UK Research and Innovation

Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs

UKRI policy fellowships 2026

Fellowship position

Fellowship title:

Defra pandemic preparedness framework fellowship

Fellowship type:

Natural hazards and resilience fellowship

Host organisation:

Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs

Host team:

Exotic Disease Control team: responsible for tackling new emerging diseases and notifiable animal diseases.

Academic discipline/s:

Epidemiology, veterinary science, one health

Summary:

Developing a framework for tackling pandemic priority pathogens in the animal health and environmental health sectors.

Policy topic:

Defra is responsible for improving and protecting the environment and supporting our world-leading food, farming and fishing industries. This includes statutory responsibility for the detection, response and control of animal diseases, whilst also giving consideration to the wider impact of diseases, such as food security, public health risk, impact on the natural environment and economic and financial implications for industry and the taxpayer.

To manage these cross-cutting implications, a joined-up approach across government is needed, and Defra works closely with other departments to support the UK's biosecurity. The UK Biological Security Strategy and UK Pandemic Preparedness Strategy are examples of this. Many of the challenges around animal disease can only be tackled using a One Health approach. The strategic focus of this project is zoonoses, where Defra's surveillance, research and horizon scanning is reliant on cooperation and collaboration with other departments and a broad research community.

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:

It is preferred, but not essential, that the fellow is based in London to facilitate close working with key London-based colleagues. If the fellow chooses not to be based in London, there may be a requirement to travel to the London office for specific meetings or to meet other team members. The fellow may alternatively be based at any of the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra) offices: London, York, Bristol and Newcastle.

Hybrid working:

We encourage staff to work in the office at least 60% of their employment time, but this can be flexible and may be based on a monthly average. However, as much of this work will be desk based, we would be content with just one day a week in an office (no set days), for the duration of the inception and main placement, where there are other team members. Defra Exotics Disease Control team have staff based in Newcastle, York, Carlisle, Bristol and London. A laptop will be provided enabling work from home or other sites, providing access to host systems. Where office attendance is outside London, it would be useful to budget for travel to London around once a quarter in the placement year and once in the inception phase. Eligible travel and subsistence costs are supported in the main UKRI grant. Please see full call text and guidance for more details.

Security clearance and nationality eligibility criteria:

Counter Terrorism Checks (CTC) clearance is required. It can take up to a month to six weeks to get clearance. 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. Please read carefully the eligibility for this level of clearance. The inception phase of the placement cannot begin until the CTC clearance has been awarded.

Fellowship position description

The fellow will work within the Exotic Disease Control (EDC) team, with the senior advisor for non-livestock diseases, science and risk.

Defra publishes individual disease control strategies for high priority notifiable exotic diseases of animals, such as avian influenza, foot and mouth disease and rabies, and a broader contingency plan, but for zoonotic pathogens there is less structure around how to interface with other government departments and the research community for a pathogen of epidemic or pandemic potential. The fellow will develop a flexible response framework, drawing on other programmes of work in the area, and ensuring it aligns with the Government Biological Security Strategy and the UK Pandemic Preparedness Strategy.

The COVID Inquiry and the Lessons Identified from Exercise Pegasus have highlighted the need for a more flexible approach to a variety of pathogens with pandemic potential. However, these are still lacking a joined-up approach (a One Health approach) to how to respond to a zoonotic pathogen. The fellow will help to draw together research undertaken by various academics under the UKRI programmes and develop a

One Health operational approach to control. This will then be built into our response mechanisms in Defra and build on the DHSC-led response to a pandemic.

Within that focus, there is scope to refine and identify priority questions. During the inception phase, the fellow will have the opportunity to shape the project so that it both meets Defra's needs and reflects the fellow's skills and interests.

Some example questions this project could address are:

- how to identify research gaps and commission new research
- which are the highest priority risk pathways to address
- what are the roles and responsibilities of teams across a one health (OH) approach
- what are the trigger points for action
- what alternative scenarios should be considered
- how should economic impact modelling, reasonable worse case scenario modelling and behavioural science also be brought into the framework

This is a desk-based project and one of the key priorities will be the synthesization of existing evidence from prior research. However, there is some limited scope for the fellow to undertake their own desk-based research to supplement this, the scope of which to be agreed during the inception phase. For any research undertaken by the fellow, we will support them in identifying suitable means of publishing and disseminating the outputs to ensure impact, subject to Defra's Publication Approvals Procedure.

Benefits for the successful fellow:

- a unique opportunity to shape and influence how the UK Government appraises and prioritises zoonotic pathogens in the future
- gain first-hand experience of how this research and evidence translates directly into future national preparedness for outbreaks and pandemics
- strong opportunities to develop their professional network, with access to a field-leading experts, analysts, vets and policymakers across a range of government departments and aligned organisations
- knowledge exchange opportunities, including policy roundtables, cross-government workshops and conferences
- ownership of a significant piece of work for Defra, with close guidance and support, including access to the tools needed to deliver and some scope to shape the work

Additional information:

The fellow will be provided with a host email address, computer and IT equipment, a security pass for their Defra office, and inclusion on distribution lists for the wider Animal & Plant Health Directorate. The fellow will join EDC team meetings, gaining insight into the role of government during disease outbreaks, as well as contributing to wider work on SPS realignment. This work will be important for our future relationship with EU agencies and research programmes. The Line Manager will provide leadership and guidance through weekly meetings. The fellow will also be invited to attend the monthly Veterinary Risk Group and Human & Animal Infections and Risk Surveillance group meetings.

Work on the OH Pandemic Framework will fit into wider cross-government activity on pandemic preparedness, and knowledge exchange with DHSC, GO Science, UKHSA, FCDO and DSTL will be expected.

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:

- a proven academic track record in epidemiology, disease control, risk assessment or disease modelling

- subject matter expertise in specific topics related to the fellowship such as pandemic pathogens or pathogens of epidemic potential, or behavioural science would be beneficial
- demonstration of ability to work in a team and lead cross-disciplinary workshops

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:

- the ability to think strategically and prior exposure to working within a complicated and multifaceted area of policy or research
- science communication skills and experience distilling the most pertinent findings of a scientific project and translating technical or scientific information for a range of audiences
- experience coordinating, engaging or collaborating with a range of partners across different organisations

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.