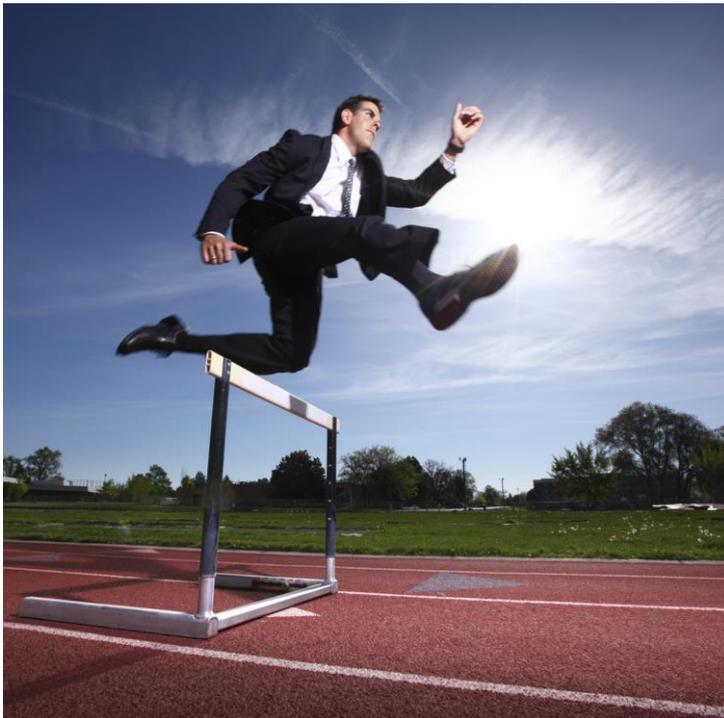




Navigating the SFI Review Process

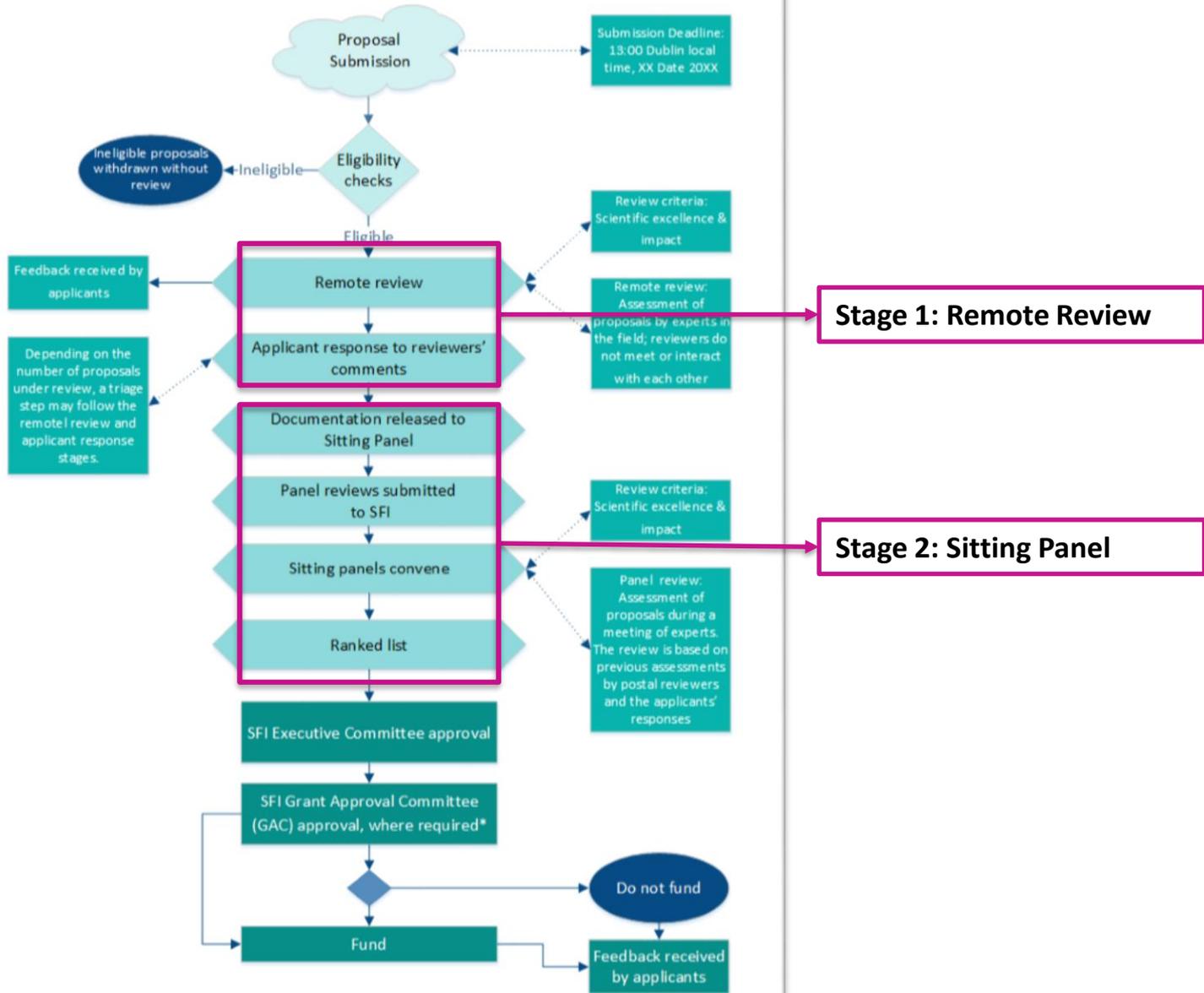
Claire McDonald
SFI Pre-Award

The journey your proposal takes after submission...

