Future Leaders Fellowships: consolidated guidance and FAQs from Aberdeen University FLF Information Event, September 2026

This FAQ was compiled in September 2026, building on information from similar events at Swansea University in April 2026 and previous events in Manchester Metropolitan University and Birmingham City University. It groups, paraphrases and summarises the questions asked to reduce repetition. Although there was a diverse range of queries, a recurring principle runs through many of them:

Applicants must explain why they are still at a stage where THIS fellowship would be transformative for their independence, leadership and research impact.

---

1. Eligibility, career stage and applicant fit

Who is the fellowship for?

The fellowship is aimed at researchers at a transition-to-independence stage. It is often described as an early career scheme, but there is no fixed rule based on years since PhD. Applicants are judged on their career trajectory, leadership potential, and the added value the fellowship would bring, rather than on a strict years-post-viva threshold. It is therefore best understood as a scheme for applicants who are:

- beyond the very earliest supervised exploratory stage of their career; but
- not yet fully established independent research leaders.

Is there a strict definition of 'early career researcher'?

No. There is no universal cut-off for early career status in this scheme. Eligibility is considered case by case, taking into account:

- career trajectory
- opportunities and barriers
- leadership potential
- whether the fellowship would significantly enhance independence, leadership and impact

There is also no single published threshold for what counts as 'significant' prior funding. Panels are more likely to consider the scale and implications of previous grants than to apply a simple formal rule. **The applicant must make the case for their eligibility and fit to scheme.**

Are there minimum or maximum years since PhD?

No fixed minimum or maximum applies. Applicants with non-linear or non-traditional careers are welcomed. However, the strength of the case required will vary. For example:

- 1–2 years post-PhD may be possible, but would require a particularly strong case showing clear readiness for a major transition to independence and leadership.
- Applicants with more senior titles may still be eligible if they can show that the fellowship would be genuinely transformative at this point in their career.

Are Lecturers, Senior Lecturers and Associate Professors eligible?

Potentially, yes. Job title alone does not determine eligibility. Senior Lecturers, Associate Professors and similarly titled staff are not automatically excluded, but will need to address potential unease about whether the fellowship would represent a transformative step in their development as an independent research leader. Applicants must be able to show that they are still at a stage where the fellowship would significantly change their trajectory towards independence, leadership and impact. If an applicant already has:

- a strong record of securing funding as a principal investigator; and
- an established research group

Then they should think carefully about whether the fellowship is the right fit and clearly state why it is, as this will be scrutinised by reviewers and panels.

Are there specific benefits or timelines for Clinical FLF applications?

UKRI has additional funding from the MRC specifically earmarked for clinically active FLFs (medics, dentists, nurses, etc., who spend at least one day a week in the clinic). In Round 10, 6 clinically active fellows were funded (an increase from the previous round's 2). Research organisations are allowed to flex their institutional cap to submit additional applications if they are for clinically qualified and clinically active fellows. Check specific round announcements for any bespoke timelines, but expect to follow the standard scheme cycle while factoring in clinical duties when planning your writing time.

Does the scheme cover clinical implementation research?

No. Healthcare implementation falls under the remit of NIHR/DHSC (who have their own FLF scheme https://www.nihr.ac.uk/career-development/research-career-funding-programmes/postdoctoral/flf) and cannot be funded by UKRI FLF. Additionally, industrial research moving towards commercialisation may fall outside funding rules due to business subsidy regulations.

Is the scheme for early career researchers only, or can mid-career academics apply?

The scheme is designed for people on an early-career trajectory in research leadership terms, rather than being defined purely by years-post-PhD or job title. Some applicants with more senior roles or non-linear careers may still be eligible, but only if they can make a convincing case that the fellowship would support a genuine transition point in their development. "Seniority" in this case is based on funding history rather than just job title. Having held a major previous award (e.g., an ERC Starter Grant or a New Investigator Award) often makes an applicant ineligible or less competitive, as the scheme is for the first major step to independence. However, being a Co-I on a large grant does not automatically disqualify someone if they can demonstrate that they weren't the intellectual lead.

