



UKRI policy fellowships 2026

Fellowship position

Fellowship title:

Defra Circular Economy Fellowship

Fellowship type:

Core policy fellowship

Host organisation:

[Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs](#)

Host team:

Circular Economy Evidence and Analysis Team

Academic discipline/s:

Social research, humanities, economics, behavioural science

Summary:

Research opportunity to advance Defra's understanding of how to support the social and cultural transition towards a Circular Economy.

Policy topic:

Embedding circularity into our society via the Circular Economy (CE) Growth Plan. The fellowship will fit into the wider programme of work, supporting the Directorate to ensure a human-focused approach to delivering policy within the Plan.

Research career stage:

Open to early and mid-career researchers

Fellowship structure

The fellowship is estimated to begin in May 2027. The exact date will be confirmed by the host depending on onboarding and security clearance requirements. The fellowship will have three phases:

- inception: duration is 3 months at 0.4 FTE
- main placement: duration is 12 months at 0.6-1 FTE
- knowledge exchange: duration is 3 months at 0.4 FTE

Work arrangements

Location requirements:

The role can be based in any of Defra's England offices. These are based in London, York, Newcastle and Bristol. There will be some requirement to travel to meet other team members, this would be approximately four times within a year.

Hybrid working:

Whilst Defra has a three-days a week minimum office working requirement in line with the rest of the UK Civil Service, we would be content for a minimum one day a week office attendance, at any location listed above, during the main placement phase. A laptop will be provided enabling work from home or other sites, providing access to host systems. In addition to office attendance, it would be useful to budget for travel to London around four times in the placement year and once in the inception phase. Eligible Travel and Subsistence costs are supported in the main UKRI grant. Please see the full call text and guidance for more details.

Security clearance and nationality eligibility criteria:

Basic Personnel Security Standard (BPSS) is required as a minimum, depending on location, which usually takes around six weeks to obtain. If the chosen location is London, Counter Terrorist Check (CTC)/Level 1B checks are required for office attendance. We would expect the successful applicant to start the security clearance application process, with support from the host team, as soon as their fellowship has been confirmed by UKRI. Inception phase can begin before the security clearance process is completed but will be required for the main placement phase. Please see [National security vetting: clearance levels - GOV.UK](#) for more information.

This job is broadly open to the following groups: UK nationals; nationals of the Republic of Ireland; nationals of Commonwealth countries who have the right to work in the UK; nationals of the EU, Switzerland, Norway, Iceland or Liechtenstein and family members of those nationalities with settled or pre-settled status under the European Union Settlement Scheme (EUSS); nationals of the EU, Switzerland, Norway, Iceland or Liechtenstein and family members of those nationalities who have made a valid application for settled or pre settled status under the European Union Settlement Scheme (EUSS); individuals with limited leave to remain or indefinite leave to remain who were eligible to apply for EUSS on or before 31 December 2020; Turkish nationals, and certain family members of Turkish nationals, who have accrued the right to work in the Civil Service. Please see [Civil Service recruitment: nationality rules - GOV.UK](#) for more information.

Fellowship position description

This Fellowship offers a unique opportunity to support Defra to advance its understanding of the social and cultural transition towards a circular economy.

In November 2024, the Environment Secretary convened a Taskforce of experts drawn from industry, civil society organisations and academia to explore the question of how we can achieve a circular economic transition in England, supporting economic growth, tackling cost of living, and paving the way to a low-carbon and resource efficient future. A circular economy ensures products are designed to last and can be repaired, refurbished, reused and recycled. Waste is eliminated, materials are kept in circulation at their highest value for as long as possible, and exploitation is replaced with regeneration.

The UK's circular economy challenge is systemic, technical and economic, but a human-centred approach is essential since:

- material flows are enacted through behaviour, not just the availability of infrastructure
- adoption depends on whether systems are designed around real human capacities and constraints

This fellowship will seek to build on existing research and previous investments to focus on the human-centred circular transition across all domains of society. The fellow will bring their expertise in-house to

support Defra to translate research into tangible human-centred approaches to delivering future policy options. This fellowship will help Defra:

- bring the social and technical together to help provide new understandings of behaviour change opportunities and policy objectives in the future
- start to fill the social and cultural evidence gaps to ensure a holistic and comprehensive assessment of the challenges involved
- embed this knowledge and understanding alongside technical circularity perspectives

This research could be addressed through a variety of frameworks, including commercialisation, place, and sectoral approaches. The choice of the area will be made by the fellow based on their interests and expertise, with the scope to be agreed between Defra and the fellow as part of the inception phase.

We expect Defra's Circular Economy Growth Plan and roadmaps to set the overall context for the fellowship with the fellow developing our knowledge of human-centred approaches to implementing a circular economy. This new knowledge will improve and secure the delivery of other key investments in this research area, including Defra's Circular Economy Pathfinders, a monitoring and evaluation programme supporting local circular initiatives demonstrate their value in embedding circular practices at the local level, and co-funding with UKRI in advanced recycling, academia-industry networking and business innovation.

There are a number of routes and mechanisms through which the expertise and fresh thinking generated by the fellowship could contribute to the Circular Economy directorate. These routes include new research project/s being commissioned to fill key evidence gaps identified, influencing policy development and co-design of circular economy interventions, and shaping existing key evidence projects for example Defra's new Circular Economy citizen survey which is intended to track the citizen journey in the transition to a circular economy.

We anticipate that this fellowship will provide the fellow with the following benefits:

- the opportunity to codesign, produce and publish original research, ensuring that findings contribute to wider scientific and policy discussions
- being embedded in Defra's Circular Economy Directorate's Evidence and Analysis team, with access to internal systems and processes, gaining in-depth understanding of the policy process
- the opportunity to inform and influence Defra and wider government policy on social, economic and environmental issues
- access to a wider network of policy, analysis, other experts and opportunities to engage with government departments and aligned organisations
- knowledge exchange opportunities, including policy roundtables, cross-government workshops and wider networks

Person specification

Applications will be assessed by UKRI panel assessment against the following essential opportunity-specific requirements in addition to the generic eligibility and call criteria.

Essential criteria:

- subject matter expertise in a topic/s related to circularity
- a demonstrated academic interest in social, cultural or human-centred dimensions of circularity
- a track record of collecting and synthesising complex evidence into meaningful outputs for research users beyond academia, such as policy, industry, third sector and public audiences

Applicants shortlisted from the panel assessment will be invited to a host led interview. At this stage the host will also take into account the following desirable fellowship-specific requirements.

Desirable criteria:

Desirable criteria that Defra would like the applicants to meet in order to be successful for this fellowship includes:

- examples of impact achieved in relation to core circular economy principles (for example, keeping products and materials in use, value retention, and reducing dependence on virgin resources)
- a track record of applied or policy-facing experience in the social and cultural dimensions of circularity (for example how people make sense of reuse, repair and second-hand consumption; cultural norms around ownership, convenience, value and “newness”; and perceptions of quality and safety)
- experience in communicating to range of audiences including non-technical audiences

Processing personal data

If applicants are shortlisted by the UKRI assessment panel UKRI will need to share the application and any personal information that it contains with the host for the host led interview selection process.

Your personal data will be handled in line with UK data protection legislation and managed securely. If you would like to know more, including how to exercise your Rights, please see the UKRI [privacy notice](#).

Please see the Hosts' [privacy notice](#) and they will delete your data at the end of the selection process unless you are successful, in which case we will retain your data as an independent data controller.