

Review of applications at Helse Sør-Øst RHF

Guide for reviewers of grant proposals 2022-23

Overview of the funding process

The South-Eastern Norway Regional Health Authority (Helse Sør-Øst RHF) funds medical research carried out by the hospitals and associated private health institutions in the region. Funding covers research across the biomedical spectrum, from more fundamental lab-based science to clinical trials, and in all disease areas.

Research funds provided by Helse Sør-Øst RHF are based on public sources, with money granted through the Norwegian Ministry of Health and Care Services' research budgets for the specialist health services and through investments in research made by the Board of Helse Sør-Øst RHF.

Access to funding in Helse Sør-Øst RHF

Funding opportunities in Helse Sør-Øst RHF are only accessible to researchers employed by hospitals or associated institutions in the health region with a position of at least 20%. This allows for applications from researchers with combined positions, such as concomitant employment at a university and at a hospital. (A typical applicant may be a clinical professor.) Project activities however, should primarily be carried out in a hospital/associated health institution, not outside, and any positions funded by these research grants, must also be located to these institutions. This supports collaborative research projects while focusing the research funding on the specialist health services to strengthen medical research as one of the mandatory tasks carried out in Norwegian hospitals.

The application process in brief

As a rule of thumb, funding for research is distributed after competitive application processes, and thus, project review is one of the cornerstones of the work as a funding body. All research proposals submitted to Helse Sør-Øst RHF are assigned to two independent reviewers who consider the scientific potential and the impact of the research concerned. The review process is confidential to protect proposals and anonymous to support the free exchange of views. After submission, the RHF administrative unit examines the applications to make sure they comply with all formal and strategic requirements of the call.

Applications are reviewed over a two-stage process. In the first stage, two reviewers provide an assessment of the proposal scoring each proposal after six criteria. Access to the applications is provided through the electronic application system eVurdering. Logging into this portal gives access to all the information needed to carry out a review.

The second stage is the panel's discussion of the proposals and funding decision. This usually involves two steps: a triage or shortlisting to select the most competitive proposals (approx. top 50%) to go through to the next stage, and a meeting for open discussion within the committee where the final funding decision is taken.

Anonymity

Although the names of reviewers in each panel are disclosed, individual assessments are anonymous to support the free exchange of views. Reviewers should ensure that they do not identify themselves in the feedback to the applicants, e.g. by describing detailed aspects of their own research. Any additional notes made during the review are not shared with the applicant, it is only text supplied in the “feedback”-box that is included in the response to applicants.

Review criteria

Review criteria for applications to Helse Sør-Øst RHF have two main dimensions: Scientific quality and potential and Impact. Each dimension is divided into three components as summarised below:

A. Scientific quality and potential

1. Project design and originality:

- Scientific background, overview of the research front, state-of-the-art, relevant references to literature
- Clarity of hypotheses, objectives and milestones
- Scientific novelty /originality relative to the research front of the subject area. Does the project
- Challenging current practices (clinical and research), e.g. through innovative use of theory/methods

2. Feasibility:

- Realistic, well-reasoned and appropriate project plans (experimental and analytical methods, data
- Collection procedures, sample size and statistical strength etc.)
- Realistic budgets
- Description of roles and positions (particularly important if including a PhD position)
- Identified risks, alternative strategies for conducting the project
- Support from pilot projects or other preliminary data where relevant
- User involvement where relevant

3. Quality of the applicant (relative to career stage) and the research environment:

- Expertise, productivity and qualifications
- Skills related to project management and supervision; independency relative to career stage
- Educational environment, capacity and ability to supervise (relevant for PhD applications)
- Access to sufficient infrastructure, equipment and resources, relevant scientific networks
- Relevant collaborators creating a research environment of capacity (cross-disciplinarity if relevant)

B. Impact

4. Needs justification:

- Target group(s), i.e. patient group(s), carers, other identified users
- Needs in the specialist health services
- filling knowledge gaps
- meeting other needs of society

5. Potential for implementation:

- Realistic plans for implementation / translation of research into improved practice
- Realistic time line for implementation (short/long term)
- Identified dependencies on development in other areas, alternative strategies
- Plans for dissemination and visibility, communication of the project activities to different target audiences

6. Importance of generating new knowledge and competence building:

- Realistic importance for the health services, possible improvements of existing offers/practices
- Importance of new knowledge / filling knowledge gaps, academic impact
- Potential for generalisation / broad use of new knowledge/methods/procedure

The six criteria are scored from 1 (low) – 5 (high). The criteria for scientific quality and potential outlines what the prospects are for good scientific progress. The reviewer should consider different aspects of the project according to the given criteria to determine how convincing and coherent the proposed project strategy is. Feasibility is central to the proposal supported by robust methodology and experimental design (e.g. bias avoidance, blinding, statistical power etc.). How suitable is the investigator group and can they deliver the proposed research. The track record of the PI and collaborators should be considered as appropriate and have realistic expectations. Note that these evaluations should also consider career stage.

The Impact dimension (B) is aligned with Scientific potential (A) and covers criteria that supports the potential for implementation and generation of new knowledge. The needs description and identification of user groups is also part of this assessment. Overall, Impact should provide a demonstration of the potential contribution that the research project will make to patients and the specialist health services, primarily, but also to the society and users in a wider perspective.

Finally, the funding decision should be based on a totality of these criteria to answer the question whether the funds requested are essential for the proposed work. Both Scientific potential and Impact should justify funding on the scale requested. Note that the criteria of the Impact dimension has been set up to support impact through the lens of Helse Sør-Øst RHF and the specialist health services in the region. This provides a frame work for assessment of which project applications are important to the health services and which are not, and supports the overarching decisions to fund research in the region, made by the Ministry of Health and Care Services and by the Board of Helse Sør-Øst RHF.

What happens to the review?

Your review and scores are passed on to the other panel members after a triage or shortlisting to reject the proposals with the lowest scores. In the committee meeting, the most competitive proposals are discussed, and a final funding decision is made. Applications that have been discussed, but not funded, will receive a feedback in which your review will be made available to the applicant. Text entered into the feedback-box in eVurdering is part of this and should justify the scoring by commenting on positive and negative sides with the application. The outcomes of all funding decisions are published on the Helse Sør-Øst RHF website soon after the Board meeting in December.