Is changing research direction enough to make someone eligible?

Not on its own. A move into a new research area may be relevant, but a change of direction alone is not sufficient. The application must show:

- why this is still an early-career transition point for the applicant; and
- why the fellowship is the right mechanism to support that move.

Does a previous unsuccessful New Investigator Award prevent someone from applying?

No. A previous unsuccessful New Investigator Award application does not prevent someone from applying for an FLF. What matters is the strength of the present case, including:

- what the fellowship would make possible that wouldn't be achievable otherwise
- how it would add value
- how it would support independence and leadership development

Who should applicants contact if they are unsure about eligibility?

Applicants who are uncertain should speak to:

- their local research office;
- the UKRI FLF team (once scheme information has been carefully reviewed for answers to questions)

However, external advice does not replace the applicant's own responsibility to make a clear case for fit to the scheme.

---

2. Eligible backgrounds, sectors and interdisciplinary profiles

Are research technical professionals eligible?

Yes. Research technical professionals are within the scope of the scheme.
There is no separate technical quota, and technical applicants count within the main institutional cap. Although the FLF profiles site exists, the Development Network does not hold role-type information in a way that allows technicians to be easily identified in past cohorts.

How are applicants with strong industry experience but limited publications assessed?

The FLF selection process adheres to DORA guidelines, so publication metrics are disregarded. Applicants with few or no publications can set out other evidence of their personal impact and standing. Reviewers and panels will know that commercial research limits conventional publication outputs. Applicants should still demonstrate:

- research or innovation excellence
- leadership potential
- the ability to deliver an ambitious programme

A narrative CV can be especially helpful in showing achievements, influence and contributions that are not presented through standard academic publication measures. For these applicants, the "added value" argument must explain why the fellowship is transformative for *them* personally, not just for the company. Early industry applications were sometimes weak (e.g., lacking detail), but support from Innovate UK Business Connect is now available to help structure these applications.

Is the scheme supportive of interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary backgrounds?

Yes — very much so. The fellowship is highly supportive of:

- interdisciplinary backgrounds
- multidisciplinary programmes
- cross-sector engagement

A substantial proportion of funded awards are interdisciplinary. Applicants should not feel they need to narrow their work artificially to fit a single discipline.

Are there separate budgets or competitions for business and academic hosts?

No, it is one competition with two entry points. While there are different portals (Je-S for academics, Innovate UK for business) and different deadline dates (academic deadlines are earlier, business deadlines are later), all applications go to the same panels. "Roving" panel members ensure consistency across both streams. The overall budget covers both.

---

3. Assessment process, peer review and interview

How does the assessment process work?

The selection process is one of the most transparent UKRI schemes, and applicants are encouraged to make use of the many available blogs and advice written by previous applicants and the FLF Development Network. (This is one example from Alison Garden, Queens Belfast.) The process broadly includes:

1. full proposal submission
2. expert peer review
3. applicant response to reviews
4. sift panel decision on interview shortlist
5. interview panel assessment
6. final funding decision

How are interdisciplinary applications assessed?

Interdisciplinary research is positively recognised within the scheme. Once applications are received, they are reviewed and grouped, and bespoke panels are formed to reflect the applications submitted. Reviewers are also asked to indicate where there are areas which they are not familiar with, which helps the panel to moderate possible disciplinary bias.

How are the four assessment criteria weighted?

They are equally weighted. Applications are assessed as a whole package against:

- Research and Innovation Excellence
- Applicant and Their Development
- Impact and Strategic Relevance
- Research and Innovation Environment and Costs

Strong applications address all four convincingly rather than relying on one outstanding aspect to compensate for weakness elsewhere. While all proposals are scored on their own merits and a weak proposal will never be funded just because it aligns with a priority, UKRI states that for borderline applications with identical scores (dead heats), strategic alignment (such as the Industrial Strategy) will be used to make the final funding decision. Added Value is the key differentiator for successful applicants, especially at the interview stage. By the interview stage, most candidates have excellent research; the decision often rests on who has the most compelling case for how the fellowship will transform their *career trajectory* and *leadership potential* over the 7-year period.

