

UKRI policy fellowships 2026

Fellowship position

Fellowship title:

DfE enhanced investment zone productivity impacts fellowship

Fellowship type:

Core policy fellowship

Host organisation:

[Northern Ireland Department for the Economy \(DfE\)](#)

Host team:

The Enhanced Investment Zone (EIZ) Team is responsible for the design, governance and delivery of a £150 million, ten-year programme focused on driving productivity and stimulating private sector led growth across Northern Ireland. The EIZ supports delivery of the [UK Industrial Strategy](#), published on 23 June 2025.

Academic discipline/s:

Economics, data science, data methods, social research and innovation studies

Summary:

Opportunity to research on the productivity impacts arising from the photonics sector related interventions incorporating the respective skills, capital and clustering interventions supported by the Enhanced Investment Zone in Northern Ireland to help inform evidenced based decision making on future multi-faceted interventions.

Policy topic:

The fellowship will research and address the policy challenge of how to measure productivity impacts from publicly funded interventions, with particular focus on photonics led cluster, skills and capital development within the EIZ. The research findings will help inform evidenced based decision making on future multi-faceted interventions and it aligns with the UK Industrial Strategy IS-8 sector (Advanced Manufacturing) and the Economic Growth mission, supporting evidence-based investment.

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 DfE 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 envisaged the role will be based at the DfE, Adelaide House, Adelaide Street, Belfast. However, alternative arrangements can be considered.

Hybrid working:

DfE operates a hybrid working model and is flexible in accommodating different working patterns to support inclusivity and accessibility. For the inception and main placement phase, ideally, we would envisage the fellow to spend approximately two days per week (around 40% FTE) working from a DfE office, with the remainder of time working remotely. This level of face-to-face engagement has been found to work well for collaboration, but we are open to reasonable adjustments based on individual circumstances.

Office based working can be undertaken from DfE Connect 2 hubs, including Belfast and other regional hub locations, supporting flexibility and reducing travel where appropriate. 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 checks \(BPSS\)](#) is required and usually takes around six weeks. Inception phase can begin before the security clearance process is completed but will be required for the main placement phase. Prior to that, access the building is still possible, but wider access, for example, to IT, is not.

Fellowship position description

Overview and policy context:

The fellow would have the opportunity to explore the proposed research area of economic productivity enhancement by determining the interdependencies and influence within a triangulated approach to productivity enhancement effect of skills, clustering and capital investment interventions. The fellow thereby could ascertain the impact of each method and the degree of additionality and reliance of one aspect on the others.

This research would have direct alignment to the Enhanced Investment Zone (EIZ) in which all 3 aspects are being supported as part of the £150m public sector investment. The photonics sector support (Photon X) within the EIZ is the core intervention within the portfolio making up the majority of proposed investment. It has several subcomponents: most notably the Phasor capital investment (c.£30m Public, £30m private) which aims to further capitalise on the £98m City & Growth Deals investment - Advanced Manufacturing and Innovation Centre (AMIC); Photonics Innovation Cluster (c.£3.5m), which has been designed to ensure the new capability benefits NI SMEs and the wider society; and bespoke skills interventions (£28m), which have been informed and shaped by employers, in conjunction with our knowledge partners in higher and further education and the EIZ Professional Advisory Panel.

The research would ultimately allow for informed policy influence of how funding in support of sectors is structured with the Department for Economy moving forward.

Co-design:

In regard to co-design and collaboration, exact methodological approaches and topics will be co-determined by DfE priorities and the fellow's interests and input during the inception phase. Beyond the linkage to the EIZ and its productivity conundrum DfE are keen to allow the fellow to propose other linkages and provide insightful learnings from their experience.

The fellow is anticipated to be embedded within the Analytical Services or Economic Infrastructure Division and Line management will be provided once the final scope of work is determined in order to ensure the fellow is embedded in the most appropriate area to allow for efficient facilitation of their research. Office desk space will be provided within the DfE offices within the EIZ and ASD seating areas allowing for there to be a collaborative working environment. IT equipment will also be made available from day one.

This fellowship will focus on the productivity impacts of integrated interventions in the Advanced Manufacturing sector, with particular emphasis on photonics led cluster development within EIZ. The core policy challenge is how to robustly measure and evidence the impacts of coordinated skills, innovation, capital investment and clustering interventions, particularly where impacts are interdependent and emerge over time.

The fellow will undertake original research and analysis to develop and apply methodologies for assessing productivity impacts at programme level, building on existing indicative productivity models used within the Department. The work will directly inform design and investment decisions.

During the inception phase, the research focus, scope and delivery approach will be co-designed, ensuring priorities are shaped jointly by host needs and the fellow's expertise. Areas of interest may include productivity measurement, evaluation of photonics-related skills and capital interventions, cluster effects and spillovers, and the use of mixed-method approaches for complex programmes. The precise research focus will be agreed at inception and refined iteratively.

Collaboration and academic quality:

To support academic rigour and learning, there is scope to establish a light touch Quality Assurance Board, operating in an advisory capacity. This would provide independent challenge and ensure the fellow's research complements existing productivity tools and adds value to the Department's analytical evidence base, while also supporting dissemination of findings. The Board would meet at key milestones (e.g. inception, end of research phase, and prior to final outputs), without constraining the fellow's academic independence.

The fellow will collaborate closely with policy officials, economists, analysts, delivery partners, FE/HE institutions and industry stakeholders, including engagement with the EIZ Professional Advisory Panel, ensuring research remains grounded in live policy needs.

Embedding within the department:

The fellow will be fully embedded within the Department for the Economy's EIZ Team, with a designated line manager, access to office space, IT equipment and internal systems, and regular engagement with policy and analytical colleagues. The role offers direct exposure to the policy making context, including how evidence is used to inform policy development, investment decisions, governance processes and programme delivery. Hybrid working will be supported through DfE offices and Connect 2 hub locations.

Benefits to the fellow:

The fellowship provides a strong development opportunity, including:

- the opportunity to co-design, produce and disseminate original research
- experience of working within a devolved government policy context, informing live decisions on productivity, innovation and industrial strategy
- access to relevant programme data, stakeholders and analytical expertise across skills, innovation, capital investment and clustering
- opportunities for knowledge exchange, 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:

- be based at an employing organisation eligible for UKRI funding with the correct visa/right to work in place for the start date of the award
- hold a PhD or equivalent research experience
- be a researcher in an eligible discipline (economics, data science, data methods, social research, innovation studies) in accordance with the position applied for

Desirable criteria:

- familiarity with productivity measurement, performance frameworks or impact assessment in complex, multi-intervention programmes.
- have expertise in designing and applying evaluation or analytical methods relevant to assessing productivity and growth impacts

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.