

Unlocking Potential: Navigating Round 11 of the Future Leaders Fellowships Event Notes

Speakers: Sara Shinton, Joanna Bullivant, Steve Meader

Author: Arifa Choudhury

Introduction

Sara opened the session by explaining that our goal today is to share the good practice they have built up over many years of running and supporting the Future Leaders Fellowships (FLF) scheme. The FLF is a diverse scheme, and in Round 10 UKRI saw a record number of applicants from outside universities. Sara encouraged that anyone joining the event from a company, charity, or other organisation that the scheme works best when it represents the whole research and innovation system.

The event was about building community among potential applicants and among the people who support them. The FLF Development Network grew from exactly this kind of grassroots connection.

Anyone who become an FLF, will engage the FLF Development Network over the full seven years of your award. And for those supporting applicants, the FLF Development Network also run a host network, including an upcoming event in Leeds to help institutions strengthen their support for leaders.

Two important reminders for applicants:

1. **Start planning your writing now.**

The scheme will formally launch in February, and you will need time to prepare.

2. **Speak to your host institution early.**

Every institution controls how many candidates it can put forward, so you must be approved internally. Hosts also need time to think about the leadership and research support they can offer you.

Although Round 11 hasn't been officially announced yet, we wouldn't be here if it wasn't coming. Institutions like Edinburgh are already planning based on Round 10 timelines.

UKRI Funding Context

Steve explained how UKRI receives its funding: all funding comes from taxpayers, flows through government departments, and is allocated after the national spending review. UKRI is awaiting final confirmation, but he confirmed that FLF Round 11 will go ahead, with a pre-announcement expected soon.

- **Formal call launch:** February 2026
- **Deadline for academic organisations:** June 2026
- **Deadline for businesses/industry:** November 2026

About the FLF Scheme

The FLF scheme was one of the first major cross-UKRI initiatives when the research councils merged in 2018. Originally planned for seven rounds, its success means it has become *business as usual*. Over 650 fellowships have been awarded so far, including around 60 hosted by commercial organisations. Round 9 awards are about to start; Round 10 is in peer review; Round 11 will support around 80 fellows.

Revised UKRI Fellowship Framework

Steve highlighted a recently launched UKRI-wide fellowship framework, designed to standardise expectations across all fellowship schemes.

Key principles now include:

- Minimum one-year duration
- At least 50% time commitment
- Clearer alignment across councils so applicants understand what a 'fellowship' means

He positioned the FLF as a transition-to-independence award for early career researchers aiming to establish their own research group and leadership trajectory.

What UKRI Looks For

Steve emphasised that FLF aims to support people on an accelerated career trajectory those whose progress will be significantly boosted by the fellowship.

UKRI prioritises:

- Equality, diversity and inclusion
- Interdisciplinary research
- International mobility

- Flexible and part-time working
- Cross-sector engagement, including work with businesses
- Strong host support, including access to facilities, studentships, and sustained salary commitment

Award Structure

The fellowship funds up to 7 years: an initial 4 years plus a 3-year renewal following a review. It can vary from £300k to £3M+, depending on discipline, team size, and needs. Awards buy out up to 100% of the fellow's time (with limited allowances for teaching/clinics/other duties). Host salary contribution increases over time.

Assessment Focus

The scheme evaluates three core components together:

1. **The individual** – track record, potential, leadership development
2. **The research/innovation programme** – novelty, feasibility, impact
3. **The host** – support, environment, open-ended position trajectory
4. **(Additionally)** The FLF Development Network as an aligned support mechanism

UKRI does **not** define 'early career' rigidly; applicants must justify their status. The key test is added value, what difference the fellowship will make compared to a typical pathway.

Application Trends & Data

- Success rate overall: ~18% (after internal institutional selection).
- Application numbers grew rapidly, prompting UKRI to introduce institutional caps from Round 6 onwards.
- Costs of proposals have risen significantly, limiting the number of fellowships that can be funded each round.
- Interdisciplinary projects make up nearly 40% of funded awards.
- The scheme funds fellows across the whole UK; around 44% are non-UK nationals who have moved to the UK.

Key Takeaways from Recent Rounds

- Strongest applicants address the whole package: research, leadership, development, and impact.

- Host support statement must be bespoke rather than a template.
- More established applicants already on open-ended contracts are increasingly less competitive.
- Applicants often struggle with questions on EDI, research culture, and trusted research and innovation, generic or rehearsed answers are obvious to panels.
- There is a notable trend where male applicants show lower success rates, partly due to submitting weaker early drafts or doing fewer mock interviews; UKRI is investigating this.

Upcoming Changes

- Co-investigator restrictions will tighten (the fellowship is a personal award).
- Stronger emphasis on value for money.
- Increased scrutiny of trusted research & innovation, especially for applicants working with sensitive technologies or partners in high-risk regions.
- Institutional application caps will remain for Round 11.

Application Process

1. **Full proposal** submission
2. **Peer review** (~5 reviewers, scoring 1–6)
3. **Applicant response** to reviews
4. **Sift panel** determines interview shortlist (~200 interviewed)
5. **Interview panel** assesses the full package
6. **Funding decisions**

Writing Advice

Start early; writing takes longer than expected.

Clearly articulate:

- What you will do?
- Why it matters?
- Why you are the person to do it?
- Why now is the right time?

- How the fellowship changes your career trajectory?

Follow the guidance carefully as rules change each round.

Use the UKRI team for queries; they are available to talk directly with applicants.

Support After Award

UKRI funds the **FLF Development Network**, run through the University of Edinburgh, providing leadership development, training, mentoring, and career support.

UKRI also offers:

- Cohort start meetings
- Annual conferences
- Policy engagement opportunities
- Media, advisory, and ambassador roles
- Tailored support for business-hosted fellows (via Innovate UK)

Business Applications

- Around 60–70 fellowships have been funded in businesses.
- Assessment is through Innovate UK rather than academic peer review.
- University spin-outs are eligible and do not count towards institutional caps.
- Innovate UK panels evaluate commercial relevance and innovation strength.

Joanna's Journey to Securing a UKRI Future Leaders Fellowship (Round 9)

Joanna, researcher whose academic path has been anything but conventional, recently secured a UKRI Future Leaders Fellowship (FLF) in Round 9. Only a few weeks into her award. Her success is particularly significant for Birmingham City University (BCU), which gained its first FLF through her award. Her journey demonstrates how the scheme can support non-linear careers, interdisciplinary research, and applicants working outside the traditional Russell Group universities, showing that success is possible from a non-Russell Group university background.

Background and Career Trajectory

Joanna's career has been anything but linear. She's moved across roles, institutions, and disciplines, often balancing research with teaching and personal commitments. She

completed a Leverhulme Early Career Fellowship and spent several years in a mix of teaching-heavy, part-time, and short-term roles. Caring responsibilities, including maternity leave, and the need to stay in one location meant she couldn't pursue every academic opportunity that arose. Despite these interruptions, Joanna accumulated a wide range of research and interdisciplinary experience, setting the stage for her FLF project.

Key Research Experience

- **2015–2018:** RA on a digital musicology project
- **2019–2021:** Knowledge Exchange Fellowship with National Trust and British Library
- **2020–2021:** Oxford Humanities Cultural Fund participatory research project
- **2023:** Unsuccessful bid for AHRC Early Career Fellowships

These projects allowed Joanna to combine research, community engagement, and interdisciplinary collaboration, forming a foundation for her FLF proposal.

Research Project

FLF Project: Sonic Heritage and Environmental Change on England's East Coast, 1718–Present

Aim: Reconstruct and investigate historical and contemporary soundscapes to understand cultural, ecological, and community heritage.

- Funding: £1.4M over 4 years
- Partner Institutions: University of Oxford, Manchester Metropolitan University
- Project Partners: National Trust, Britten Pears Arts, Suffolk Archives, local music and heritage groups

The project is strongly interdisciplinary, combining:

- Acoustic analysis
- Digital reconstruction
- Heritage science
- Musicology
- Ecology and environmental history

- Creative and community-led practice

The first four years focus on technical work, fieldwork, training, and team building. Years 5–7 are dedicated to embedding methods, impact, and outreach across cultural and heritage sectors.

Why the FLF Scheme Fit

It started with a conversation with Head of Research and Deputy about reviving an unsuccessful project. She asked for internal funding where she spent two weeks doing preliminary research/site visits. She evaluated AHRC Standard Grant vs UKRI FLF and came to the conclusion that her project required:

- Long-term support for a team
- A structure that encouraged leadership development
- Time to build and maintain large-scale partnerships
- Support for intensive interdisciplinary work
- Ways to articulate a clear personal trajectory that had been interrupted but not diminished

The FLF scheme's combination of leadership, ambition, interdisciplinarity and long-term transformation made it the best fit. Equally important, the scheme allowed her to make a case that the fellowship would be personally transformative unlocking a research career that had been constrained by institutional and structural barriers.

Institutional Process and Support

The internal selection process at BCU involved:

1. Expression of Interest
2. Internal sift
3. Full proposal plus costings
4. Peer review
5. Final institutional selection (she was one of two chosen at BCU)

The research office provided support: a dedicated Research Support Officer, detailed checks, countless discussions on structure, and practical help with budgets and letters. The university also made a firm commitment to remove teaching duties and to support her team and leadership development. The move into an interdisciplinary cluster

brought fresh collaborations with VR labs, games design, architecture and materials fabrication, all of which strengthened the project.

BCU provided strong backing, including mentoring, infrastructure, and research culture support.

One unexpected gap was administrative support: Joanna did not cost this into the proposal, not realising she could. She later negotiated institutional admin assistance an important lesson she highlighted for future applicants.

Building the Team and Partnerships

Constructing the project team was one of the most challenging parts. She needed to balance:

- Appointable roles vs. named collaborators
- Technical and research expertise
- Training for staff
- Co-creation work with communities

The project partner commitments were even more demanding. Large organisations like the National Trust required extensive consultation to ensure their involvement aligned with their strategic priorities. Quantifying in-kind support was a learning curve, especially around contributions of space and staff time.