Are award success rates similar across research council remits?

Yes. While assessment cultures differ, which can be reflected in panel scores, UKRI utilizes "roving panel members" (Rovers) who move between panels to tension results and ensure that implicit disciplinary biases do not disadvantage applicants. Funding roughly correlates to the volume of applications submitted per remit.

How is the strategic importance of the topic incorporated into funding decisions?

A proposal's importance, reach and significance, including wider relevance to UK society and the economy where appropriate, is assessed under Research and Innovation Excellence.
Applicants should not assume that:

- being in a prominent strategic area will compensate for a weak overall proposal; or
- not being in such an area will count against them automatically.

The FLF portfolio is diverse. The priority is to align clearly with the published scheme aims and assessment criteria. That said, if a proposal clearly sits within a UKRI strategic theme and does not acknowledge the opportunities, alliances, resources or connections associated with that position, this may weaken the case. Applicants should do their due diligence and seek advice across their networks.

What are common reasons applicants are unsuccessful at interview?

Common weaknesses include:

- giving generic or over-rehearsed answers, especially on EDI, research culture, trusted research and innovation, or team development
- failing to explain clearly how the fellowship would change the applicant's trajectory
- weak explanation of leadership development, either for the applicant or their team
- not knowing the budget and team structure in sufficient detail
- weak or unconvincing host support
- focusing too narrowly on the research and not enough on the wider leadership and development dimensions of the fellowship
- presenting ideas that are better supported by other funding models
- failing to update partnership progress and project development from initial application at interview stage
- poor preparation for EDI and Trusted Research questions

Does UKRI favour UK impact over international impact?

No. UKRI scores applications on their own merits based on the research. International impact is perfectly valid but, in both cases, the geography of impact must align with the topic and be properly

resourced in terms of costings, partners and activities. Where the project relies on international travel, you must ensure you have addressed how your project manages the ethics of this (e.g., decolonialism in the Global South), Trusted Research protocols, and justifications for travel regarding carbon emissions.

How should applicants prepare for interview?

Good preparation includes:

- starting early and giving yourself time to refine your thinking
- rewriting and practising the short pitch multiple times
- testing it with audiences beyond immediate subject specialists
- using reviewer comments and your written response to anticipate likely questions
- asking a mentor or experienced colleague to review those materials with you
- preparing explicitly for the topics in the indicative questions that will be provided (on leadership, EDI, team development and specific research culture issues affecting your field and how you would intervene)
- making sure you can explain the work clearly to people both inside and adjacent to your discipline
- asking your host institution for mock interview support, ideally with people familiar with the scheme
- clearly thinking about trusted research and innovation, including export controls, international partnerships, and global security

Applicants should also consult the FLF Development Network blog on interview preparation.

Is there guidance on responding to reviewers?

Yes. A helpful resource is the blog post:

- Respond, don't Rebut

This is a personal blog from the FLF Development Network Director based on panel observations and applicant support experience.

If submitting a resubmission, how should I address previous feedback?

A resubmission must be written as a completely standalone application because peer reviewers on the new TFS system do not receive cover letters. Do not explicitly refer to previous scores or expect the reviewer to know the history of the proposal. However, you should incorporate the lessons learned and directly address prior panel concerns within the core text of your new proposal.

How should applicants handle AI when writing their response to reviewers?

Panels are increasingly able to spot AI-generated text, which can sound generic or have a "weird tone." Applicants should use AI only for checklist purposes if using protected/secure versions, avoiding all open-access or free AI tools. Writing must be personal and professional. If an applicant suspects a *review* they received was AI-generated, they should flag it, but not simply because the review was negative.

4. Team structure, collaboration and project partners

How should applicants structure complex projects now that costed Co-Leads are not allowed?

Changes to the terms and conditions in Round 10 mean that Co-Leads can no longer be costed in as such. This was introduced in response to a large increase in the costing of senior staff time, which reduced the number of awards made, and was intended to realign the FLF as a personal award. This does not remove collaboration from the scheme. Applicants can still build strong collaborative arrangements, provided the fellow remains the clear intellectual and strategic lead.