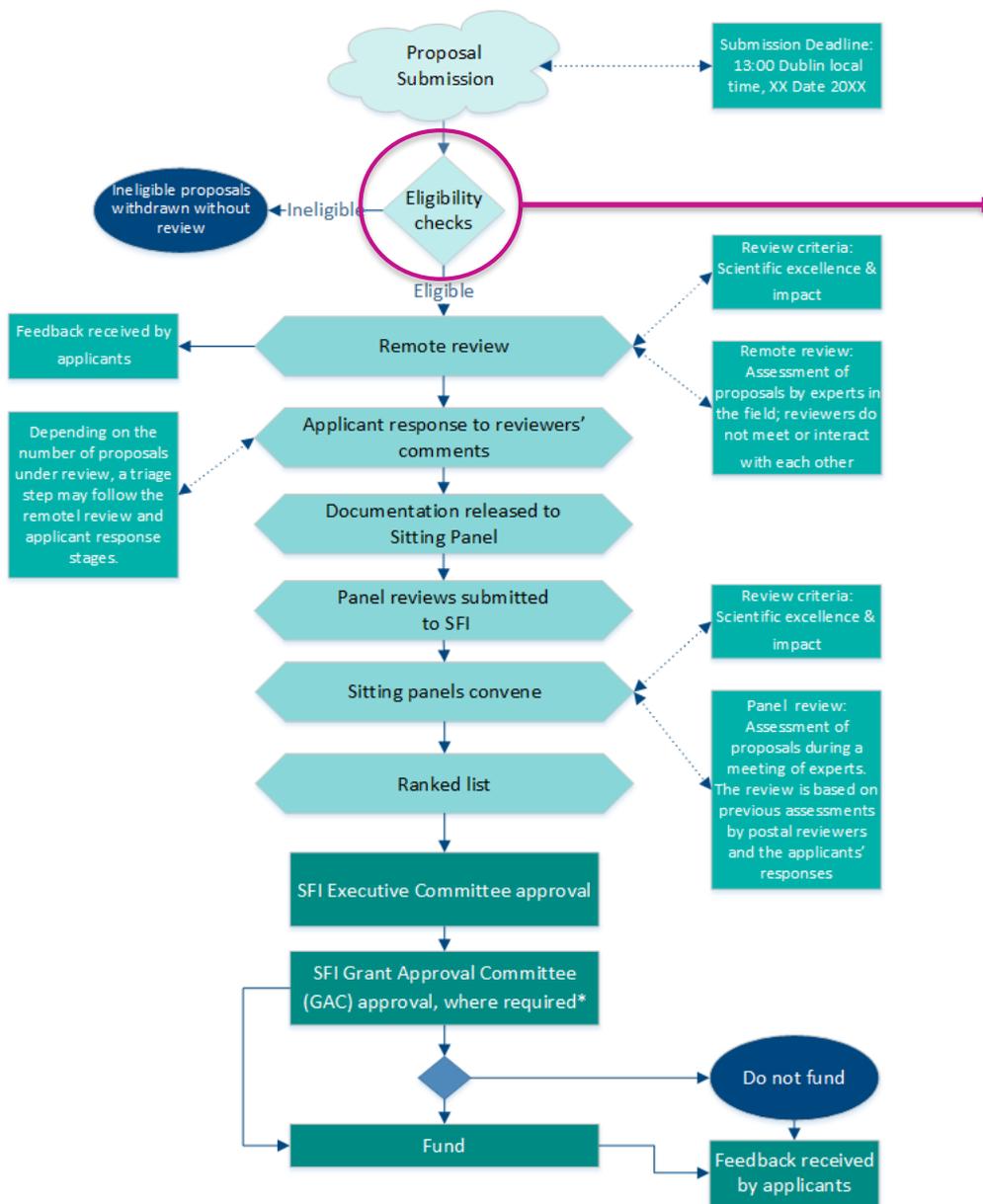


- Different SFI programmes follow different review processes – these are articulated in the relevant call documents
- Here, we will use the example of a generic two-stage review process to demonstrate the journey your proposal might go through following submission

SFI Funding Programme 20XX



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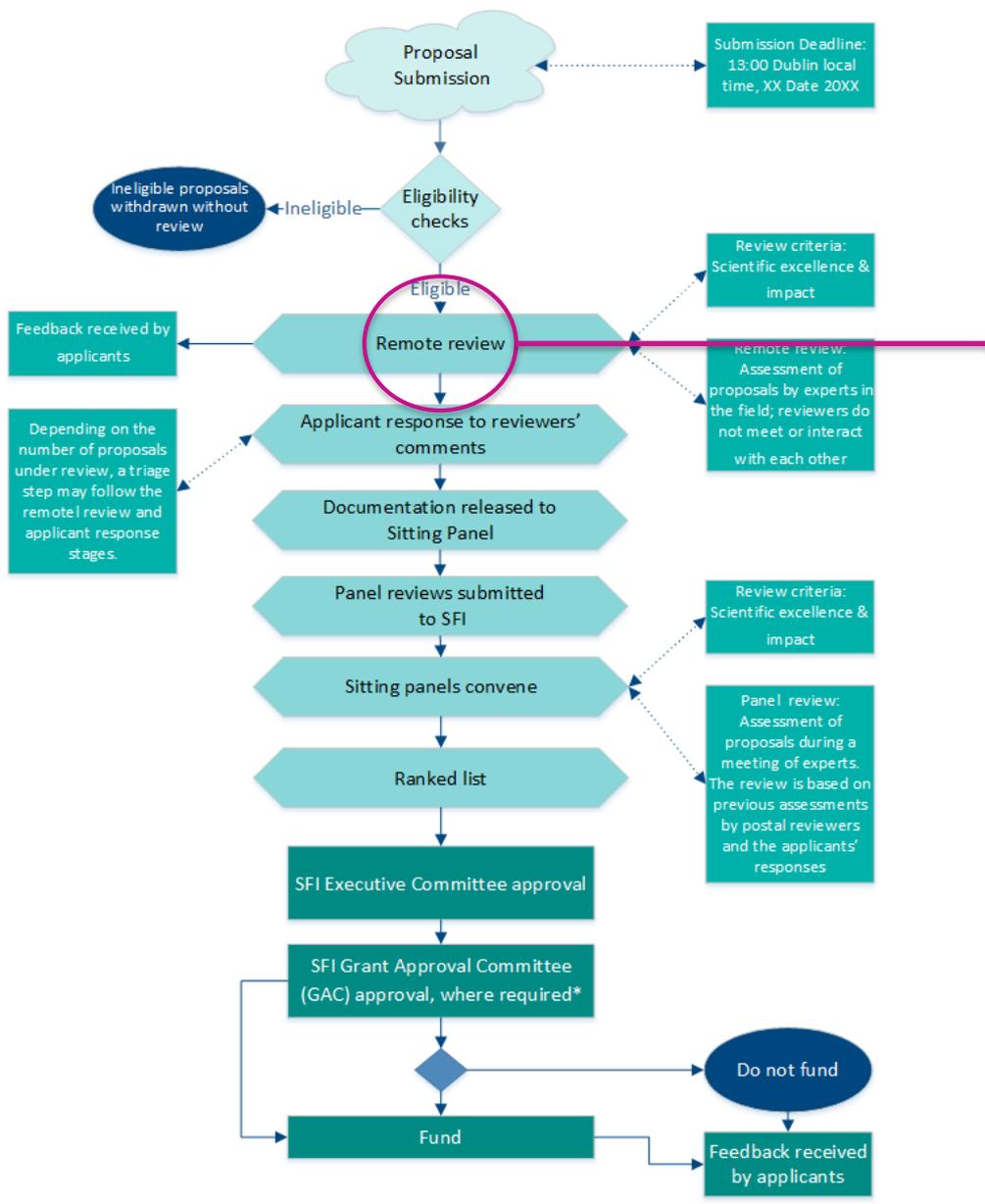
Who performs eligibility checks?

