

## Workshop on funding opportunities within the Food Standards Agency

Margaret Ashwell

Ashwell Associates, Ashwell Street, Ashwell, Herts. SG7 5PZ, UK

During this workshop, held as part of a joint Nutrition Society and Food Standards Agency (Agency) meeting on Micronutrient interactions and public health, several precepts for a successful funding application to the Agency were discussed. These precepts, many of which can be used as guiding principles for project proposals to other funding bodies, are summarised as follows:

- remember that the Agency only supports research that will help them formulate or change human food policy;
- read the research requirements document thoroughly and plan your project to answer the call;
- remember that the Agency issues contracts, not grants; your project will be just one project within a focused and coordinated programme;
- collaborative work is encouraged, but this type of approach is not a licence to double or treble your costs;
- write a one-page executive summary and attach it to the front of the form;
- the statistical basis for your experimental design and proposed statistical analysis of your results are important criteria in the evaluation of your proposal;
- your plans for dissemination and exploitation are very important;
- match your project duration against your research plan;
- abide by the Agency plan for quality assurance for the management of research;
- make full use of the programme adviser and the Agency policy contact and the 'feedback' stage to refine your scientific ideas in line with Agency policy.

### Funding opportunities: Foods Standard Agency

The Optimal Nutrition Programme has already been mentioned as one of the research programmes funded by the Food Standards Agency (Agency; Tedstone, 2004). It addresses specific issues in relation to macronutrient intakes and issues relating to subgroups that would influence the targetting of dietary advice. The overall aim of the Optimal Nutrition Programme is to provide a scientific basis for population and subpopulation level dietary guidelines for optimal health.

During the 10 years I have acted as an external programme adviser both to the Agency (and, before 2000, for the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food), I have read more than 300 research proposals written in response to the regular calls for research published in the research requirements document. Many of these proposals have resulted in very successful projects within the programme and some have been summarised in other papers from this

meeting (for example, see Jackson *et al.* 2004; McNulty & Pentieva, 2004).

Table 1 outlines the elements of the current (2004) system used by the Agency to commission research and Table 2 summarises the current evaluation criteria. What follows is personal advice drawn from my accumulated experience on the distinguishing features of successful proposals.

### **The Agency only supports research that will help them formulate or change food policy**

They do not fund any research that happens to be interesting to you! Never lose sight of this objective and acquaint yourself with the policy background and strategic aims of the Agency (at the beginning of the research requirements document). In general, the Agency is interested

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**Abbreviation:** Agency, Food Standards Agency.

**Corresponding author:** Dr Margaret Ashwell, email [margaret@ashwell.uk.com](mailto:margaret@ashwell.uk.com)

**Table 1.** The current (2004) submission and evaluation process used by the Food Standards Agency (Agency) to commission research

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The Agency do initial sift to check on broad policy relevance; does the proposal fit with the requirement?
The Agency send out proposals to internal and external evaluators plus the programme adviser
Internal and external evaluators read proposals and fill in an evaluation form for each proposal
Evaluators identify queries to go back to proposers; the 'feedback' stage
Proposers answer queries as soon as possible; usually about 2 weeks is given for this stage
Evaluation panel discusses proposals and evaluators' comments. Responses from proposers to queries are considered
Evaluators rank proposals in merit order
Agency officials meet to discuss size of research budget. Decide to fund proposals usually in accordance with the outcome and evaluation panel ranking
Unsuccessful proposers contacted and given some reasons for failure to help with future proposals
Successful proposers contacted
Post tender negotiations result in the detailed scope of work and pricing schedule that define the project's activities and form part of the contract. These points need to be agreed and signed by both parties (The Agency project officer and proposer)

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**Table 2.** The current evaluation form used by the Food Standards Agency for project proposals

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Policy relevance
Scientific quality
Details of the contractor
Finance
Specific comments for applicants to address
Additional comments
Overall ranking

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in the diets of healthy adults. Beware of straying into territories that are covered by other government departments. There is sometimes a fine line between them. On the whole, the Agency will only fund work in its programmes that relates directly to the human diet. Only under exceptional circumstances are projects funded that are wholly based on *in vitro* or animal-model experiments. These techniques can only be included as part of your experimental protocol if it is clear how the rest of your proposal is concerned with the diet and health of man.

