

# **EPIC Futures NI Policy Commissioning Call**

## **Phase 2. Guidance**

Opens. Tuesday 5<sup>th</sup> August 2025, 5pm.

Closes. Tuesday, 9<sup>th</sup> September 2025, 5pm.



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## EPIC Futures NI Policy Commissioning Call – Key Dates

Key milestones	Date
<b>Call Opens:</b>	Tuesday 5 <sup>th</sup> August 2025
<b>Clarification and questions deadline:</b>	Tuesday 19 <sup>th</sup> August, 5pm
<b>Deadline for applications:</b>	Tuesday 9 <sup>th</sup> September 2025, 5pm
<b>Eligibility Screen and Assessment Process:</b>	Wednesday 10 <sup>th</sup> September – Friday 31 <sup>st</sup> October 2025
<b>Conditional Letter of Offer and Due Diligence Checks</b>	Between 10 <sup>th</sup> - 28 <sup>th</sup> November 2025
<b>Project Initiation Meetings (PIMs)</b>	1 <sup>st</sup> – 12 <sup>th</sup> December 2025
<b>Grant Funding Agreement and supporting papers complete:</b>	Thursday 18 <sup>th</sup> December 2025
<b>Project Start Date:</b>	Week of 5 <sup>th</sup> January 2026
<b>Progress Updates:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Monthly checkpoints (email and online)</li> <li>- Midpoint reporting – short report and 10 min presentation to EPIC Futures NI Co-director Team</li> <li>- Present Findings at Commissioning Call Policy Workshop – October/ November 2026 (TBC)</li> <li>- End of project reporting on milestones aligned to financial payments.</li> </ul>
<b>Project End Dates:</b>	<p>We wish to fund projects of varying duration.</p> <p>The maximum end date for large awards between £30,001 - £100,000 is the 30<sup>th</sup> September 2026.</p> <p>The maximum end date for small awards between £10,000 - £30,000 is the 30<sup>th</sup> June 2026</p> <p>All spending must be incurred by the end date specified in the proposal. (See Page 34 for details regarding small awards with vulnerable groups).</p>
<b>Final reports due:</b>	Expected within 2 weeks of project end date.

## EPIC Futures NI Funding Summary

EPIC Futures NI is a Local Policy Partnership (LPIP) hub, led by Ulster University and funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) and Innovate UK.

EPIC Futures NI has been allocated £4.8 million to help reduce regional disparities in economic, social and environmental challenges faced by local communities.

EPIC Futures NI aims to contribute towards a prosperous and sustainable future for Northern Ireland. We work in partnership with academia, policy, community and organisations in the voluntary sector to jointly co-design policy and programmes that will help remove the barriers that people face to fair and inclusive employment.

One million pounds has been allocated to the EPIC Futures Policy Commissioning Fund. Phase 1 opened in October 24 and is now closed. Approximately £250K was awarded across 9 projects. Details of these projects can be found on <https://www.epicfuturesni.org>.

This call specification is related to Phase 2, where approximately £750K will be awarded.

## Background to EPIC Futures NI

Northern Ireland (NI) has a long history of lagging behind other regions in the UK across a range of economic performance indicators. The challenges which the NI economy faces are multifaceted, however, skills and labour deficits are contributing to NI's lagging performance against other UK regions.

NI has a complex supply ecosystem, with the lowest unemployment rate (currently at 2.1%, as of May 2025) and the highest level of economic inactivity (currently 26.3% as of May 2025) across the four UK regions. Economic Inactivity is also significantly higher than the rate in Ireland (21.3%, NISRA, 2025). This represents a very challenging labour market for businesses seeking qualified labour to sustain their business, and to become more productive and innovative to compete on a global stage.

Research by the Ulster University Economic Policy Centre and EPIC Futures NI (2024)<sup>1</sup> highlights that there is spare capacity, beyond the unemployed, in the NI labour market. These additional forms of spare capacity are 1) the 'hidden unemployed' and 2) the 'underemployed'. The hidden unemployed comprise of individuals who are economically inactive but can and do wish to work if additional supports are provided, and individuals on government training programmes.

In Northern Ireland, the largest groups within the hidden unemployed are women, individuals with disabilities, and those aged over 50. However, many other geographical locations (at district

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.ulster.ac.uk/epc/pdf/2024/spare-capacity-in-the-northern-ireland-labour-market/NI-spare-capacity\\_Real-unempt\\_2024.pdf](https://www.ulster.ac.uk/epc/pdf/2024/spare-capacity-in-the-northern-ireland-labour-market/NI-spare-capacity_Real-unempt_2024.pdf)  
[https://www.ulster.ac.uk/epc/pdf/2024/spare-capacity-in-the-northern-ireland-labour-market/NI-spare-capacity\\_In-work\\_2024.pdf](https://www.ulster.ac.uk/epc/pdf/2024/spare-capacity-in-the-northern-ireland-labour-market/NI-spare-capacity_In-work_2024.pdf)  
[https://www.ulster.ac.uk/epc/pdf/2024/spare-capacity-in-the-northern-ireland-labour-market/NI-spare-capacity\\_Hours-based\\_2024.pdf](https://www.ulster.ac.uk/epc/pdf/2024/spare-capacity-in-the-northern-ireland-labour-market/NI-spare-capacity_Hours-based_2024.pdf)

or settlement level), and particular categories of society face significant barriers in accessing fair and inclusive employment, underscoring the need for targeted, intersectional approaches to labour market inclusion.

## **EPIC Futures NI**

EPIC Futures NI stands for: Economic and Social Partnering for Inclusive Innovation and Collaboration (EPIC), which contributes towards a prosperous and sustainable future for Northern Ireland (NI). EPIC Futures NI is a Local Policy Partnership (LPIP) hub, led by Ulster University and aims to contribute towards a prosperous and sustainable future for Northern Ireland. With a 'place-based' focus the partnership brings together academia, policy makers, business, community, and voluntary sector to jointly co-design policy and programmes that will help improve equitable access to skills and employment opportunities.

Together, we aim to create evidence-based solutions to fair and inclusive employment across Northern Ireland. Our primary focus is providing an evidence base for policy and programmes aimed at targeting the 'hidden unemployed' within the economically inactive population. We also seek to develop new collaborations and help remove the barriers that people face to accessing fair and meaningful employment.

EPIC Futures NI is one of four Local Policy Partnership's (LPIP) across the UK, alongside a central strategic co-ordination hub. EPIC Futures NI is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), Innovate UK and the UK Research and Innovation (UKRI). The £23 million LPIPs programme is a 'place-based' call, which has been designed to support local and national policymakers in tackling levelling up challenges which are unique to their place and in turn driving sustainable and inclusive economic growth, and reducing regional disparities in the UK.

## **Aim of this Phase 2 commissioning call**

The overall aim of this commissioning call is to build a robust evidence base around key themes that contribute to a fairer and more inclusive labour market in Northern Ireland, particularly for people who are not in, or do not have access to, suitable paid employment or self-employment. Together, we aim to create evidence-based solutions for fair and inclusive employment across Northern Ireland.

We are interested in projects which seek to explore and provide solutions to aid individuals who are economically inactive, unemployed, underemployed and hidden unemployed. We are seeking to fund projects that advance theory, policy, and practice. Projects that bring innovative, cross-cutting approaches to place-based challenges and that offer fresh insights into the lived realities of individuals facing barriers to skills development and employability are particularly welcome.

## **Collaboration**

Proposals that involve cross-sector partnerships, particularly between academia and community, voluntary, or business organisations are strongly encouraged. Projects should also

reflect lived experience where possible. Projects involving the collection of new data must include an academic partner capable of securing independent formal ethical approval from their own academic institution for the data collection within the timeframe of the project. This will be assessed as part of the eligibility criteria.