Collaborators can be included as project partners, training providers, secondment hosts or non-costed co-investigators (although again be mindful of using this phrase on a fellowship as it may undermine your leadership position.) This change does not rule out collaboration, but applicants must classify those who are part of their research and innovation plans as collaborators, project partners or position this work in the roles of PDRAs and administrative/project managers instead.

Co-Is are generally not allowed if they are intellectual leads on significant work packages, as this undermines the "personal award" nature. However, you can cost in Postdoctoral Research Associates (PDRAs), including Senior PDRAs or Advanced Research Fellows, to lead work packages. You can also include technical specialists and admin staff.

How should researchers from other disciplines be included?

Researchers from other disciplines can still make important intellectual contributions. In most cases they should be presented as collaborators or project partners rather than as costed co-leads. The essential principle is that the fellow must remain the clear lead of the programme.

For researchers in disciplines typically used to working solo (such as the Humanities), what portion of the 7 years involves managing others?

There is no fixed minimum team size or mandatory timeline for managing people, but you must still demonstrate leadership. If you do not require a large team of PDRAs, your leadership might involve managing administrators, coordinating international non-costed collaborators, directing an interdisciplinary network, or mentoring others in your field. Before looking at these options, remember that the ability to hire RAs or PDRAs is one of the opportunities of the FLF. Can you increase your ambition or the reach of your work with this additional resource?

Are letters of support from project partners encouraged?

Yes, they will add value if they are:

- specific
- credible
- clearly linked to the proposed work
- explicit about any contribution in kind, collaboration or interest in the programme

Applicants should avoid generic endorsements and should check the current round guidance for any formatting or submission requirements as these may change.

How well developed do partnerships need to be at application stage?

Partnerships should be well developed and credible by the time of application. However, panels will understand that some formal permissions and agreements — especially with large organisations — can take time.

Applicants should not worry if every partnership is not fully formalised at submission, provided there is clear evidence of meaningful engagement. Progress can be updated at the sift stage, where relevant to reviewer comments and at interview, where applicants are normally invited to give a project update.

Letters of Support expressing "strong intent" are acceptable at the application stage, as formal contracts often take longer to finalise that the application timeline allows. However, applicants must be prepared to show progress on these partnerships in their response to reviewers and at the interview (12 months later). A lack of progress or misalignment of priorities discovered post-award is a common risk; applicants should have backup plans.

What is the best way to involve industrial partners?

Industrial partners do not need to contribute in-kind as a default. What matters is that their role is justified, clearly defined and appropriate to the project. Where the partner is a small company or charity, it may be more appropriate to cost contributions properly rather than assume they can be provided in kind. Applicants should also think carefully and early about intellectual property arrangements. In short, the best way to involve partners is in alignment with the research and innovation planned in the proposal.

Is matched cash or in-kind support from industrial partners or universities favourable?

Not necessarily. Applications are not penalised for limited institutional match funding or partner contribution.

The key issue is whether any support is appropriate, relevant and justified, rather than whether there is a large headline amount attached. There are many other ways for partners and hosts to demonstrate their support and commitment. With increasing financial constraints across research and innovation sectors, panels are reminded not to penalise individual candidates if their host is not able to make substantial financial contributions, but they will expect to see other support for you.

Can we budget for tuition fees for team members (e.g., an RA getting a PhD)?

Generally, no. You cannot budget for Masters or PhD tuition fees directly on the FLF grant, as UKRI has specific mechanisms for student funding. However, if the host institution (Research Organisation) wishes to cover these costs separately, that may be possible, but it requires conversation with UKRI. Training and development costs for the team are allowed, but not degree fees.

Should team members such as postdoctoral researchers be named?

Naming researchers will facilitate their recruitment and is a way to recognise expertise and their contribution to the proposed project but isn't essential. Most Fellows recruit after the award as this allows fine tuning of project needs. However, for the panel to judge the need for each post it's important that you define:

- the role
- the skills required
- the responsibilities.

