



Policy Insights Unit

Policy Insights Unit Policy Fellowships 2026

Q&A pack



Stage 1: Application



**Mid June
2026**

Applications open. Read over this Q&A pack – is the Policy Fellowship right for you?

**Early July
2026**

Develop a research question and complete the application form by the deadline.

**Mid July
2026**

Complete a short interview with the PIU, followed by a matching session with an academic expert in your chosen research area.

Stage 2: Fellowship underway



**August/
September
2026**

Fellowship begins and lasts a minimum of 80 hours over a flexible period (roughly six months).

**September
2026 to
March 2027**

Attend regular check-ins with your mentor, for 6-8 hours per month.

**September
2026 to
March 2027**

Attend 2-4 check-ins with PIU staff over the course of the Fellowship.

Stage 3: Output and evaluation



May 2027

Fellowship ends with published research output and/or policy insights presented to your team and research institution.

The Policy Insights Unit (PIU) is a cross-government unit that develops analysis and ideas for policy. Operating like an in-house consultancy, we agree bespoke projects that combine expert engagement with research synthesis and policy development.

Our Policy Fellowship programme gives civil servants who have a specific policy-related question the opportunity to be matched with an academic mentor who can help them to answer it.

As well as answering a policy question, the Fellowship gives officials the opportunity to make new contacts, learn new skills and build subject knowledge, including data analysis and interpretation.

In this document you can learn more about the PIU and the Fellowship, along with all the information you'll need to apply.

Should your team require intensive support on a policy project, the PIU also offers a wide range of paid-for services. Please visit our [website](#) or email us at enquiries@policyinsightsunit.gov.uk for details of how we can support you.

About the PIU Policy Fellowship

What is the PIU Policy Fellowship?

- The PIU Policy Fellowship is a bespoke, flexible, part-time mentoring programme which aims to support officials who want further help and expert insight to answer a specific policy question.
- Over the course of six months, civil servants work under the supervision of an academic mentor in a relevant field to research and produce an output based on their policy area.
- Academic mentors are drawn from PIU partner institutions: Brunel University London, University of Surrey, Lancaster University and University of York.
- This round will be the fourth Fellowship cohort. Since the scheme started three years ago, it has supported 32 fellows, growing from just three in the first cohort, to 20 in the most recent.

What are the benefits of undertaking a Policy Fellowship?

- As well as answering a policy question, the Fellowship gives officials the opportunity to make new contacts, learn new skills and build subject knowledge, including data analysis and interpretation.
- Fellows from previous cohorts reported more confidence engaging with academic research and experts in their policy area.

Eligibility

Am I eligible to apply for the Fellowship?

- The Policy Fellowship is suitable for any UK civil servant or public servant (SEO-G6 or equivalent) who has a specific policy-relevant question they feel would benefit from further research supported by an academic expert, as well as those who are looking to develop their research skills and build new networks with non-governmental experts.
- The scheme is open to civil servants, public servants and public sector officials working in the UK public sector only. This includes officials from Arms-Length Bodies, devolved governments and public sector organisations (e.g. the NHS), but does not include officials working for other national government and international organisations.
- Previous cohorts included fellows from: Department for Education, Cabinet Office, Government Office for Science, Department of Health and Social Care, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, and the Fast Stream.

I'm an analyst, not a policy official – can I apply?

- Yes, you can apply. Civil servants with a technical specialism may particularly benefit from the Fellowship where they can work closely with an academic mentor and build on existing analytical skills or develop new ones.
- Previous fellows with functional and specialist expertise from different areas of the civil service have completed a variety of data, AI, and statistics-focused projects.

How much time am I expected to commit to completing the Fellowship?

- You must be able to commit a minimum of 80 hours over a flexible period agreed by your line manager. The Fellowship is expected to take around six months to complete and requires a commitment of roughly one day per week. This may vary depending on the nature of the question or topic.

Is the Fellowship suitable for teams as well as individuals?

- The Fellowship is a programme to support individuals in the policy development process. Should your team require support on a policy project, the PIU also offers paid-for services. Please visit our [website](#) or email us at enquiries@policyinsightsunit.gov.uk for details of how we can support you.

The application process

How do I apply?

- Please complete our short online [application form](#). **Applications close on 15 July 2026**. If you have any questions about the application form, please contact us at policy.fellowship@policyinsightsunit.gov.uk.

What does the application process involve?

- To complete the application form you will need to have a research question and a brief research proposal that aligns with your area of work and expertise.
- In preparing your application, it may be useful to look at recent research in that area and identify how it aligns with your team's priorities. You may wish to consider what your policy area is lacking and how it would benefit from specific expertise.

Do I need to request line manager approval before I apply for the Fellowship?

- Yes – you should discuss the Fellowship with your line manager before applying, to ensure that you can dedicate enough time to the programme.

How long does the application process take?

- Once applications close, PIU will assess applications and arrange short interviews with successful applicants. Following this, applicants will meet with a prospective mentor to ensure their project is a good fit. This process is anticipated to take around a month, with Fellowships expected to start in August or September 2026.

How are successful applicants selected?

- We will select proposals that would benefit most from access to a relevant academic mentor. Please note, fellows will only be selected if there is a suitable mentor available.

How are fellows matched to academic mentors?

- If your application progresses, you will have a short interview with PIU staff followed by a 'matching' meeting with a prospective academic mentor. During this meeting the academic will help you refine your research question and assess the suitability of your project based on their expertise.

