



Department for
Science, Innovation
& Technology

Rt Hon Liz Kendall MP
Secretary of State for Science, Innovation
and Technology
100 Parliament Street
London SW1A 2BQ

www.gov.uk/dsit

11th March 2025

Dear Research Funders,

Launching a new charter to support women in research

The UK's science and research strengths are central to this government's mission to deliver economic growth, raise productivity, and improve living standards across the country. To realise that ambition, we must ensure that our research and innovation system is able to attract, retain and support the very best talent and that means addressing the persistent barriers that prevent too many women from thriving in research careers.

Women have made extraordinary contributions to UK science and research, from Ada Lovelace to Professor Dorothy Hodgkin and Professor Dame Sarah Gilbert. Yet women remain under-represented in the research workforce, particularly in senior roles where they hold fewer than a third of professorships. When women do work in R&D, they earn less on average than men and too often face structural barriers that make it harder to build and sustain a research career alongside caring responsibilities. These gaps are not due to a lack of talent or ambition; they reflect hurdles that push too many women out of research or slow their progression. I know many of you share these concerns and have made significant efforts to change this.

Equality matters. You have shown us that research teams with a more equal gender balance produce more novel and higher impact research. At a time when the UK faces significant skills shortages in R&D intensive sectors, we can all agree that we cannot afford a system in which half the population faces avoidable barriers to success.

Today, I am announcing that we will launch a new voluntary charter to improve outcomes for women across the UK research system, and I'm inviting those who fund research across the sector to support it. We will work with the sector on detailed commitments and publish the full charter in summer 2026.

The purpose of this charter is simple: to create clear, tangible actions that government, funders and employers can commit to in order to drive lasting culture change, improve standards, and bring greater consistency and transparency across the sector.

A central pillar of the charter will be improving support for parental leave, particularly for doctoral researchers. All PhD funders should commit to meeting, exceeding or offering an equivalent parental leave offer to the one currently provided by UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) for the doctoral students they support. Currently, this includes 52 weeks of maternity leave, with funding to retain the full stipend for 26 weeks and a further 13 weeks of support commensurate with statutory maternity pay. The offer

also includes two weeks of stipend for students who are partners of a mother or birth parent following the birth of their child to take parental leave.

Uneven access to maternity and parental leave across research funding routes creates real and damaging consequences. Too many women are forced to choose between starting a family and continuing their research careers. This undermines talent, damages confidence, and weakens the pipeline into research careers - outcomes that are wholly at odds with our ambitions for a world leading R&D system.

Making UKRI's parental leave offer the **minimum standard across doctoral funding** is a necessary first step in bringing greater fairness and consistency, and will send a clear signal about the value we place on women researchers. Alongside this, I am keen to hear your views on **how we can better support researchers returning from maternity leave to rebuild momentum, progress and thrive in the scientific community**. This includes consideration of flexibility, fair assessment of outputs and career progression, and the creation of safe, inclusive working environments free from harassment or discrimination. I recognise that the barriers women face will vary across research disciplines and organisations - some of the challenges women experience in the social sciences will be different to those in physics - however there are common drivers of inequality across the sector that we can and should address together.

None of us can address this challenge alone; so I call on you to work with me to co-create a charter that captures our shared commitment to supporting women in research, as well as any further evidence or examples of best practice you can offer on improving outcomes for women in research more broadly. Over the coming months, we will engage further with funders, employers and representative bodies to share evidence of what works and build momentum behind collective action. I am therefore inviting you to not only sign your organisation up, but also to help shape the charter itself.

I am clear that we will only succeed if this work is informed by the experience, expertise and leadership of the whole R&D sector – by your evidence, knowledge and commitment.

Ensuring that women are able to fully participate in, and help lead, our research and innovation system is essential to delivering this government's ambitions for growth and prosperity. I look forward to working with you to make that a reality.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Liz Kendall', written in a cursive style.

Rt Hon Liz Kendall MP
Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology