UKRI policy fellowships 2027

Fellowship position

Fellowship title:

West Midlands Combined Authority business growth and innovation fellowship

Fellowship type:

Place policy fellowship

Host organisation:

West Midlands Combined Authority

Host teams:

Business Innovation and Technology; Economic Policy and Partnerships

Academic discipline/s:

Economics, business and management

Summary:

An opportunity to strengthen the evidence base for inclusive regional economic growth by examining the drivers of business R&D investment and exploring how innovation, productivity, and prosperity can be more widely shared across places, businesses, and communities.

Policy topic:

Place and R&D, links to UKRI Place agenda and place references in UKRI Strategy.

Research career stage:

Open to early and mid-career researchers

Fellowship structure

The fellowship is scheduled to begin on 1 October 2027. 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 fellowship will be based at 16 Summer Lane, Birmingham, B19, 3SD. The postholder will be expected to be in the office for at least 40% of the main placement.

Hybrid working:

Whilst the West Midlands Combined Authority has a two-day per week minimum office working requirement. A laptop will be provided enabling work from home or other sites, providing access to host systems.

Security clearance and nationality eligibility criteria:

Security clearance is not required for work at the WMCA. However, staff must be eligible to work in the UK. If visa sponsorship is required, you must follow the guidance provided on the Funding Finder regarding a Global Talent Visa.

Fellowship position description

This fellowship offers a unique opportunity to shape the evidence base underpinning the West Midlands Combined Authority's (WMCA) long-term economic agenda. Working across policy, research and analytical teams, the Fellow will explore two complementary areas of strategic importance that will inform future policymaking, programme design and investment decisions.

This will be an opportunity to work in a live policy development and policy implementation environment, at a trailblazing Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA), led by a directly elected Mayor. Rewiring The State and the Government's Innovation Nation policy is signalling new powers and funding relating to near to market innovation for MSAs, and so this fellowship means you will be at the forefront of ensuring evidence and research informs decision making for a new era of place-based innovation.

In sum, you will not just do research; you will ensure knowledge and evidence create real world impacts for local communities. You will be able to see how your work translates into funding decisions, delivery models, and outcomes for communities.

You will benefit from:

- a deep understanding of how research informs public sector policy and strategy
- being embedded in the West Midlands research and intelligence ecosystem, becoming part of a wider team across universities, local authorities, and the combined authority who are collectively working together to make the West Midlands the best place in the UK to, work, and visit.
- exposure to political dynamics and an understanding of how best to present data and evidence to senior politicians and senior decision makers
- potential opportunities to come and work at the WMCA or one of our partner organisations beyond this fellowship, if you wish, through access to new networks
- a supportive and trusted peer group – it is the people that make the WMCA, and we are all incredibly passionate and committed about making a difference for local communities
- regular opportunities to interface with world leading academics and researchers, particularly at the University of Birmingham and University of Warwick, who work closely with the WMCA on all matters of place-based research, policy, and strategy
- the ability to trailblaze new methods and approaches to strengthen research capacity and capability in combined authorities, setting a blueprint for the wider UK and potentially setting a global-standard, with dissemination of method and outputs on the global stage will be strongly supportive and encouraged. WMCA and its partners have strong access and relationships into the EU and OECD, as examples

Theme 1: What drives business R&D and innovation?

Understanding firm-level R&D expenditure in the West Midlands, firm-level behaviours and decisions on what motivates them and holds them back from making R&D investments, and to what extent is there a causal link between accessible public R&D funding and firm level R&D investments?
The Fellow will examine how R&D investment decisions are made in businesses, with a strong focus on moving away from aggregate data trends into firm-level data, decisions, and behaviours.

The West Midlands has a strong rate of private R&D expenditure (see Office for National Statistics (ONS) releases by region) and unlike several other regions, this is increasing. However, policy makers do not fully understand by whom or why.

The West Midlands also has a low rate of public R&D expenditure – especially as a ratio of private, it is amongst the widest gap (5:1) in the UK. Is there a causal link between more public R&D expenditure and more private sector R&D expenditure in the West Midlands? If so, why is the West Midlands private R&D expenditure going up despite the relatively flat public R&D investment scenario?