#### **The research requirements document must be read in its entirety**

The format of the current document (2004) includes the background sections, guidance for applicants (at the front) and guidelines for completion of form RCU-A3 (at the back). A lot of careful preparation goes into this document. Read it first, and only then go back and read the paragraph or the page that relates to your own research interest. Your proposal must be absolutely in line with the research call. Don't be tempted to put in something that is 'vaguely' in the same area. If in doubt, take advice (see p. 552).

#### **The Agency issues contracts, not grants; your project will be just one project within a focused and coordinated programme**

You need to have a clear picture of what you hope to achieve, how and when. Your research proposal must include realistic and achievable objectives within the time-bound milestones. For this reason the application form is so important. Remember that your proposal will be

evaluated against the selection criteria (part D of guidance for applicants in the research requirements document) and, if you are successful, it will form the basis for your contract. Obtaining a good 'track record' with the Agency requires delivery on time. Promise only what you can deliver, and deliver what you promise! Too few proposals give a clear indication of exactly what the research will deliver, why the outputs will have implications for the development of future policies and what its relative importance is in terms of the likely effects on improving the UK diet.

If at all possible, show how your project will bring added value to existing projects and will enhance the whole programme. For example, can you do further work on samples that have already been generated in an Agency project? There is a full list of current projects (updated regularly) and the most recent annual research report on the website at <http://www.food.gov.uk/science/research/fsaresearchprog>.

#### **Collaborative work is encouraged, but this type of approach is not a licence to double or treble your costs**

Sometimes too many collaborators can be seen as a disadvantage. Very careful thought should be given as to why it is important to bring other contractors on board and what skills they are contributing that are essential to meet the overall objectives of the project. Instead, show how the Agency is getting even better value for money because the contractors with the correct expertise are performing the appropriate parts of the project.

#### **A one page executive summary attached to the front of the form is helpful**

This summary is not only helpful to evaluators, but it is enormously helpful to focus your thoughts when you start to write a proposal. It must make clear how you will use top-quality science to help formulate food policy.

Don't use up too much of the limited space to reiterate why the topic is of importance to the Agency; they know that. It is much better that your summary should distinguish the approach you intend to use to answer the research call from that used by all the other proposers.

It is helpful to write your summary as if you are addressing the Head of the Agency (or, even better, his or her secretary or spouse, who is not familiar with the scientific terms you are using!). Check how successful you have been by asking someone else who is completely unfamiliar with your work to read it. Do they understand what you want to do, and why and how you want to do it? Once you've got this right, flesh out the proposal with the required details.

**The statistical basis for your experimental design and proposed statistical analysis of your results are important criteria in the evaluation of your proposal**

Table 3 summarises some of the most important statistical issues to think about in relation to proposals for the Optimal Nutrition Programme.

Generalisability and ways of dealing with non-response are important if your results are to have relevance to public health. Power calculations, measurement issues and plans for sensible analysis will avoid waste of resources and will show that your proposal represents good value for money.

**Your plans for dissemination and exploitation are very important**

The official definition of dissemination from the EU's Directorate of Research makes it clear that dissemination does not include traditional peer-reviewed publications. The Agency does not go quite this far, but it is always impressive if you can speculate on how you will disseminate your results beyond peer-reviewed journals.

The Agency prefers to publish results of the work it funds sooner rather than later; so, if you can pinpoint ways in which you can publish methodological papers or guidelines before the end of your project, this information will be well received.

Projects requested under the Optimal Nutrition Programme are less likely than some others funded by the Agency to result in exploitable outcomes. However, remember that tangible products are not the only form of exploitation. Policy exploitation is another outcome, and if your project is truly geared to a public health end point, you can indicate to which policies it might contribute.