Strengths of the Application

Joanna believes several factors made her application compelling:

- A project that grew *naturally* from her work, rather than being constructed to fit the scheme
- A transparent, well-explained personal narrative using the R4RI to contextualise career breaks, teaching loads, and restrictions
- A clear alignment between her needs, the project's needs and the FLF scheme's aims
- Extensive early engagement with partners
- A strong institutional support package
- A bold interdisciplinary vision that pushed beyond her comfort zone

- Targeted examples of leadership development for both herself and her future team

She repeatedly emphasised that applicants should not shy away from ambition: the FLF is designed for people with a big vision.

Interview Preparation and Experience

Joanna's interview preparation was exhaustive. She:

- Rewrote her five-minute pitch many times
- Compiled a table of every interview question she could find
- Rehearsed repeatedly with colleagues, mentors, friends and even her hairdresser
- Learned the budget and team structure in depth
- Practised explaining the project to non-specialists, knowing the panel would not include musicologists

In the real interview, almost all questions matched what she had prepared. The only surprise was an in-depth query about whether she had costed her scanning work correctly. There were no discipline-specific challenges; instead, the focus was on leadership, EDI, team development and the strategic coherence of the project.

Lessons Learned and Advice for Applicants

- **Start early:** partner work alone can take months.
- **Don't be afraid to ask for help.** Many current FLFs are willing to share advice or even their applications.
- **Use the R4RI** to explain context and barriers.
- **Think ambitiously** and create a project that excites you.
- **Rehearse the interview extensively** and know every aspect of your budget and team plan.
- **Expect the process to consume months of work**, it is intense but transformative.
- **Design for leadership**, not just research.

Joanna's journey demonstrates that the UKRI Future Leaders Fellowship can empower researchers from non-Russell Group universities, supporting unconventional, interrupted, and interdisciplinary careers. Her success at BCU not only reshaped her own trajectory but also marked a milestone for the institution, proving that transformative projects and leadership potential can thrive well beyond traditional academic pathways.

Sara Shinton's presentation

1. Panel Assessment Criteria

Novelty & Distinctiveness:

Sara discussed, your work must be well-designed, novel, and distinctive, especially in crowded fields. Panels look for evidence that you are on a trajectory to become world-class, even if you are not there yet.

Significance & Leadership:

Sara highlighted that panels focus on the significance of your work and your leadership potential. The fellowship is about transformative research that your leadership will enable.

Host Support:

Sara emphasised that panellists evaluate your host as closely as you. Institutions must provide resources, avoid overloading you with teaching, and actively support your development. Lack of host engagement can affect success.

Continuity & Growth:

Fragmented projects or unrelated small grants do not play well. Demonstrate continuity, momentum, and long-term growth in your research trajectory.

2. Application Preparation

Responding to Reviews:

Sara stressed staying calm and professional when responding to reviewer feedback. Address criticisms clearly and use disagreements among reviewers to highlight positive aspects.

Critical Friends & Feedback:

Sara suggested using colleagues to review drafts, challenge weaknesses, and provide constructive criticism. Think like a reviewer when refining your application.

Institutional Alignment:

Your project should align with your host's broader strategies without losing distinctiveness. Ensure Heads of School or Directors of Research are aware of and support your project.

Early Planning:

Sara emphasised that internal processes begin before the official call in February. Early conversations with your host about support and funding are critical.

3. Fellowship Focus**Transformative Impact:**

The FLF should enable work that is not possible otherwise. Highlight added value beyond previous projects, grants, or teaching.

Leadership Development:

FLF is about growing as a leader. Demonstrate ambition and potential to contribute to research culture and leadership in your field.

Long-Term Vision:

Sara noted that the 7-year fellowship allows incubation, development, and implementation of ideas, providing time for building partnerships, networks, and outputs.

4. Eligibility & Considerations**Early Career Researcher (ECR) Status:**

ECR definitions are flexible. Panels focus on transformative potential and career trajectory rather than strict years post-PhD.

Institutional Context:

Both small institutions and Russell Group universities are equally considered. What matters is your access to support and mentorship.

5. FLF Development Network Support

Provides mentorship, coaching, and leadership development beyond host support. Focus on developing leadership, networking, and career growth.

Offers:

- 360 feedback and coaching vouchers.
- Leadership retreats to define personal leadership style.
- Crucible programs for networking, idea exploration, and small funding.
- Structured mentorship with rotation every six months.

6. Practical Advice

Planning & Timing:

Complete administrative sections early. Use internal critical friends to review eligibility, added value, and impact.

Application Focus:

Sara emphasised highlighting leadership potential, transformative research, and added value. Avoid overemphasising CV metrics or prior publications.

Networking & Development:

Sara noted the importance of engaging with FLF network resources, podcasts, and toolkits to enhance research and leadership trajectory.

Summary

As Sara discussed, panels want applicants who demonstrate:

- World-class potential
- Strong institutional support
- Transformative leadership and research impact

Focus on distinctive research, added value, and long-term growth. Leadership and the unique opportunities enabled by the fellowship are equally important as the research itself.