



OPEN
OXFORD POLICY
ENGAGEMENT NETWORK

Public Policy Challenge Fund 2025-26

Guidance for applicants

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1. Summary

Launched in 2021, the Public Policy Challenge Fund enables researchers at the University of Oxford and partners in the policymaking community to collaborate in tackling public policy challenges. It contributes to the aims of the [Oxford Policy Engagement Network \(OPEN\) Strategy](#) by providing better access to opportunities and resources for researchers and policy professionals to learn and engage.

This scheme is funded through the University of Oxford's allocation from Research England's Policy Support Fund.

Applicants can apply for awards of up to £20,000 with projects starting from 1 January 2026 at the earliest. All project activity **must** be completed and funding spent by **30 June 2026**.

All applications must include at least one researcher from the University of Oxford (Research Partner) and one policy professional from a policymaking organisation (Policy Partner). For help identifying a Research or Policy Partner, please [contact the Policy Engagement Team](#).

Academics and research staff employed by any department or faculty at the University and at any career stage can apply. Proposals from those new to, and experienced in, policy engagement are equally welcome. Those with college-only contracts must apply via a department or faculty. DPhil students can apply if they will have submitted their thesis and be awaiting examination at the point their project will commence, or as co-applicants. All proposals must include at least one Policy Partner.

Applications should be submitted by the Research Partner using the [Internal Research Award Management System](#) (IRAMS). Applicants should follow the guidance below and researchers should consult their departmental research support team in the first instance, not least to ensure they comply with any departmental eligibility criteria, approval processes, or guidelines.

All applicants are strongly encouraged to [contact the Policy Engagement Team](#) to discuss ideas for a potential application, as well as for advice on eligibility criteria, potential hosts at Oxford or in the policymaking community, and other related questions.

Deadline: 12:00 BST, 10 November 2025

2. Key dates

Action	Date
Call opens	19 September 2025
Application deadline	12:00 10 November 2025
Applicants notified of funding decision	w/c 8 December 2025
Earliest project start date	1 January 2026
Latest project end date	30 June 2026

3. What can the Challenge Fund be used for?

Previous Challenge Fund awards have involved policy partners in local and central government, parliament, and civil society, and addressed a range of public policy challenges, including those related to climate change, the economy, health, international development, migration, and peace and security. They have involved research partners from diverse disciplines.

The Challenge Fund may be used to support new partnerships and activities, or for development of ongoing collaboration. The latter must clearly demonstrate the added value of further funding and the potential for timely impact.

The following kinds of activity are some of those that may be supported:

- **Exploratory conversations:** to participate in exploratory meetings or consultations with partners and other key stakeholders or improve dialogue between researchers and policy professionals to co-develop future collaborative projects
- **Workshops:** to run seminars or workshops that enable researchers and policy professionals to share evidence and expertise, and which support the uptake of research evidence in policymaking
- **Evidence synthesis:** to collaborate on synthesis of evidence from diverse sources, disciplines and contexts to inform policy debates, options or decisions, and approaches to filling gaps
- **Leveraging networks:** to establish, develop or leverage mutually accessible networks
- **Co-production of tools and resources:** to facilitate the uptake of research evidence in policymaking and co-development of approaches to monitoring, evaluation and scrutiny of policy
- **Professional development:** to enable researchers to deepen their understanding of how research can inform policymaking, and develop the skills to catalyse it;
- **Placements:** to support academic placements in the policymaking community, and placements of members of the policymaking community at the University
- **Research:** to facilitate partners to co-design and co-produce new research to enable better understanding of local, regional or national challenges, enabling policy professionals to inform the research agenda, and both partners to apply research to policy challenges

The Challenge Fund will not cover costs related to:

- Research consultancy
- Studentships or internships for UKRI-funded DPhil students, where these are funded through UKRI Doctoral Training Grants
- Participation in academic conferences or seminars lacking clear prospects of engagement with policy professionals

4. How will applications be assessed?

A researcher-member of the OPEN Steering Group will chair the panel, which will include at least one researcher in another academic division, and may include members of professional services staff and of the policymaking community. The quorum is 4.