5. Mentoring, host support and institutional commitment

How important is mentoring?

A mentor is not strictly required, but strong mentorship and institutional support will strengthen an application considerably. Whilst the Development Network will match you with mentors throughout your fellowship, already having a mentor who can support you with known challenges will strengthen your leadership development case in the proposal. Mentors can support you on quite specific challenges rather than looking for someone who can provide blanket guidance. Choosing the right mentors can demonstrate credible support for both research development and your career development.

Can a PhD supervisor act as a mentor?

Possibly, but applicants should think carefully about whether this arrangement demonstrates the level of independence expected at this stage. In many cases, it may be stronger to show a broader or more independent mentoring structure. It's advisable to avoid this if you've worked with your PhD supervisor continuously.

What does strong host support look like?

Strong university support should be specific, tailored and credible, not generic. It might include:

- reduction or removal of teaching and other competing duties
- access to facilities and infrastructure
- mentoring and leadership development
- support for team building
- access to studentships or the wider research environment
- a clear and credible trajectory towards an open-ended role

The support of the host organisation is taken very seriously in assessment, so this part of the application is important. It is now submitted as a 1000-word statement as part of your application rather than a separate headed letter. Information on what assessors are looking for is included in the applicant pack.

How should a university demonstrate support beyond covering salary in years 3–4?

The strongest support statements go beyond salary and show what the institution will do to help the fellow succeed. Echoing what's in the list above, you might ask for confirmation of:

- protected time
- guaranteed reduction of competing duties
- access to infrastructure and technical support
- leadership development and mentoring
- integration into a strong research environment
- support for growth of the team and longer-term career progression

Panels are briefed that institutions may not be able to promise studentships or large financial contributions due to economic pressures. Strong support can be demonstrated through protected time, reduced teaching loads (max 6 hours/week is ideal), leadership roles, mentoring, and access to facilities, rather than just cash.

How should the institution describe an open-ended role after the fellowship?

The institutional support should present a clear and credible trajectory towards an open-ended role: UKRI states there must be a "**route to an open-ended contract**" meaning there has to be a vacancy or position the person can legally apply for during the fellowship, although this does not mean a guaranteed job offer. Applicants should check the published guidance for the round in case there are any specific wording or evidence requirements. Some organisations will not be able to make firm promises, as they operate inclusive pathways into open-ended posts which are open to all eligible staff, but they should be clear that there is a pathway and you will be supported to follow it. The panel acknowledges current sector-wide redundancies and understands an iron-clad guarantee may not always be possible, but the structural opportunity must be a concrete pathway or vacancy that the fellow can legally apply for. Institutions should be clear about the pathway even if they cannot make an iron-clad guarantee due to sector-wide redundancies.

Are host inclusive selection and support statements assessed?

No, these are reviewed on an institutional basis and are not coupled to individual applications. These statements are to ensure that institutional demand management processes are not disadvantaging any groups. Whilst important to your host and UKRI, it's not something for you to worry about as an applicant.

Can administrative support be costed?

Yes, if it helps you to deliver your plans more efficiently and effectively. Talk to research support experts and more experienced researchers and innovators. It's worth noting that some FLFs wish they had included administrative support in their proposals as this would have reduced the burden on them or research staff.

Applicants should discuss this with their host institution and decide whether administrative support should be costed directly into the proposal or could be provided explicitly as part of the host contribution. Either way, this needs to be written into the proposal to ensure it is available to you after award.

What support is available for industry hosts regarding financial contributions?

For business hosts, the funding rules follow business subsidy regulations, not the standard 80% FEC. UKRI contribution varies (30%–100%) based on company size and project type (TRL). Innovate UK performs due diligence on the company's financial sustainability and projected cash flow to ensure they can meet their contribution over 4 years. Start-ups do not need the cash immediately but must project it.

---

6. Characteristics of strong and weak applications

What are the top ingredients of a strong FLF application?