- SFI staff

How to pass eligibility checks?

- Read the call document
- Ensure each section has the correct number of pages, all letters of support are included, etc.
- Ensure your research proposal fulfils:
 - SFI remit:
 - http://www.sfi.ie/resources/SFI-Remit-Guidance-for-Applicants_March-2016.pdf
 - [SFI Clinical Trial and Clinical Investigation Policy](#)
 - Programme-specific remit, e.g. themed calls
- Ensure you and your co-applicant(s) are eligible
- Ensure your Research Body is eligible
- If your proposal is a resubmission of an application previously submitted to any SFI programme, ensure it demonstrates that the review comments resulting from the initial application were taken into account in the preparation of the new submission

If the eligibility criteria are not fulfilled, your proposal will be withdrawn without review.



Who performs remote review?

- Scientific and engineering technical experts, based outside of Ireland
- They perform their reviews remotely, and do not meet or discuss proposals

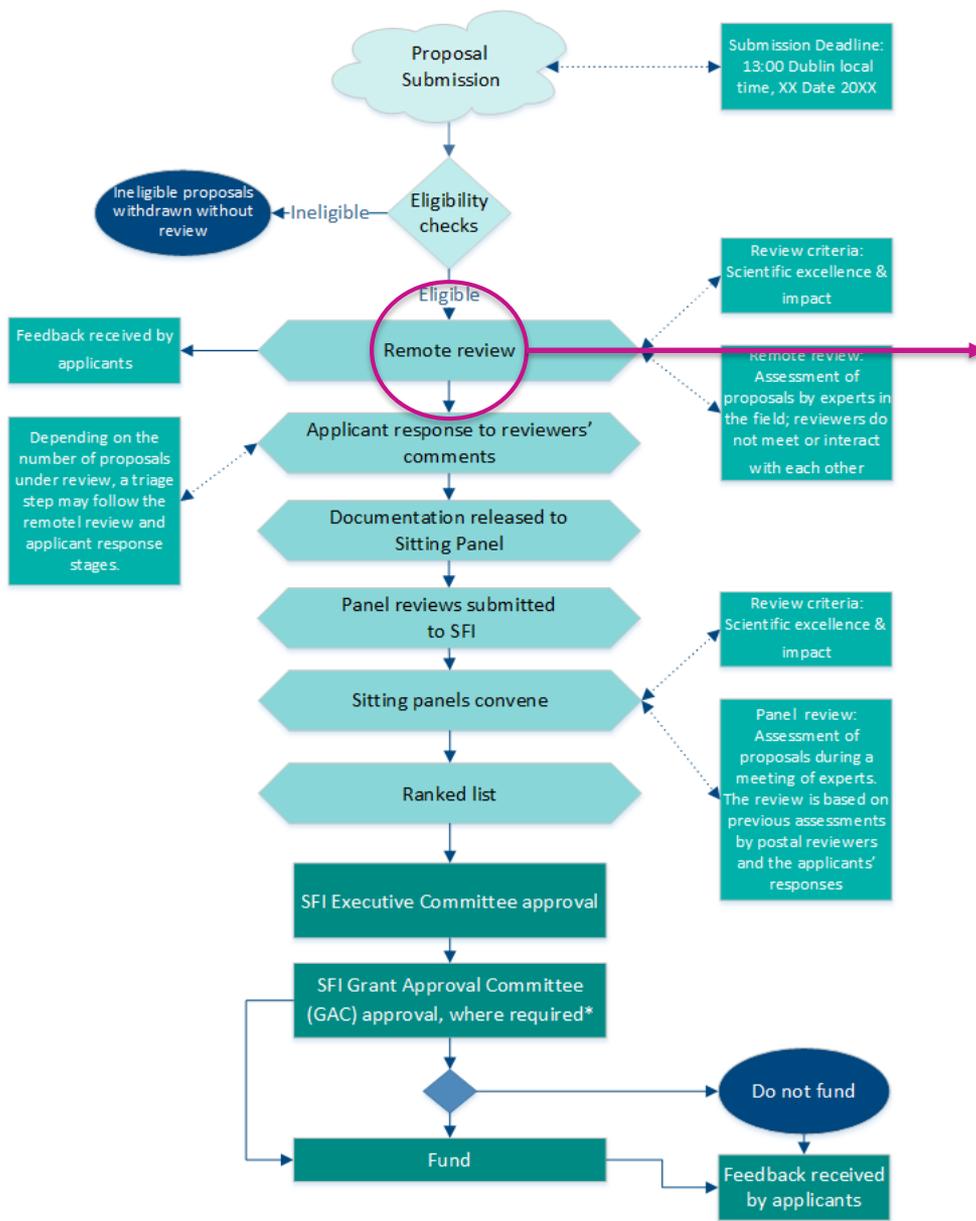
Types of remote review:

- **Postal:** Each reviewer reviews a single proposal
- **Panel:** A number of proposals are assigned to each member of the panel based on expertise

How are reviewers found?

- SFI staff use your proposal to source appropriate reviewers
- Some programmes allow applicants to name excluded reviewers – ensure you have a good reason for excluding reviewers! These can often be the most qualified experts to assess your proposal.
- Make it easier for SFI to find the reviewers you want:
 - Ensure you classify your proposal accurately – Primary & Secondary Research Areas, Keywords
 - Cite the experts in the field, people who are publishing the current state-of-the-art

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Peer Review

- The call document contains the review criteria – this is what the reviewers will be asked to comment on – make this easy to find in your proposal

Reviewers are:

- Busy, with many commitments
- Inherently sceptical and analytical

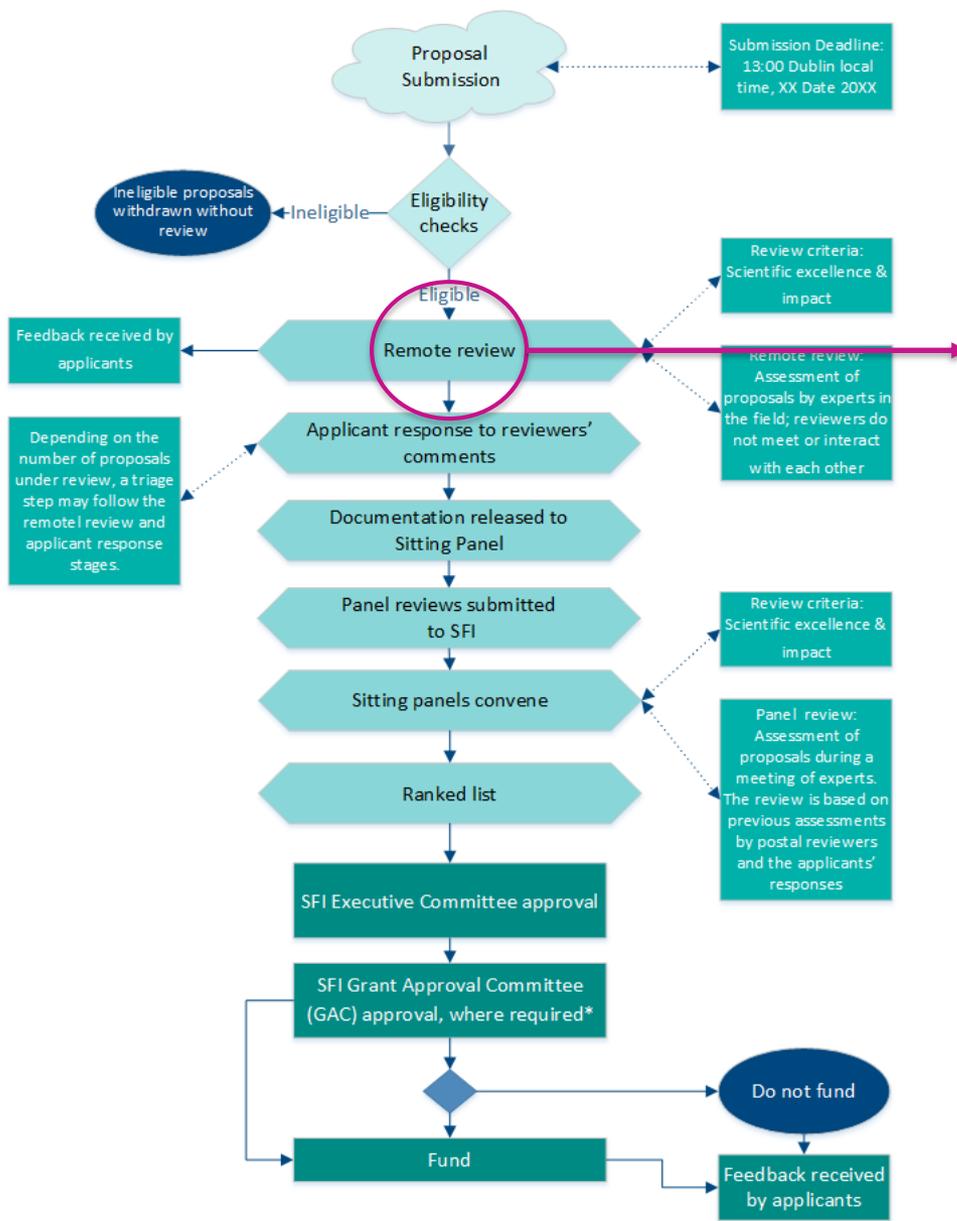
Make their job easier with:

- Well-organised, clearly written prose
- Lots of section headings and breaks in the writing
- Important points repeated at several places in the application
- Well designed, well labelled and large-enough-to-read flow diagrams, charts, figures

And avoid irritating them by:

- Omitting information
- Omitting or mislabelling references/figures
- Including figures/figure legends that are not legible
- Submitting an application that is sloppy or full of typographical errors