The panel will aim to support high quality proposals which show (a) strong potential to accelerate and deliver impact in policy arising from excellent research and (b) commitment to developing productive

collaboration with policy partners. The panel will score applications on a scale from 1 to 6, mindful of the following criteria:

- **Relevance to at least one public policy challenge identified as such by the policy partner(s)**, reflected in: Policy Partner's in statement of support; proposed goal and outcomes
- **Potential to advance policy professionals' understanding, to clarify or expand the range of options open to them**, reflected in: Policy Partner's in statement of support; proposed goal and outcomes
- **Effectiveness of project design and methods, reflecting input of partner(s) throughout project**, reflected in: clear, logical pathway from activities, via outputs, to outcomes and goal that are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound; identification of key assumptions, risks, and issues that may affect implementation
- **Effectiveness of proposed arrangements for monitoring, evaluation, and learning, and the potential for other researchers and policy professionals to learn from the proposed project**, reflected in: provision for iterative learning; opportunities to share learning; theory of change
- **Value for money**, reflected in: articulation of measurable outcomes; clear identification and justification of all costs; identification and mitigation of financial risks; quantified contribution (cash or in-kind) by Policy Partner (at least 10% of amount requested) and other partners

Proposals may relate to continuation of ongoing or earlier activity, or substantially new activities. The former must clearly demonstrate the added value of further funding and the potential for timely outcomes, which might include those that are:

- Instrumental: changes to plans, decisions, behaviours, practices, actions, policies;
- Conceptual: changes to knowledge, awareness, attitudes, emotions;
- Capacity-building: changes to skills and expertise;
- Enduring connectivity: changes to the number and quality of relationships and trust; or
- Culture/attitudes towards knowledge exchange and towards research impact itself

5. How will funding be allocated?

Eligible applications will be assigned, based on their average score, to one of three bands. The panel may moderate scores to ensure that assessment criteria have been applied consistently, paying particular attention to applications that have received a wide range of scores and those that may be close to band boundaries.

Should there be insufficient funds to support all fundable proposals, to increase equality of opportunity and reduce the effect of unconscious bias, including as to the relative importance of different policy priorities, funds will be allocated on a random basis:

- Firstly, to other applicants in Band A
- Next, to those in Band B, until insufficient funding is available to satisfy the next applicant.

The funding available for the Challenge Fund in 2025/26 is at least £45,000.

Applicants will be notified of the outcome of their application by e-mail during the week beginning 8 December 2025. Feedback will be available on request.

6. Who can apply?

Applications must include a Research Partner and Policy Partner. Applications must be submitted by the Research Partner.

Research Partner

The Research Partner must be an academic or researcher employed by a department or faculty at the University, or by a college, applying via such a department or faculty. If the Research Partner has a contract of employment that lasts more than six months beyond the project end date, they may also serve as Principal Investigator (PI), otherwise they should serve as a Co-applicant and identify an eligible academic or researcher to serve as PI. This is because the PI is responsible for ensuring delivery of two project reports, which are due up to six months following project completion (see below). Clinical Research Fellows may apply if they have completed their DPhil and hold a contract of employment with a department or faculty. DPhil students can apply as Research Partner if they will have submitted their thesis and be awaiting examination at the point their project will commence, or as co-applicants.

Awards can only be held in departments or faculties, not in colleges. Researchers with college-only contracts, and those from Gardens, Libraries and Museums, must apply via a department or faculty, with a member of that department or faculty as a Co-applicant.

If the Research Partner moves to another university during the course of the project, this funding will not transfer with them.

Policy Partner

The Policy Partner must be a policy professional. In most cases, the most appropriate Partner is likely to be employed in a policymaking organisation, such as a devolved or national assembly, civil service, statutory body, or multilateral organisation. About two thirds of successful applications for OPEN funding involve such a partner. In some cases, the most appropriate partner may be employed in a think-tank or other civil society organisation.

Applicants must clearly explain their choice of Policy Partner, and their partner's role in proposed activities and outputs, and achievement of proposed outcomes and goal.