Three recurring features of successful applications are:

1. a distinctive, ambitious and feasible programme
2. a convincing case for leadership potential and personal transformation
3. strong, tailored host support

Strong applications also show continuity and momentum in the applicant's trajectory, rather than appearing as a set of unrelated activities. Successful applications describe a programme of work (a vision for a lab/group over 7 years) rather than a single "project" that could be done on a standard grant. The application should show how the fellow will transition from doing the research themselves to leading a team to do it.

What do applications most often get wrong?

Common mistakes include:

- focusing too much on the project and not enough on leadership and development
- offering generic answers on EDI, research culture and related areas
- submitting a templated host support statement with no tailored aspects for the individual applicant
- failing to explain the added value of the fellowship
- not showing a clear and coherent trajectory
- focusing only on the Fellow's development and failing to articulate team members' growth

What distinguishes a competitive proposal from a good but unsuccessful one?

Competitive proposals usually make a stronger whole-package case. They tend to offer:

- a more distinctive and convincing programme
- a clearer explanation of why the fellowship is needed now
- stronger evidence of leadership potential
- more bespoke and credible host support
- a better articulated account of how the fellowship will transform the applicant's trajectory

How long does it take to prepare a competitive application?

Applicants should start as early as possible and before their institutional selection processes are completed, as these may be multi-stage and only finalised close to the final submission date. A strong application often takes months to develop, especially where it involves partnerships, internal institutional selection, costings, securing host commitments and the recommended rounds of feedback and revision. Writing almost always takes longer than expected!

What is the success rate?

The overall success rate is approximately 18%, after internal institutional selection. However, it should be noted that with an increase in industrial applications to Round 10, the success rate is likely to be slightly lower.

Regarding success demographics, is it true female applicants have higher success rates?

Yes. Recent UKRI data shows female applicants have been continuously outperforming male applicants in recent rounds. UKRI is analysing the exact reasons and considering introducing more granular scoring at interview stage to identify any specific areas of challenge or weakness. (There are various theories about gender performance including the suggestion that women delay applications until they are more experienced, providing them with stronger evidence of suitability and undertake more mock interviews (3–6) compared to male applicants (often only 1), leading to better interview performance, but the evidence is variable.) UKRI is analysing this to understand the reasons why and ensure the process is fair.

Are there examples of successful applications?

There are no official sample proposals published for the scheme. However, applicants can learn a great deal from:

- profiles of funded fellows
- award information on UKRI's Gateway to Research
- talks and blogs by current fellows

Some fellows may also be willing to share their applications informally if approached directly but be mindful of the sensitivity of sharing information about a live project and be clear about which aspects of the application it would be helpful to see and how you will protect the data provided.

---

7. Project ambition, impact and outreach

How ambitious should the project be?

The fellowship is intended for applicants with a big vision, so ambition is important. At the same time, the programme must remain:

- coherent
- credible
- feasible

The strongest applications combine boldness with a plan that reviewers trust can be delivered. One FLF described her application as the story of a project where everything goes well, then thought about what she could do to ensure this happened. Reality will be different, but this approach helped her to fill the opportunity of the FLF.

How should ambition be balanced with feasibility?

Applicants should show:

- why the work matters
- what is novel and distinctive
- why the plan is deliverable
- what added value the fellowship creates

The aim is not to choose between adventurousness and attainability, but to show how the programme delivers both.

What kind of impact should applicants aim for?

Applicants should show that their work will have reach and significance. Impact can include influence on academic thinking, methods, professional practice, communities, heritage and culture, policy and wider sectors. It does not need to be immediate, narrowly economic or purely commercial but it must align with your research aims. Missing an obvious route to impact will negatively impact your proposal.

For Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences (SHAPE), impact should not be forced into "hard data" metrics if inappropriate. However, incorporating transdisciplinary elements (e.g., neuroscience in literary studies) can help engage policymakers who look for different types of evidence. Impact can be about building the space/networks for change to happen, not just immediate measurable outputs.

Is the scheme suitable for Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences (SHAPE)?