## Funding Routes: Open Call and Priority Areas

Before starting your application, identify whether it is a **research-led** or **partner-led** application. UKRI is the primary funder and has different rules depending on whether the lead organisation is a UKRI-recognised research organisation (such as a university) or a non-research organisation (such as Independent Research Organisations, UK Businesses, Community and Voluntary Sector and Government). Check if your organisation is listed as a research organisation here [Research organisations eligible for UKRI funding – UKRI](#).

A summary of eligibility and the distinctions between **research-led** and **partner-led** applications can be found on pages 26–29 of this guidance document (EPIC Futures NI Phase 2 Policy Commissioning Call Guidance).

**Route 1 is via the open call.** In the open call, we have outlined 8 thematic areas with associated research questions. Applicants have freedom within this open call to design projects which align with the thematic areas. Within this open call, we will fund both small and large awards and have allocated a set amount of funding for each type of awards.

- **Small awards:** We have allocated £160,000 for small awards. These are for projects which are in the range of £10,000 - £30,000. These projects must be completed no later than by 30<sup>th</sup> June 2026.
- **Large awards:** We have allocated £320,000 for large awards. These are for projects which are in the range of £30,001 to £100,000. These projects must be completed no later than by 30<sup>th</sup> September 2026.

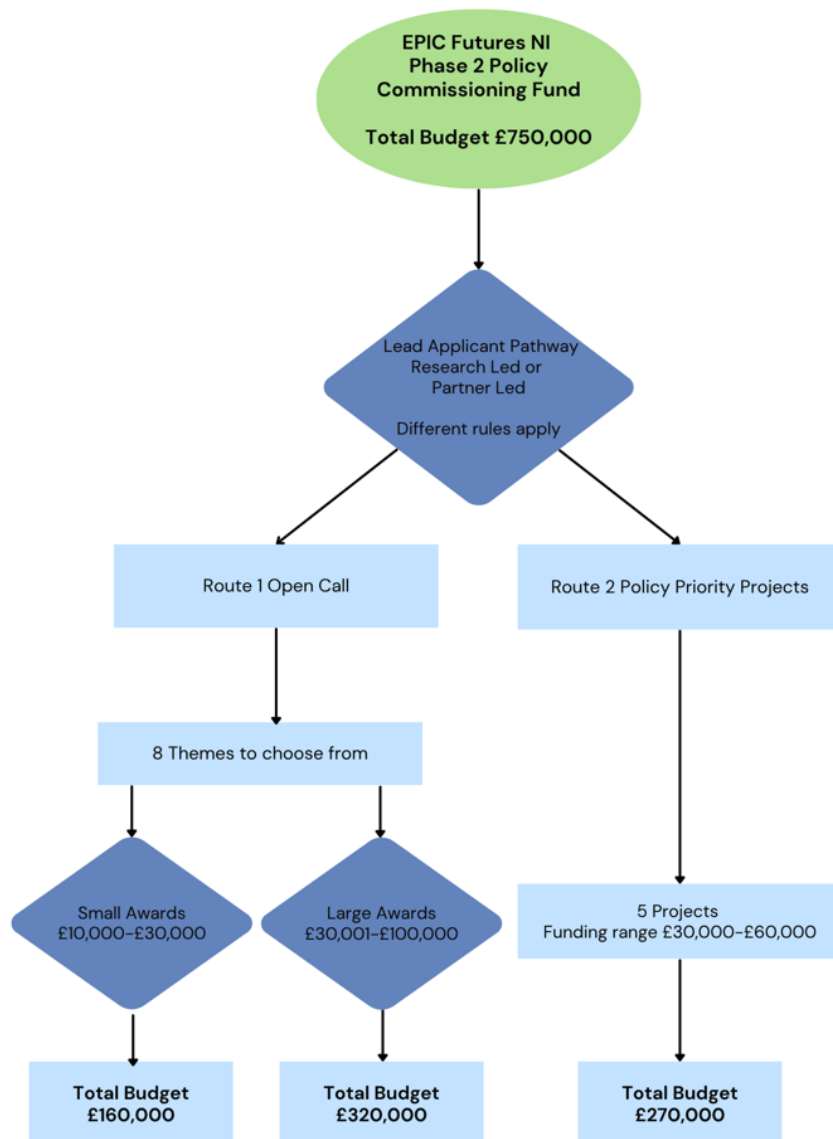
**Route 2 is the Policy Priority Call.** We have allocated £270,000 for this call over 5 defined projects. The maximum funding thresholds are stated for each specific priority area project within the description and varies from £30,000 to £60,000.