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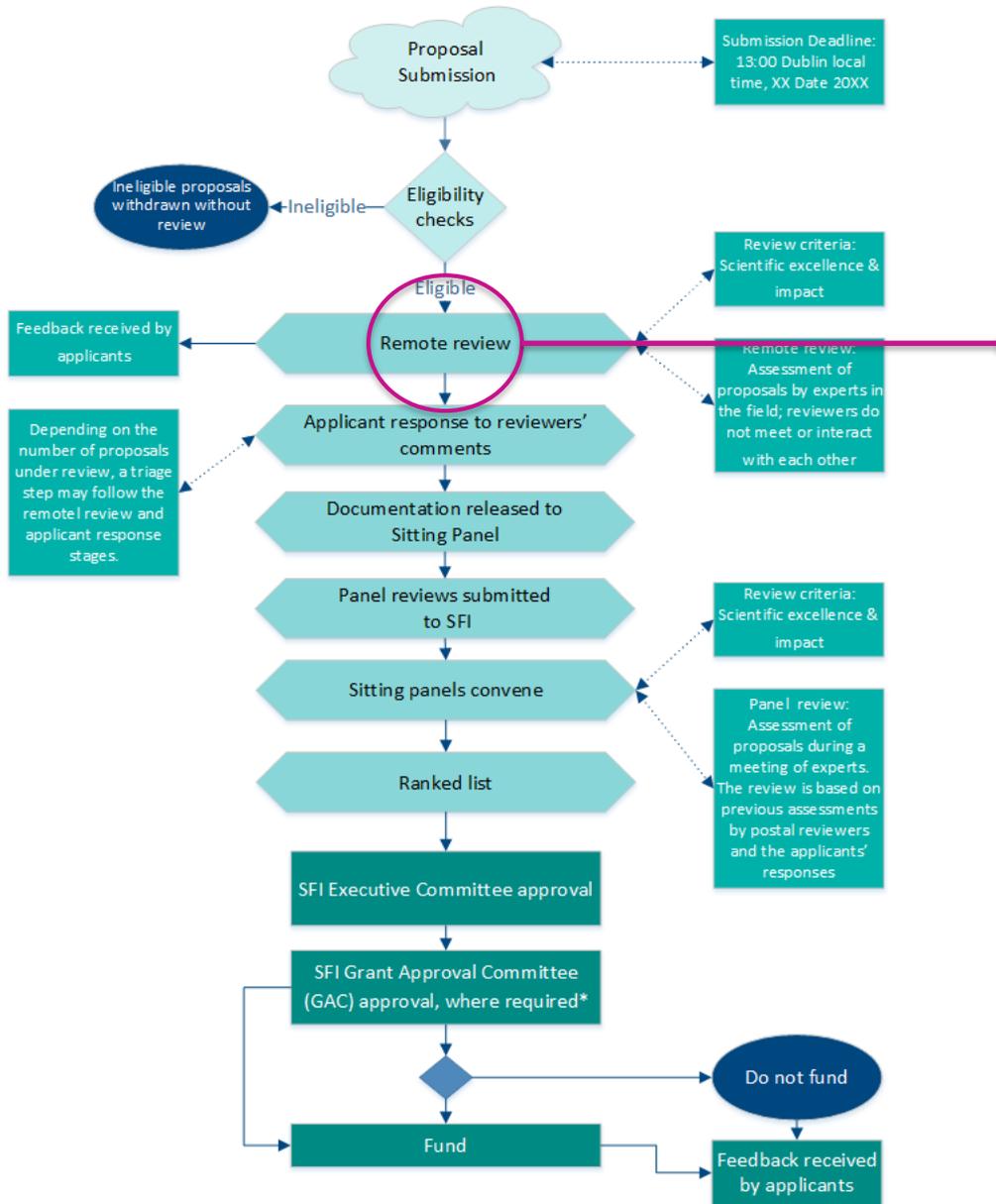
Common Criticisms

Applicant

- “Impressive track record in the related area of X, but no significant experience in the proposed area of Y”
- “Applicant is already an established researcher and is therefore not suitable for such an early career award”
- “There was no information provided on professional services such as conference organisation, scientific committee participation, invited presentations, etc.”

Research Programme

- “Over-ambitious”
- “Diffuse, unfocused and superficial examination of the field”
- “Rationale for hypothesis or methods not sound”
- “Preliminary data do not support the hypothesis”
- “Research programme is not hypothesis-driven”
- “Lack of sufficient experimental detail”
- “Insufficient discussion of pitfalls and alternative approaches/contingency plans”
- “Lack of novelty – an incremental advance in the field”



Common Criticisms

Impact

- “The pathway to impact was not clearly articulated”
- “The timelines set out in the impact statement are not feasible”
- “The plan for protecting intellectual property has not been articulated”
- “Considering the strong involvement of the collaborating company, it is concerning that intellectual property has not been mentioned”
- “The applicants have not identified suitable industry partners for future collaborations to take this research forward”

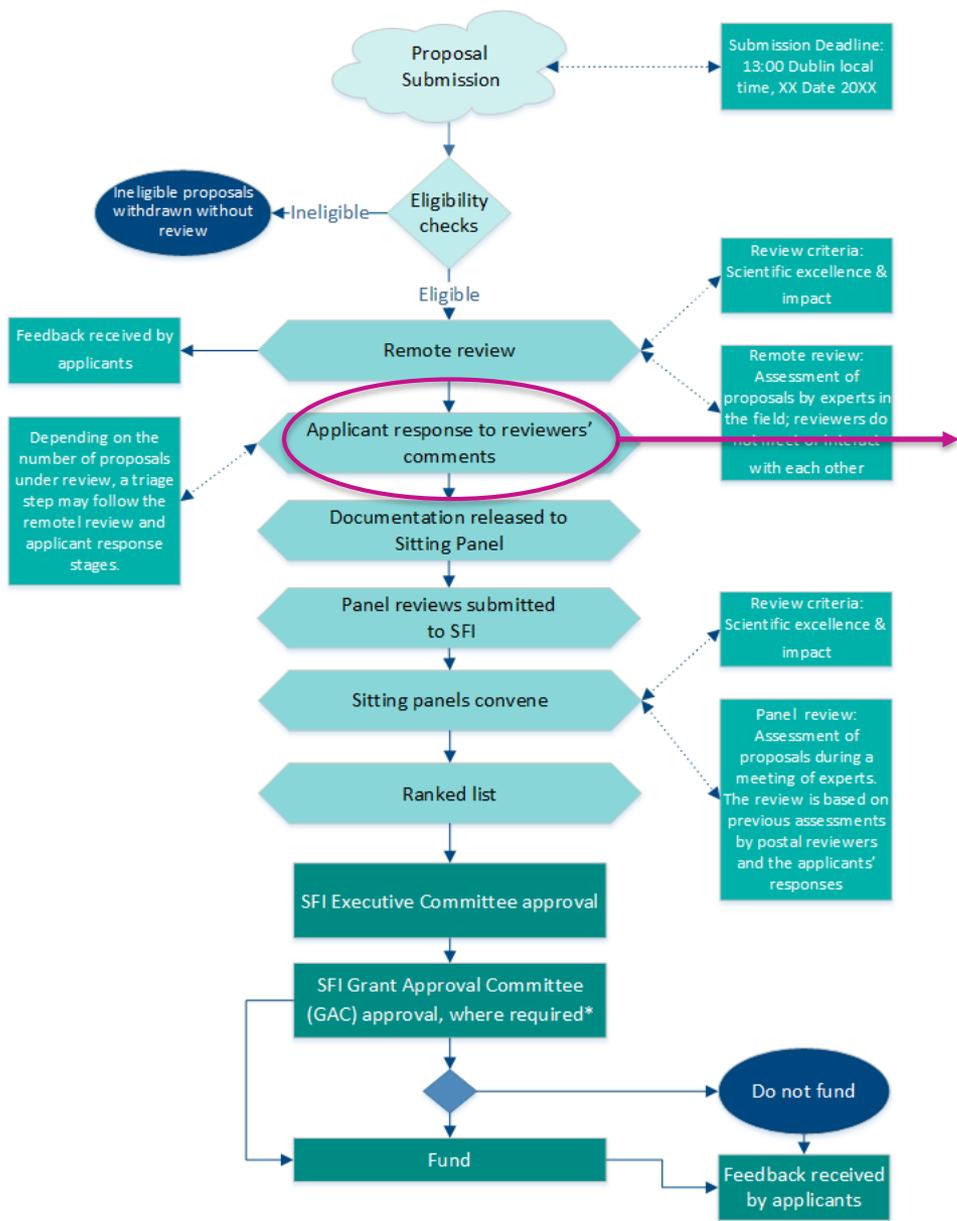
When preparing your impact statement, refer to:

<http://www.sfi.ie/funding/award-management/research-impact/>

Institutional/Mentor Support

- “Letters of support are vague/formulaic”

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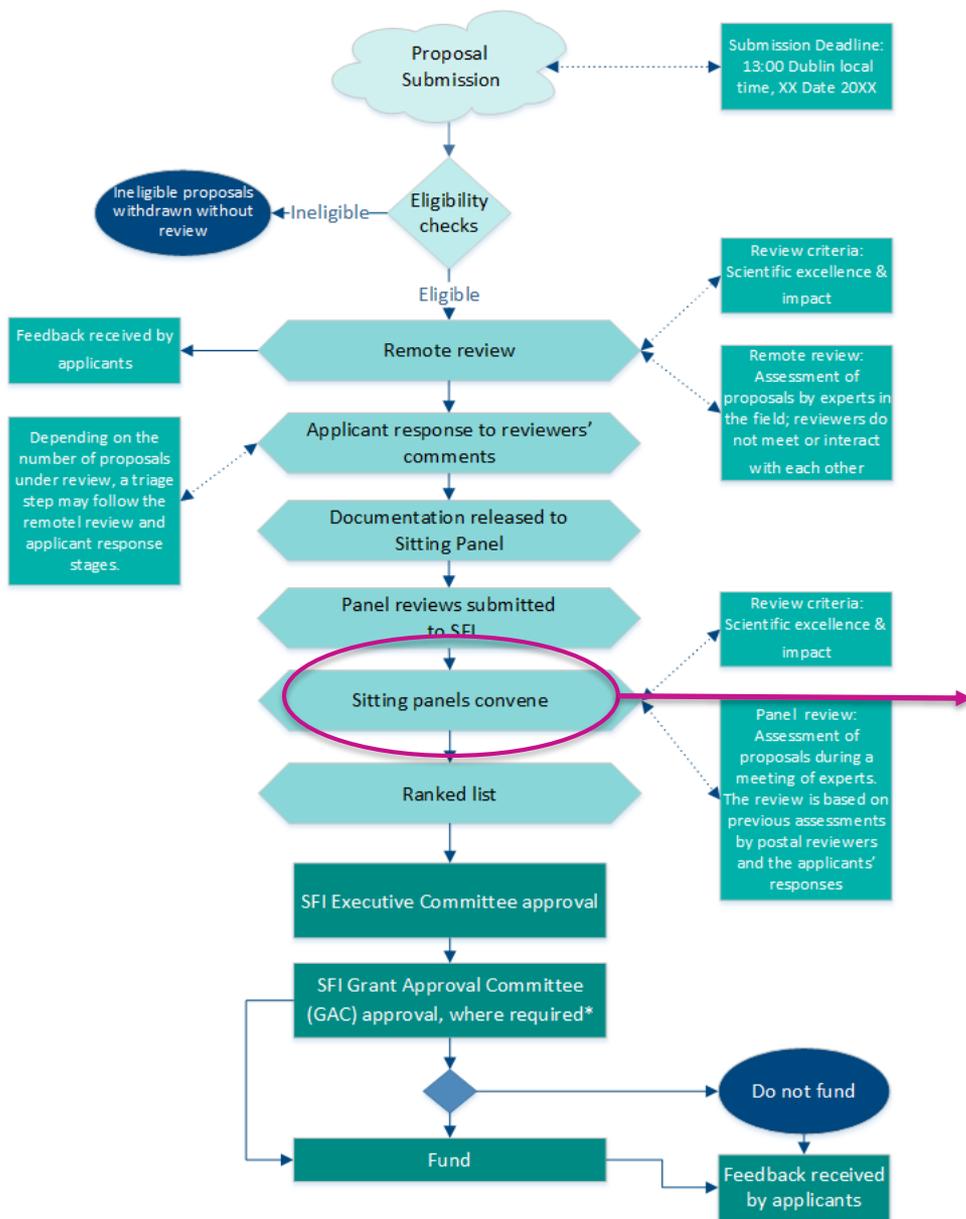
Applicant Response

- Will be read by sitting panel reviewers, who are usually different to those who completed the remote reviews
- Will feed into the funding decision, along with the postal reviews, the proposal, and the panel discussion
- Provides an opportunity to rebut criticisms or misunderstandings at remote review stage
- Be positive; panel reviewers don't want to read an aggressive applicant response; but also don't simply repeat the positive comments

How to approach your applicant response

- Read the reviewers' comments carefully and take the time to compose your response
- Make sure to address each point
- If a concern is raised by more than one reviewer, it could be that your proposal could be presented more clearly; consider explaining things in a different way in your response
- Don't just focus on the research programme – also address comments made on impact, budget, team, etc.
- Use preliminary data or published data to support your argument
- Take a concise, methodological approach to addressing the issues, that will be clear and easy to follow by the sitting panel

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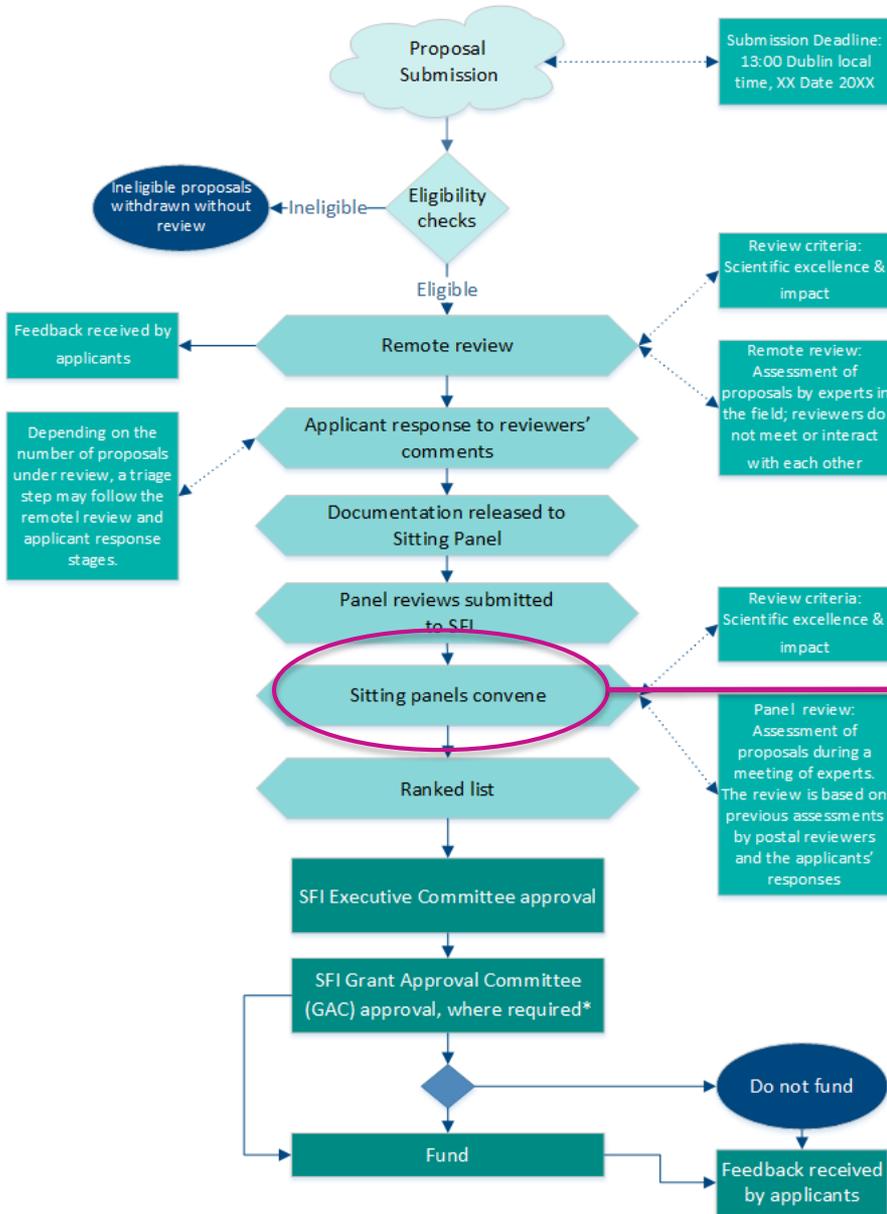


Sitting Panel Review

- Meet in Dublin to discuss proposals and make a funding recommendation
- International experts with a broad range of expertise.
- Appeal to your audience: your application and applicant response should appeal to both experts in your field *and* someone who is smart but knows little about your field