Co-applicants

Applications **may** also include co-applicants:

- Those employed or studying at the University of Oxford, including; DPhil students; teaching staff; museum staff; or research facilitators and other professional services staff; and
- External partners in academia, the public, private or voluntary sector.

Retired and Emeritus Fellows, as well as Master's students, are ineligible. Project staff not currently employed by the University must be able to demonstrate their eligibility to work in the United Kingdom if required to do so as part of the project.

For information regarding support for finding partners, please see Section 12.

Many departments and faculties have internal eligibility criteria, review and approval processes, and other guidelines. Applicants are advised to consult their research support team at an early stage in their planning, not least to ensure they comply with these.

7. What can be funded?

Eligible costs include:

- Salary costs of fixed-term researchers and project staff, e.g., research assistants
- Travel and subsistence costs for researchers, external partners or delegates
- Event costs, including venue hire, AV services, transcription, and catering (max £30 catering costs per person for a full day event; pro-rated for shorter events; alcoholic drinks are not an eligible cost).
- Consultancy/professional fees for external partners
- Equipment, capped at 5% of funds requested

All project activity must be completed and funding spent by 30 June 2026.

Support from the Challenge Fund is not provided on a full economic cost (FEC) basis. Estates and indirect costs are not covered by the fund but 100% of direct costs will be covered. More information about costing and pricing projects is available [here](#). All expenses must be in line with the [University's Expenses policy](#).

Efficiency, cost-effectiveness and value for money should be clearly demonstrated in the application. Payments will not be made for miscellaneous expenses or unspecified items. If you are unsure about the eligibility of a specific expense, please contact researchandpublicpolicy@admin.ox.ac.uk for further guidance.

Clear details of any combination of cash or in-kind contributions are sought from both partners to reflect shared commitment to the proposed partnership. **The contribution of policy partners is expected to equate to at least 10% of funds requested from the Challenge Fund.**

If your proposal involves undertaking a placement, applicants should establish whether a contract will be required as soon as possible as this can take time to set up and potentially delay work on the project, should your application be successful.

In certain circumstances it may be appropriate to cover some costs at the partner organisation, if the participation of the partner organisation is essential to the success of the project but would otherwise be prohibited by cost. Please also note that VAT cannot be recovered so must be included in the costs where necessary. If a partner is delivering services in aid of the project, any additional costs including VAT need to be checked and factored into the budget at application stage.

8. [Monitoring, evaluation and learning](#)

See Section 4 for the emphasis placed on this in assessment of proposals. Applicants are invited to set out clear plans in this respect, to enable them to learn and adapt their approach, and to maximise the potential for other researchers and policymakers to learn. Applicants are encouraged to consult the [Policy Engagement Team's guidance and resources relating to monitoring, evaluation and learning](#).

The Policy Engagement Team will work with award-holders, individually and as a cohort, to

- Maximise learning from their experience, and in finding ways to share that with others, e.g., in the context of training activities or resources, or in the form of a blog; and
- Communicate progress towards outcomes, planned or unplanned, including via the team's online presence and social media.

[Reporting requirements](#)

Timely consideration of arrangement for monitoring, evaluation and learning will also facilitate and inform the reporting that is required of all award-holders. These reports will be the key mechanism to collect critical information for reporting to Research England, and will assist the Policy Engagement Team in monitoring progress and managing any issues that arise.

A schedule of reporting dates will be provided with award offer letters. Research Partners will be contacted with an email reminder closer to the dates that reports are due for submission.

- **Mid-project report** – This should outline progress, highlight any interim lessons learned, and any challenges, which might delay or impede successful completion. This is not required for projects lasting less than 6 months.
- **End-of-project report** – The end-of-project report should evaluate the project, demonstrate the impact and benefits for both the researcher and the partner organisation, and detail any plans for ongoing engagement with the partner organisation. This report should be submitted within one month of the end of the project.

- **Impact report** – The impact report should briefly outline further impacts achieved in the six months following the project's completion. The aim is to capture any impact that has developed since the project's completion date.

9. How to apply

Researchers are encouraged to [join OPEN](#) before applying.