We are open to explorative approaches including pilot projects with a strong research framework, policy analysis, research addressing evidence gaps and the piloting or study of a new approach (or existing approaches in new places). We also are interested in the development of innovative methods and tools which can aid data collection/analysis/reporting and/or which can be used to target groups facing significant barriers to employment and traditionally defined as ‘marginalised.’ We wish to fund studies which can demonstrate impact in various ways. The focus of all applications should be the output/outcomes which will inform policy in Northern Ireland.

- **Research led** e.g., scoping studies, policy analysis, empirical data collection (quantitative and qualitative), data modelling and analysis.
- **Action led** e.g., pilot projects with a strong evaluation and/or research framework.

- **Demonstrator led** e.g. pilot projects which test, showcase and evaluate a new technology, model or approach in a real-world setting. These must be accompanied by a strong evaluation and/or research framework.

Where possible, we encourage projects to finish earlier than the specified end dates to allow evidence to be published in real time and to inform policy. Please note that the size of funding must be commensurate with the scale, ambition and impact that can be achieved. The ESRC gives guidance on what constitutes impact: <https://www.ukri.org/councils/esrc/impact-toolkit-for-economic-and-social-sciences/defining-impact/>.



## ROUTE 1: OPEN CALL THEMES

The open call will cover eight key themes that have been identified through consultation with expert academic and policy stakeholders. Some thematic areas have been carried over from the Phase 1 call, where there remains continued knowledge gaps however, several new themes and topics have been added.

Topics are suggested for each theme however, you can propose projects which deviate slightly from suggested topics, where a strong justification is provided of the relevance to EPIC Futures NI and for policy and practice for Northern Ireland. In Route 1 you can apply for a small award (between £10,000 - £30,000) or a large award (between £30,001 and £100,000) for any of the topics in this Route 1 Open Call. Please note that depending on the level of funding requested, you may wish to focus on one or more questions/themes. This is at the discretion of the applicant.

- **Theme 1.** Addressing Skills Inequalities and Understanding Inclusive Pathways to Employment for Under-Represented Groups
- **Theme 2.** Pathways to Good Work for Young People
- **Theme 3.** Place-Based Strategies for Skills, Employment, and Economic Inclusion
- **Theme 4.** Understanding what Works for Skills and Employability
- **Theme 5.** The Caring Economy
- **Theme 6.** Health and Work
- **Theme 7.** Inclusive Access to the Green Economy
- **Theme 8.** AI, Digital Capability and Inclusive Work

Any policy benchmarking studies commissioned by EPIC Futures NI should prioritise areas where policy is shaped by devolved institutions and/or ensure that international learnings are clearly relevant and of practical value to policy stakeholders in Northern Ireland.

## **Route 1 Open Call Themes - Details**

### **Theme 1: Addressing Skills Inequalities and Understanding Inclusive Pathways to Employment for Under-Represented Groups, Especially Individuals with Special Educational Needs (SEN) and Disabilities**

Northern Ireland faces a significant and persistent challenge in ensuring inclusive access to the labour market. More than one-quarter of the working-age population identifies as having a disability, yet Northern Ireland has the lowest employment rate for disabled people across all UK regions and the largest employment gap between disabled and non-disabled individuals. These statistics represent more than disparity, they reflect a deep loss of potential, with economic, social, and personal consequences for individuals and communities.