**Match your project duration against your research plan and don't feel that you have to fill up every space in the proposal form!**

There is no recommended norm, but if you are tempted to put in a proposal for >3 or 4 years there must be a very good scientific reason why the research needs to take this long; not just to keep someone in a post! This type of approach also extends to practical matters, where planning is very important and the more clarity you can provide the better. Proposals are frequently criticised for insufficient detail being paid to full and proper characterisation and knowledge of subjects and starting materials, where these aspects have a big influence on the remainder of the work.

**Table 3.** Statistical considerations for project proposals submitted to the Food Standards Agency (Agency)

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Generalisability
The Agency needs studies to support evidence-based decisions, not just to generate hypotheses
Ideally you should be able to extrapolate your results to the population of interest (generally the UK population)
If not, you must discuss and address issues around generalisability and clearly state that the proposal aims only at generating hypotheses
Non-response
You want to avoid bias that might occur because non-response issues were not addressed
Even if your proposal has a proper sample plan, there may be differences between the respondents and the non-respondents, which will hinder the generalisability
You must address alternative methods to correct for this point, particularly if the target population is likely to respond according to particular population traits
Power calculations
Your proposal for studies must be correctly powered to avoid waste of resources
Measurement issues
Good measurement is fundamental for the success of the proposal
Poor measurement, or measurement issues that were not addressed, will penalise the overall conclusions
Measurement issues need to be addressed within the proposal and methods should be incorporated to tackle them
Make all your data analyses sensible
Analyses must be carried out realistically
There is no point in suggesting complicated analyses for which the study has not been correctly powered and will lead to meaningless results
All analyses should be described in detail and all tests should be correctly justified

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The proposal form has been designed to cover a wide range of projects, some very different from yours. If you have problems with the form, the relevant information may be appended separately. Please don't use a type smaller than 12 point and use space wisely (most evaluators will have eyesight a little past its prime!). It is quality and clarity, not quantity, that is important. Give particular emphasis to what you are going to do and why, and focus your scientific context on this aspect; you do not need to produce a mini-review!

**Abide by the Agency plan for quality assurance for the management of research**

A code of practice was established jointly with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council and the Natural Environment Research Council. It was launched in May 2003 and has applied to work arising from the Agency's research requirements since that date. It was framed to encompass a diversity of research procedures, involving mathematical, physical, biological and social science, laboratory or desk-based activities. The joint approach emphasises that this code is about quality of management of research not the scientific procedures

themselves; the quality assurance of the science has always been a requirement for a successful proposal.

From June 2004 proposers will be expected to be able to make a much clearer statement of the extent to which they can comply with the code. In the long term the Agency will expect most contractors to have 3rd party accreditation. Full details can be found at the following website: [www.food.gov.uk/science/research/researchpolicy/quality-assurance/qacopres](http://www.food.gov.uk/science/research/researchpolicy/quality-assurance/qacopres).

#### **Make full use of the programme adviser, the Agency policy contact and the 'feedback' stage**

Both the programme adviser and the Agency policy contact are there to help applicants submit high-quality proposals that are in line with the research requirements document. They usually have lots of experience from past applications and past evaluations. They will also be aware of the background thinking behind the requested requirements.

All proposers will be alerted to the date of the 'feedback' stage, i.e. when they can expect to receive the queries posed by the members of the evaluation panel. If you have already run your proposal past the Agency contacts, the points required for clarification should have been minimised. In all cases this 'feedback' step is an extremely important part of the process. Complete and succinct answers to the queries can not only help you to clarify points, but also help you to convince the evaluators that you are 'on top' of the science, methods and statistics relevant to your proposal. Should your proposal not be

successful, the feedback you receive at this interim stage, as well as after the final evaluation, should help you submit better proposals in future.

#### **Finally**

This advice is written specifically in relation to research proposals submitted to the Agency for the Optimal Nutrition Programme. However, although written here from an Agency perspective, the guidelines, advice and many of the principles covered are relevant to submitting proposals to many other funding bodies.

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