Applications must be made using the [Internal Research Award Management System](#) (IRAMS). This is a four-part process:

1. Complete the online section of the application on IRAMS.
2. Download and complete the Case for Support template from IRAMS.
3. Combine the Case for Support with the other supporting documents into a single PDF.
4. Upload the single PDF to IRAMS, which should comprise:
 - a. Case for Support, with all relevant fields completed
 - b. Statement(s) of support from external partner(s)
 - c. Letter of support from the Head of Department or Faculty
 - d. Breakdown of costs presented as an X5 admin output

Case for Support

The Research Partner should download the Case for Support from IRAMS and complete together with their Policy Partner all relevant sections. Detailed instructions for completing the Case for Support are included in the form.

The Research Partner should consult their departmental administrator about the preparation of costings. The department or faculty is responsible for confirming the accuracy of those costings. Funding for any project activities not funded through the OPEN Seed Fund should be confirmed, or confirmed on the condition of your proposal being successful, at the time of applying. All project activity must be completed and funding spent by 30 June 2026.

Statement(s) of support

A statement of support (max. 400 words) should be provided by a senior representative of the Policy Partner's employer. This should:

- Summarise the nature of the public policy challenge that the project aims to tackle;
- Demonstrate that they understand and are committed to the project's goal;
- Indicate their role in proposed activities and in achieving proposed outcomes;
- Indicate how they expect to benefit from the engagement (e.g., in terms of learning, or deepening networks); and
- Outline the support that will be provided.

In cases where obtaining a statement of support from the Policy Partner's employer is considered problematic at the proposal stage, applications may be submitted without one, though any award would be conditional on provision of one.

Statements of support from other partners may be provided.

Letter of support from Head of Department or Faculty

A letter of support (max. 400 words) should be provided by the Head of Department or Faculty. It should demonstrate their support for the project and include details of how the department or faculty will support delivery.

Costing

Applicants should provide as much detail as possible in IRAMS about Contributions from Other Sources, including cash, as well as time invested by partners and other in-kind contributions.

The online application form in IRAMS requires a financial breakdown of the project. For each budget line please describe the costs being requested in the corresponding 'Description' field, and if appropriate, provide a justification. Once the 'Purpose' is entered for three budget lines, more budget lines will become available on the online form.

Please provide an FEC costing. This should be presented in the form of an admin output from the University's costing and pricing software, X5. Applicants should ask their research administrator or finance officer to produce the X5 costing.

The total requested in IRAMS should match the PRICE on the X5 costing output.

Projects must be completed and all funds spent by 30 June 2026, so all costs must be attributed to Year 1 only. No extensions can be given after this date.

Departmental/faculty approval

Applications are automatically submitted to your department for approval via IRAMS.

Where proposals include staff time for researchers based in a different department to the Research Partner, a statement (e.g., e-mail) indicating departmental approval of this should be provided by the Head of Administration and Finance in each department involved.

Applicants should check with their department for internal approval procedures and deadlines. Some departments require significant notice to check and submit proposals, so applicants are advised to seek guidance from their departmental administrator as soon as they consider making an application.

10. Sharing best practice

Successful applicants may be invited by the Policy Engagement Team to take part in briefing, training or other events that support the aims of the Challenge Fund.

Applicants should note that successful applications are likely to be used as exemplars for future applicants but an opportunity to opt-out of this will be available.

In addition to any publications that may be delivered through their partnership, successful applicants will be invited to help the Policy Engagement Team prepare a short lay summary of their project for publication via University channels and others at their discretion.

11. Monitoring, evaluation and learning

Applicants are encouraged to consult the [Policy Engagement Team's guidance and resources relating to monitoring, evaluation and learning](#) and are expected to outline relevant arrangements in their case for support.

Throughout their project, Partners will be supported by the Policy Engagement Team to maximise learning from their experience and share this with others. Research Partners will have the opportunity to:

- Participate in a cohort-gathering for new OPEN award-holders at the start of their project (either in January and April 2026)
- Share their experience with other OPEN members at a networking event in July 2026
- Share their learnings with others, e.g. in the context of training activities or resources, or in the form of a blog
- Communicate project activities and progress via OPEN's online presence and social media accounts.