Individuals with special educational needs (SEN) and disabilities face barriers at every stage of the education-to-employment pipeline. These may include a lack of targeted support during transitions, limited access to flexible learning, stigma in recruitment, and challenges sustaining employment. Moreover, data on recruitment, retention, and progression for these groups is scarce, particularly data that is Northern Ireland-specific or disaggregated by type of disability or learning need.



To build more inclusive education and employment ecosystems, we must deepen our understanding of both systemic and individual-level barriers, and test interventions that support sustainable participation in the labour market.

## **Suggested Research Questions and Focus Areas for Theme 1**

### **1.1. What are the pathways to inclusive employment for disabled people, including neurodivergent individuals and those with physical or learning disabilities?**

- What barriers and motivators shape their journey from education to work?
- What types of targeted interventions show the most promise at different stages (e.g. transition support, job matching, mentoring)?

### **1.2. What are the current recruitment, retention, and progression rates for individuals with different categories of special educational needs and disabilities in education and employment?**

- Are certain types of disabilities associated with more severe drop-offs or face different barriers, and at what points (e.g. post-school transition, job retention)?
- How do flexible learning models for these groups (e.g. part-time, online, modular) influence employability, participation, and productivity?

### **1.3. How effective are existing support mechanisms (e.g. Disabled Students' Allowance, Access to Work, workplace accommodations) in enabling sustained transitions into meaningful employment?**

- Are services accessible, well-understood, and appropriately tailored?
- What are users' experiences of navigating support systems across sectors?

### **1.4. What inclusive education and employment models from other regions or countries could be adapted to improve outcomes in Northern Ireland?**

- What does international evidence suggest works in fostering inclusive workplaces or education-to-work transitions? (Please note a project exploring supported employment models was funded in phase 1 therefore we are seeking other models).
- What contextual adaptations would be necessary for NI?

### **1.5. How can local employers and training providers better align with the needs of disabled individuals to:**

- Support lifelong learning, and/or prevent permanent labour market detachment following sickness or disability-related absence?
- What practices can be scaled or incentivised to support workplace re-entry or job retention?
- What role can co-designed learning or skills programmes play?

## **Theme 2: Pathways to Good Work for Young People**

Despite recent improvements, too many young people in Northern Ireland remain disconnected from education, training, and employment. According to the Labour Force Survey (January-March 2025), an estimated 19,000 young people (aged 16-24) were not in education, employment, or training (NEET). Alarming, 15,000 of these were economically inactive, neither working nor actively seeking work. This level of disconnection poses significant long-term challenges to individuals' life chances and to the region's economic and social cohesion.

Young people's transitions into the labour market are deeply shaped by early experiences, family background, care responsibilities, socio-economic status, educational access, and more. Individuals from under-represented and disadvantaged backgrounds often face structural barriers that are insufficiently captured by headline employment figures.

To develop more inclusive and effective policy, we invite proposals that explore the barriers, pathways, and enabling conditions for young and marginalised people to achieve and sustain meaningful work.

### **Suggested Research Questions and Focus Areas for Theme 2**

**2.1. What are the underlying causes of NEET status and economic inactivity among young people in Northern Ireland?**

**2.2 What are the longer-term employment scarring effects of being NEET?**

**Additional sub-questions for 2.1 and 2.2 include:**

- Are there regional differences across NI?
- Do specific communities or socio-economic groups face greater risk?
- How do NI trends compare with UK or international data?
- What early interventions or policy responses could reduce NEET rates?

**2.3. How do vulnerable or at-risk young people become detached from education and employment, and what supports their re-engagement?**

- Groups of interest may include young people in or on the edge of care, care-experienced youth, those in contact with the youth justice system.
- What policy levers or practice interventions are most effective in re-engaging these groups?

**2.4. How do workless households, especially single-adult families, contribute to intergenerational economic inactivity?**

- What roles do poverty, parental employment, and local opportunity structures play?
- Can whole-family interventions disrupt cycles of unemployment?