Research questions and policy areas

This year we have expanded the programme with mentors who specialise in a wide range of research topics, including but limited to:

Health, care and wellbeing

- Health inequalities and health economics
- NHS productivity, workforce and service design
- Digital health and medical technologies
- Mental health (children, adolescents and adults)
- Ageing, loneliness, disability and long-term conditions
- Behavioural science in health
- Death, dying and bereavement
- Neurodivergence and clinical psychology
- Occupational health

Sustainable futures and net zero

- Climate science and atmospheric research
- Net zero transition
- Circular economy and resource efficiency
- Biodiversity and conservation
- Regenerative agriculture
- Sustainable plastics and polymers
- Sustainable energy and hydrogen
- Sustainable agriculture and food systems
- Sustainable buildings and infrastructure

AI, data and emerging technologies

- AI and machine learning
- Responsible and safe AI use
- Data science and decision support
- Digital infrastructure and data centres
- Digital innovation in health and public services
- Embodied and assistive AI
- Advanced materials and mechanical design

Democracy, governance and security

- Electoral reform, integrity and participation
- Public policy design and evaluation
- Intelligence and security
- Strategic communications
- Technology governance
- Public opinion and political polarisation
- Policy implementation and systems thinking
- Electoral behaviour
- Law and regulation

Global systems and relationships

- International relations and geopolitics
- EU-UK relations
- Indo-Pacific and Global South studies
- Trade, supply chains and global value chains
- Economic growth, inequality and labour markets
- Energy geopolitics and sustainability transitions

Inclusion, education and social justice

- Education policy and outcomes
- Special educational needs
- Racism and anti-racism
- Disability and accessibility
- Child poverty
- Widening participation
- Gender and labour market participation
- Public participation and community engagements
- Online harms

Creative, cultural and heritage futures

- Creative industries
- Cultural policy and copyright
- Arts and accessibility
- Cultural heritage and historic environments
- Digital transformation of cultural sectors
- Creative economies and place-based development
- Architecture and ceramics
- Geographies of creative industries
- Digital media
- Relationship between human and non-human materialities

Economic development

- Ecological economy, growth and inequality
- Economics of education
- Uncertainty analysis
- Decision analytic modelling
- Monetary policy
- Political economy of trade

What have previous fellowship projects focused on?

Some examples of previous fellowship projects include:

- Teachers using AI tools in the classroom
- Integration interventions and alternative provision
- AI tools for automated trade services
- Green skills gaps

Are there restrictions on the type of research topics I can propose?

- Although we have a large number of available mentors, applicants will only be matched to mentors suitable to supervise a project in their chosen policy area. Please consult the list of available research areas above and ensure that your research question is relevant to at least one of these.

How do I ensure my research question is feasible?

- Think carefully about the scope of your research question and the evidence or data you need to answer it, and whether it is feasible to access or collect this in the 80 flexible hours the Fellowship is expected to take.

What to expect during the Fellowship

What kind of support can I expect during the Fellowship?

- Academic mentors will provide one-on-one expert support and advice throughout the Fellowship. You are expected to meet with your mentor for six to eight hours a month in mentoring sessions.
- For some projects, a PhD student or postdoctoral researcher may be assigned to provide additional support, but this is not mandatory and depends on availability, as well as your research question.

Where will my mentor be based?

- Successful candidates will be partnered with an academic mentor from one of the PIU partner institutions: Brunel University London, the University of Surrey, Lancaster University or the University of York. Meetings between mentors and fellows can be held in-person or remotely.

What kind of output can I expect to produce during the Fellowship?

- Fellows are expected to produce a research output (e.g. a policy paper or a literature review) based on their work during the Fellowship.
- You will also be required to complete an evaluation form to share your experience of the Fellowship and help improve the scheme for future cohorts.

Can I see examples of previous fellows' projects?

- A recent example of research output from the Policy Fellowship can be found [here](#).

Further information

My question isn't answered here – who can I contact?

- For specific queries about the Fellowship or the application process, please contact us at policy.fellowship@policyinsightsunit.gov.uk
- More information, including the [application form](#), can be found on our [website](#). The application window closes on 15 July 2026.

PIU Policy Fellowship Testimonials



Iain Cuthbert

Policy Advisor - Alternative Provision Team, Schools Group (DfE)

“As a policy advisor, I regularly work with data analysts and social researchers, but leading my own research project broadened my understanding of social research methods and their role in evidence-based policy. It also encouraged me to consider underutilized academic evidence, enriching my department’s knowledge base on alternative provision.”

The literature review has deepened my understanding of my policy area and will inform my team’s work as we implement the government’s ambitious reforms to SEND and alternative provision.”



Georgina Kay

Policy Advisor,
Digital Strategy Division,
Digital Data and Technology, DfE

“The Policy Fellowship was a really insightful experience – it gave us the chance to test our ideas with academics and structure our research effectively.”

Regular check-ins kept us on track and we delivered an internal report that supported our department’s policy work. I’d recommend the Fellowship to policy officials looking to fill evidence gaps – or even map them out!”



Nik Barkas

Smart Data Challenge
Prize Policy Lead,
CC Directorate, DBT

“The AI Fellowship I completed with Brunel University was transformative for both my department and personal growth. It allowed me to explore the use of AI in trade advisory services, significantly reducing misconceptions and enhancing clarity in our approaches. The exceptional support from the academic mentors and the Open Innovation Team not only enriched my research but also fostered a collaborative environment that propelled our departmental initiatives forward.”