The Policy Engagement Team will work with Partners, individually and as a cohort, to

- Maximise learning from their experience, and in finding ways to share that with others, e.g. in the context of training activities or resources, or in the form of a blog; and

- Communicate progress towards outcomes, planned or unplanned, including via the team's online presence and social media.

Reporting requirements

Timely consideration of arrangement for monitoring, evaluation and learning will also facilitate and inform the reporting that is required of all award-holders. These reports will be the key mechanism to collect critical information for reporting to Research England, and will assist the Policy Engagement Team in monitoring progress and managing any issues that arise.

A schedule of reporting dates will be provided with award offer letters. Research Partners will be contacted with an email reminder closer to the dates that reports are due for submission. The emails will include a number of questions to help shape reports:

- **End-of-project report** – This should evaluate the project, demonstrate the impact and benefits for Research and Policy Partners, and detail any future plans for further engagement. This report should be submitted within one month of the end of the project.
- **Impact report** – This should briefly outline further impacts achieved in the six months following the project's completion. The aim is to capture any impact that has developed since the project's completion date.

12. Where to get support

All applicants are strongly encouraged to contact the Policy Engagement Team (researchandpublicpolicy@admin.ox.ac.uk) to discuss ideas for a potential application, as well as for advice on eligibility criteria, potential hosts at Oxford or in the policymaking community, and other related questions. The relevant divisional lead from the table below will respond.

Division	Contact
Gardens, Libraries and Museums Mathematical, Physical and Life Sciences	Jess Hedge (jessica.hedge@socsci.ox.ac.uk)
Humanities	Will Pryor (william.pryor@socsci.ox.ac.uk)
Medical Sciences	Naomi Gibson (naomi.gibson@medsci.ox.ac.uk)
Social Sciences	Noora Kanfash (noora.kanfash@socsci.ox.ac.uk)

13. Guidance and resources

Please find below information and guidance from the Policy Engagement Team and others at Oxford:

- From the University's Policy Engagement Team:
 - [How can I engage with policymakers?](#)
 - [How does UK Government work and what do policymakers look for?](#)
 - [How do I engage with the UK Parliament and how do parliaments work?](#)
 - [How do I build policy engagement into project design?](#)
 - [How do I engage with policymakers internationally?](#)
 - [How do I monitor, evaluate and learn about policy engagement?](#)
- From elsewhere:
 - [ESRC Impact Toolkit](#)
 - ['Guidance on Planning and demonstrating Effective Policy Engagement'](#) (Arts & Humanities Research Council)
 - ['How to engage with policy makers: a guide for academics in the arts and humanities'](#) (Institute for Government, Arts & Humanities Research Council)
 - [Policy Impact: A 'how to guide' for researchers](#) (University of Cambridge)
 - [Research England's Knowledge Exchange pages](#)
 - ['Routes to Policy Impact: A Practical Guide for Academics and Researchers'](#) (University of Nottingham)
 - [Science for Policy Handbook](#) (Elsevier)
 - ['Engaging with local government: A Guide for Academics'](#) (University of Cambridge)

- [Engaging with evidence toolkit](#) (Nesta, Capabilities in Academic Policy Engagement and Chief Scientific Adviser's Office at the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities)
- [Engaging with academics: guide for policy makers](#) (Government Office for Science)

14. Get inspired!

- [Researcher Stories: Policy Engagement](#) – short videos of policy-engaged researchers at Oxford and their policy partners, including some of who have been funded through the OPEN Seed Fund
- [Oxford's Experience in Policy Engagement](#) – news, stories, and advice from policy-engaged academics at Oxford
- [Social Sciences Division impact case studies](#) – lay summaries of successful impact stories
- [ESRC IAA funded project summaries](#) – short summaries of projects funded to date
- [TORCH KE Fellowships and other projects](#) – run by the Humanities Division
- [Oxford Impacts case study series](#)
- [Oxford's KE and Impact pages](#)
- [ESRC Celebrating Impact Prize](#) - watch winners' impact videos
- [ESRC Impact case studies](#) – read case studies or watch videos
- [LSE Impact Blog](#)
- [Transforming Evidence](#) (blog)
- [Universities Policy Engagement Network](#) (blog)