



UKRI policy fellowships 2026

Fellowship position

Fellowship title:

DfE understanding special educational needs fellowship

Fellowship type:

Core policy fellowship

Host organisation:

[Department for Education](#)

Host team:

The fellow will be part of the SEND and Alternative Provision analytical unit which is in the Schools and Pupil Analysis Division.

Academic discipline/s:

Social science, research methods, social policy, education, statistics

Summary:

Opportunity to further develop the evidence base on understanding areas, levels, and complexity of special educational needs to inform government policy development and interventions.

Policy topic:

The Department for Education (DfE) is the lead department for the Breaking down barriers to opportunity mission. DfE is proposing to reform the school and Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) system. This fellowship will focus on special educational needs which sit under the Achieving and Thriving pillar of the [Department's areas of research interest](#).

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:

We have current unit members based in London, Sheffield, Manchester, and Nottingham. We can consider other DfE locations (Darlington, Bristol, Coventry). There will be some requirement to travel to meet other team members, this would be approximately four times within a year, usually in London or Sheffield.

Hybrid working:

There is an expectation of spending time in an office (or another working environment such as a work visit) two to three days a week. This can be discussed and tailored depending on personal circumstances within DfE's hybrid working arrangements. A DfE laptop can be provided enabling work from home or other sites, providing access to DfE systems. The line manager and main contact is based in Nottingham. In addition to office attendance, it would be useful to budget for travel from the fellow's main location (listed above) to Nottingham around three 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 full call text and guidance for more details.

Security clearance and nationality eligibility criteria:

Basic Personnel Security Standard (BPSS) is required, which usually takes around six weeks. 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](#)

General Nationality requirements apply to this role. Please check your eligibility before applying. More information is available at [Civil Service recruitment: nationality rules - GOV.UK](#)

Fellowship position description

Policy challenge and research area:

This fellowship will advance our understanding of the areas, levels, and complexities of special educational needs (SEN) which will enhance our ability to target interventions that support pupils with additional needs to thrive and achieve both in school and adult life.

We know children and young people identified with special educational needs have poorer outcomes than their peers across a range of measures such as attendance, exclusions, attainment, adult outcomes and wellbeing.

Children and young people with special educational needs are a heterogeneous group, and we understand less well how experiences and outcomes vary for pupils with different areas of needs, types of SEN identification and levels and complexity of their needs, as well as intersectionality of SEN with other child and young people characteristics. Understanding SEN beyond high level SEN types captured in school pupil data is the specific evidence gap we would like this fellowship to focus on.

Research and analysis opportunities:

We are open to different approaches to generating insights. This could include primary research, evidence synthesis, secondary data analysis of survey or linked admin data, or collating expert insights. We expect the approach taken to be shaped by the fellow's interests and skills and suitability to the research questions to be jointly agreed.

Collaboration:

As an embedded member of the SEND and AP analytical unit, the fellow will have ample opportunities to collaborate with, and learn and receive support from experienced government analysts with a range of backgrounds from social research, statistics, data science to economics. You will also be part of the wider DfE analytical community, being able to benefit from knowledge and skill shares and wider networking opportunities.

As analysts, we work closely with our SEND and AP policy and delivery professionals. For the fellow this provides the opportunity to, as a member of the team, to contribute to policy discussions and development in a complex, varied and cross-cutting policy area, e.g. through attending policy focused meetings, presenting work, quality assuring the use of evidence, supporting the development of briefings and other documents etc. There will be additional opportunities to engage with policy and analytical colleagues in the wider department or other government departments depending on the agreed topic scope of the work taken forward.

We expect this collaboration to lead to co-creating the detailed development of the project, building on the initial proposal, in the inception phase. Collaborating will also be key to developing policy-relevant outputs.

Outputs and impact:

Depending on the chosen analytical methodology, outputs may include analysis of existing data, development of replicable code, and/or write up of findings. A key part of the fellowship will be to disseminate outputs in an accessible way to policy makers and practitioners. This could be in the form of reports, evidence packs, and presentations. Outputs may be published by the department as full research reports, attributable to the author. It will also be possible to turn outputs into articles for publication in academic journals with DfE's clearance to ensure sensitive data is carefully managed.

In addition to contributing to the wider body of scientific evidence, we anticipate the fellowship to have impact on education and adult outcomes of children and young people through providing additional evidence to inform ongoing reforms in the SEND system.

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:

- the ability to collaborate with policy and analytical colleagues to undertake problem analysis and translate this into options for analytical work which meets evidence needs and has practical relevance
- the ability to select and apply appropriate research or statistical methods to generate novel and robust insights that answer agreed research questions
- ability to synthesise evidence generated, drawing out key messages while being clear on any limitations of the evidence

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:

- knowledge of education systems and an interest in special educational needs policy and practice
- willingness to explore opportunities for people with lived experience to inform the research and dissemination

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.