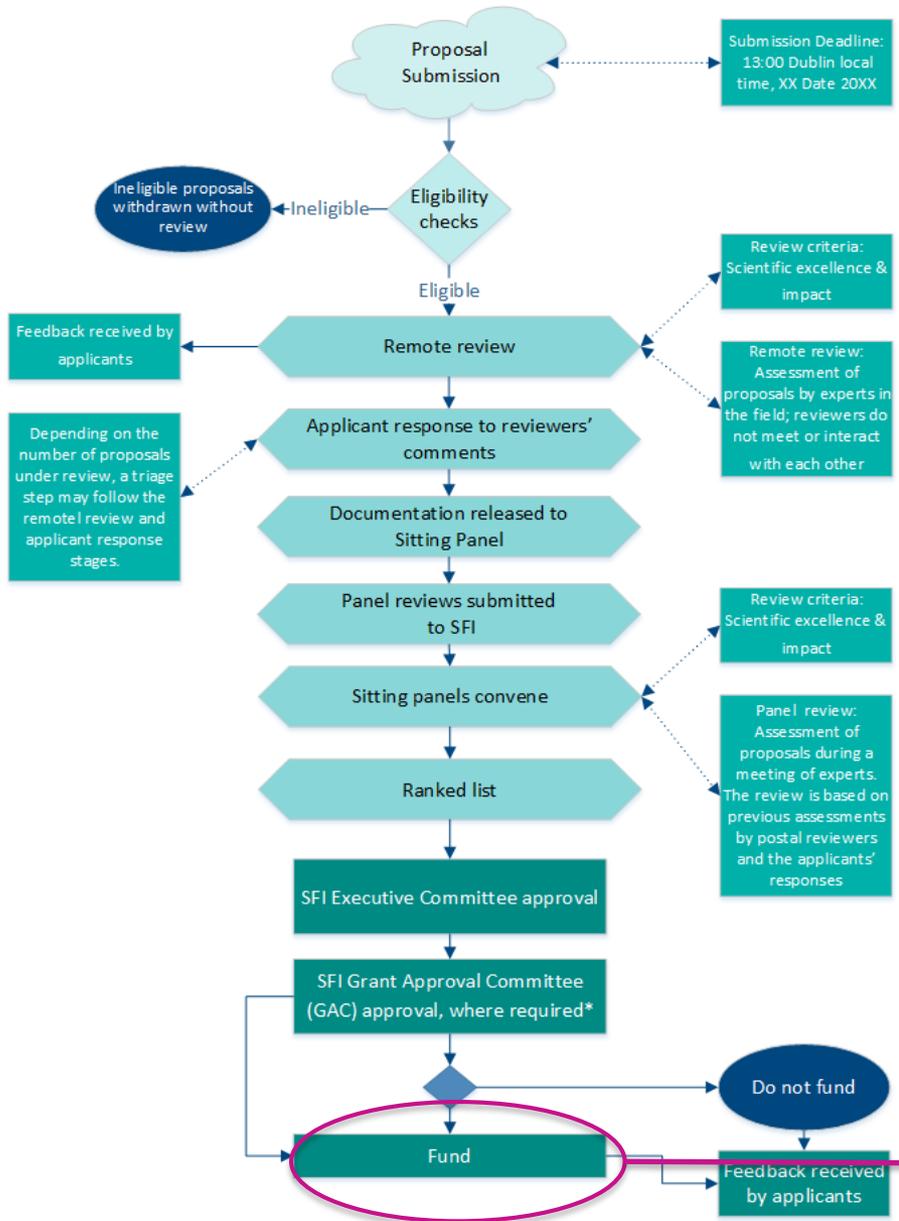
Common panel review comments on the applicant response

- “The remote reviewer comment X was not rebutted in the applicant response”
- “The applicant response is aggressive rather than constructive”
- “The applicant response is irrelevant, inappropriate and stubborn. The applicant has not acknowledged the criticism Y”
- “The rebuttal did not address the core problems”
- “The rebuttal was defensive and argumentative. It was not addressed in a calm way. The applicant could have done a better job thinking about it”
- “There was an inappropriate tone to the rebuttal”
- “The remote reviewers found the application was not novel, innovative. The applicant response did not address this to my satisfaction”
- “The applicant did not take the opportunity to provide more preliminary data”



Sitting Panel Review – more comments on the applicant response

- “The remote reviewer concerns were well rebutted with relevant data”
- “The concern about the over-ambitious nature of workpackage 4 was well rebutted, and I agree with the applicant’s argument”
- “The rebuttal very clearly articulated the novelty of the work”
- “The applicant took on board the remote reviewer comments and changed the proposal consistently. They were well addressed”



Last Stage: Budget Assessment

Common reviewer comments on the budget

- “Need for three post-docs is not totally clear since profiles envisaged are not provided”
- “Budget is completely overdrawn”
- “The budget is very modest in comparison to the over-ambitious nature of the research programme”

Once a funding decision is made, SFI staff apply the changes recommended by reviewers and examine the budgets of funded proposals to ensure:

- All line items are fully justified
- Compliance with the SFI Grant Budget Policy: http://www.sfi.ie/funding/sfi-policies-and-guidance/budget-finance-related-policies/SFI-Grant-Budget-Policy_2016_July.pdf

SFI staff will remove items from the budget that are:

- Ineligible
- Not justified

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In Conclusion:

Preparation Stages

- Carefully research the funding programmes available and ensure you are applying to the most relevant one to your career stage and field
- Start your proposal early
- Read the call document
- Watch the webinar
- Recruit collaborators early – Consider including collaborators who can fill gaps in your expertise

Proposal

- Avoid jargon
- Repeat important concepts/advances throughout the proposal
- Find information on the nature of the review process for the programme you are applying to. Address your proposal to the reviewers described
- Get feedback:
 - Show your draft application to a colleague
 - Show your draft application to a colleague who does not already know what you intend to do
 - Show your draft application to a colleague who is not your best friend

Submission

- Be cognisant of internal deadlines
- Aim to submit your proposal one week before the deadline