Yes. The scheme covers the entire UKRI remit. The lower number of SHAPE awards is due to fewer applications, not lower success rates (which are comparable to STEM). SHAPE applicants often need to shift their mindset from the traditional "solo researcher" model to a team-based leadership model, which the scheme requires. Research offices are encouraged to actively promote the scheme to SHAPE departments.

What sort of impact or outreach activities should be included in the budget?

There is no expected standard proportion of budget for outreach or impact activity. The right approach is to include only those activities that are clearly justified, relevant to the programme and important to delivery or impact. You may be able to get advice from specialists in this area in your host organisation.

---

8. Designing the research programme

Should the proposal focus on four years or seven years?

The detailed case should focus primarily on the first four years, because that is the initial award period. Applicants should also show a broader longer-term vision for years 5–7 to make the case for the FLF over shorter term awards, but the immediate programme should be the most fully developed. The detailed case is for the first 4 years, but the application must clearly allude to the 3-year extension and the 7-year vision. The 4+3 structure allows for a "runway" to de-risk ambitious, long-term translational work (especially in industry/clinical fields) that shorter grants cannot support.

How should outputs be balanced across the programme?

The main outputs and activities should be set out clearly for the first four years, while signalling the future direction and ambition that a longer continuation period could support. Outputs may need longer to emerge – in fact this might be part of your case for applying for the FLF over shorter term funding. As with everything in your proposal, think about what you're trying to do and how best to achieve this. If you are moving into a new area, building new relationships or going through complex regulatory steps, you may not have any tangible outcomes for the first years of the fellowship so ensure that you have strong research governance to manage risk that the fellowship delivers nothing.

Do work packages need to be tightly linked?

Not necessarily in a narrow technical sense. Work packages do not all have to be directly interdependent, but they should contribute to a coherent overall vision. The programme must feel like one strategic fellowship, not a collection of unrelated projects. Being able to "slice up" the proposal is a common reason for rejection.

How much time is the fellow expected to commit?

Under the UKRI fellowship framework, fellows are expected to commit at least 50% of their time to the award (but the part-time commitment is for caring responsibilities or other mitigating circumstances,

not so they can hold another position simultaneously.) The fellowship can buy out up to 100% of the fellow's time, subject to the normal **limited** allowances for duties such as teaching or clinical work.

Is the scheme more about the person or the project?

Both. Fellowships are personal awards so the individual is much more important than for other schemes, but their work must be excellent and impactful. The selection criteria set this out clearly and should be your main steer whilst writing.

How flexible can the project be once awarded?

Some flexibility is expected in a multi-year fellowship, particularly as new findings emerge or the external landscape changes, and pivoting is acceptable and expected. However, the application still needs a clear initial plan and rationale. Any major changes after award would normally be managed through the usual funder and institutional processes. Industry and clinical fellows, in particular, may need to pivot based on market needs, investor feedback, or regulatory changes (e.g., biosecure acts affecting international partners). The application should show risk management, but the actual work can evolve.

---

9. Leadership, independence, EDI and professional development

What does the scheme mean by independence and leadership?

The fellowship is intended to help applicants move into a stronger position as independent research leaders. This means more than simply leading a project. It includes the ability to:

- shape a distinctive programme of work
- build and develop a team
- influence the field
- create impact beyond previous work
- contribute positively to research culture

Ultimately, leadership means shaping the story and direction, not necessarily being the technical expert in every room. A leader builds a Scientific Advisory Board, manages diverse stakeholders, and makes strategic decisions (e.g., stopping a line of inquiry if the data isn't needed for the broader story).

What outcomes indicate independence and leadership have been established?

Echoing the list above, expected indicators include:

- leading a distinctive programme
- building and supporting a team
- progression towards research leadership
- influence and impact beyond previous work
- contribution to research culture and the wider field

Your application should demonstrate how you will position yourself to achieve these, including how your host and partners will help you build your leadership and standing.

How should EDI be treated in an application?