The WMCA wish to better understand:

- the pattern of business R&D investment across the West Midlands: which businesses are investing in R&D, and how does this vary by sector, geography, firm size and other characteristics? This analysis is expected to draw on HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC) R&D tax credit data accessed through the ONS Secure Research Service (SRS). WMCA has SRS accreditation and Assured Organisational Connectivity (AOC) in place; access would be subject to the Fellow being an accredited researcher and the work being approved as an accredited project
- the drivers of changes in firm-level R&D investment: where R&D expenditure is increasing or declining, what factors are influencing these decisions? This could be explored through case studies, potentially supplemented by a business survey
- the relationship between public sector funding and business R&D decisions: how, and to what extent, does access to public R&D funding or publicly funded R&D influence firms' own investment decisions? The research should consider whether this relationship varies by sector, geography, firm size or other business characteristics within the West Midlands

While official statistics offer valuable information on research and development, R&D tax credit data rooted analysis is the added value of this research. This has the potential to reveal a richer picture of where business innovation is occurring, which firms are investing in R&D, and how innovation activity varies between sectors, places and firm types.

This work could address questions such as: Which places and industries generate the greatest R&D activity? How do innovation patterns differ between small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and larger firms? What factors influence business investment in research and development? To what extent does public support translate into business growth, productivity improvements, innovation adoption, or wider economic spillovers? The findings could strengthen regional innovation policy, support investment prioritisation, and improve understanding of how innovation contributes to inclusive economic growth.

During the inception phase the research fellow will need to scope the work out, secure access to appropriate data, and make an early business case to WMCA for any additional or targeted data collection. There will be a lot of opportunity to set the methodology and pursue research angles according to the fellow's own research interest areas.

Theme 2: How does business R&D and innovation translate into productivity and inclusive growth?

The Fellow will also contribute to a programme of research focused on the opportunities and challenges facing regional economies. Building on the WMCA's Priority Areas of Research Interest (ARIs), this theme will explore how places can achieve stronger productivity, business dynamism and prosperity while

ensuring that growth is widely shared across communities. Potential areas of investigation include business performance and productivity, the conditions that enable firms to scale and innovate, and the relationship between economic growth, inequality and opportunity.

The precise focus will be agreed collaboratively between the Fellow and the WMCA's policy and analytical teams to reflect emerging policy priorities, the Fellow's expertise, and wider academic expertise. This flexibility will ensure the research remains relevant to the WMCA's evolving strategic agenda while providing opportunities to make a significant contribution to regional and national debates on inclusive growth, innovation and economic development.

Examples from existing ARIs include:

- what interventions have the greatest impact on firm-level productivity in the everyday economy
- what interventions are most effective at helping SMEs in the frontier economy to scale faster and for longer
- to what extent are vertical and horizontal income inequality obstacles to economic growth

Research outputs will be supported to be published and disseminated via journals, academic seminars, and national and international conferences. WMCA may encourage the fellow to organise/work with other fellows to organise bespoke conferences or seminars. WMCA can provide some targeted additional funding to support this.

The fellowship is expected broadly to balance activity across the two themes above, while retaining flexibility during the inception phase to refine the research questions and methodology in response to data availability, emerging evidence, the Fellow's expertise and live policy priorities. Alongside publishable research, the Fellow will translate findings into practical recommendations for WMCA policy and programme teams, with opportunities to inform the design, targeting and evaluation of business support and innovation interventions, investment decisions and future strategy. Findings will be shared with senior decision-makers and relevant regional partners rather than remaining solely as research outputs.

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 economics or business and management
- subject matter expertise in specific topics related to the fellowship (such as economics of business growth and productivity, or business behaviour related to research and development activity)
- strong analytical skills relating to the opportunity (for example, the ability to synthesise a range of quantitative and qualitative data using statistical and data science methods)

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:

- deep contextual understanding of the WMCA area and the challenges and opportunities it faces
- ability to work at pace and in an agile way, adapting research methods and focus areas in response to early findings
- strong collaborative and communication skills, working with policy colleagues and external senior stakeholders to agree research priorities and present findings simply and visually

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 West Midlands Combined Authority's 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.