EDI is taken seriously and should not be treated as an afterthought or a token add-on. Generic statements are weak. Applicants should instead show specific and thoughtful approaches to inclusive leadership, team development, recruitment and support, and research culture. These should be integrated into the overall fellowship and leadership plan. Providing evidence of your experience and contributions to these areas will build your credibility as an inclusive leader.

Should applicants include training and development plans for leadership and management?

Yes, a training and development plan aligned with the research vision will strengthen the application, especially if it supports the case for leadership growth. Remember that the FLF Development Network is funded by UKRI to provide extensive development opportunities. Look at their website (including the short video on the home page) to identify which of their support will have particular relevance to your leadership development plan.

The FLF Development Network offers a "phone a friend" approach, providing bespoke coaching, 360-degree feedback, and leadership retreats after the FLF is awarded. The development plan should be unique to the individual (an industry fellow's plan will look different from an academic's).

---

10. Development and support for successful fellows

What support is available to successful fellows?

Successful fellows can access substantial development support, through the FLF Development Network and UKRI, including:

- leadership development
- mentoring
- training
- cohort meetings
- annual conferences
- policy and media opportunities
- networking through the FLF Development Network

Can a PhD student be included in the fellowship?

No. PhD students cannot be costed directly into the fellowship application. If fellows wish to work with PhD students, those students must be supported through other routes.

What wider network opportunities are available?

There are extensive opportunities for fellows to engage with UKRI, the FLF cohort, individual fellows and external stakeholders including:

- the FLF Development Network
- mentoring and coaching
- cohort start meetings
- annual conferences
- policy engagement
- advisory roles
- networking and leadership development activities

You can also apply for funding from the Development Network to create your own networks and communities.

---

11. General scheme information

How many awards are expected in Round 11?

Round 11 is expected to support around at least 75 fellows per year for the next four years (up to round 14). It may also be helpful to note UKRI's intention to run the scheme at the same time each year so you can plan ahead. Round 10 saw a record number of business fellows, at 29 out of 75, with more clinical fellows expected to join the upcoming schemes as well in future rounds.

Does this total include academic, industry and clinical fellows?

Yes. The total number of fellowships includes academic-, industry- and clinical-hosted fellows.
What caused the massive spike in applications during Rounds 5 and 6 (was it due to ERC/UK association)?

The spike was primarily due to higher-education hosts fully realising the benefit of the scheme's design (specifically the salary buy-outs) and opening the internal floodgates. This directly resulted in the strict institutional caps (demand management) seen in subsequent rounds.

Does the stated Round 11 budget include business fellows?

Yes. The overall fellowship budget is intended to cover the full scheme, including academic, business/industry and clinical fellows.

Is there a separate budget for businesses and higher education institutions?

The scheme information indicates a single overall fellowship budget, rather than a separately described budget for businesses and higher education institutions. However, applications are made via a different route and the scheme has a later closing date.

Will the 13-month timeline from submission to announcement be shortened?

UKRI continues to try to streamline, but applicants are strongly advised to mentally prepare for fluctuating timelines (e.g., reviewer comments arriving weeks late). Due to the extensive scale of peer review (taking up to 12-15 review requests to secure 3-4 reviewers per application), delays are common. Start building partnerships and navigating international contracts very early, as these always take longer than expected. The timeline is unlikely to shorten significantly due to the scale of peer review (needing ~10,000 reviewer invites for 800 apps). Applicants should anticipate a 2-year journey from initial thought to project start.

What support is available post-award?

Successful fellows get support from both the FLF Development Network (providing 80+ development opportunities per year, along with 1-on-1 support) and the UKRI Post-Award Team. The Post-Award team specifically helps navigate operational challenges like recruitment delays, contract negotiations, and financial management. This support applies to both academic and industry fellows.

Final reminder for applicants

Across the scheme, the most important recurring message is this:

Do not be distracted by job title, years since PhD, perceptions about topic, or rely on a strong research idea alone. You need to show why you, this programme, and your host environment together make a compelling case that the fellowship would be a transformative step in your development as an independent research leader.

Other Resources

Cold Comfort – Learning from Rejection in Competitive Schemes

Respond, don't Rebut