## **2.5. What is the entrepreneurial potential among young people from deprived areas, and what are the barriers to realising it?**

- How do location, infrastructure, digital access, finance, and mentoring impact this?
- How might policy or local ecosystems better support marginalised youth into entrepreneurship as a route to employment?

### **Theme 3: Place-Based Strategies for Skills, Employment, and Economic Inclusion**

Economic inactivity in Northern Ireland is not evenly distributed. It varies significantly across geographic areas and is shaped by a complex interplay of socio-economic, cultural, institutional, and infrastructural factors. While urban areas account for much of the economically inactive population, it is increasingly important to understand the dynamics in rural, remote, and peripheral communities, where issues such as distance from employment or training, limited transport infrastructure, and lack of local opportunities can create distinct challenges. These challenges may disproportionately affect women, disabled people, and young people, yet there is limited evidence in a Northern Ireland-specific context to inform tailored, place-sensitive interventions.

Labour markets are not just economic systems, they are institutional and social constructs, shaped by lived traditions, intergenerational norms, and local identities. In Northern Ireland, historical legacies, cultural and religious divisions, and spatial inequalities (including the experience of border regions) all influence labour market participation and behaviour in ways that are deeply embedded in place.

To address this, we seek projects that offer granular, place-based insights into the drivers of economic inactivity and the design of more effective, inclusive policies. Proposals could focus on a single locality or compare across regions to inform scalable policy interventions.

### **Suggested Research Questions & Areas of Focus for Theme 3.**

#### **3.1 Do interventions targeting economic inactivity and skills development need to differ in rural or remote areas compared to urban areas?**

- Are current employability programmes equally effective in peripheral regions?
- Does labour market re-entry take longer or require different forms of support in rural contexts?

#### **3.2 To what extent are remote and hybrid working models accessible and viable for people in remote or peripheral areas?**

- Are digital skills, broadband access, or employer attitudes limiting uptake?

### **3.3 How do perceptions of local labour markets affect job-seeking behaviours in peripheral and rural regions with few large public or private sector employers?**

- Does this influence the confidence or aspirations of economically inactive individuals?

### **3.4 What are the multi-dimensional, place-based factors that contribute to intergenerational joblessness and economic inactivity?**

- How do family, social support systems, community norms, and local institutions play a role?

### **3.5 How do cultural, religious, and social divisions influence participation in training and employment programmes?**

- Are some groups less likely to engage due to perceived or real community tensions?
- Do subjective or perceptual barriers influence how far people are willing to travel for training or employment?
- Are there gendered or age-related patterns in these perceptions?

### **3.6 What factors have enabled certain areas or regions to improve labour market outcomes while others remain persistently deprived?**

- What models of local regeneration or inclusive growth offer lessons for NI?
- What is the interdependency of factors influencing economic inactivity within Areas of Social Deprivation?

### **3.7 How do border regions present unique labour market and skills-based opportunities and challenges?**

- What are the cross-border implications for workers across different industries/sectors?<sup>2</sup>
- What sector-specific employment opportunities exist in cross-border regions, and how can they be leveraged to support re-engagement of the economically inactive population?
- To what extent do individuals in NI's border areas face 'double disadvantage' due to rurality and peripheral policy focus and what targeted interventions have proven effective in similar transboundary contexts?
- What are the lived experiences of unemployed or economically inactive people in border communities regarding access to skills provision, training, or inclusive employment pathways?

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<sup>2</sup> Research with Employers and Activator roles in the locations of Derry & Strabane / Donegal border and Fermanagh & Omagh/ Sligo border is currently in progress as part of the wider EPIC Futures project therefore we are not seeking research on those perspectives but welcome other perspectives in this theme.

- What role do identity, cultural affiliation, and local political dynamics play in shaping labour market engagement in NI's border areas?

#### **Theme 4: Understanding What Works for Skills and Employability and Learning from International Best Practices**

This theme is broken into two parts exploring different sub-elements of 'what works'.

##### **Theme 4a: Understanding what works for Skills and Employability**

Despite an extensive evidence base on economic inactivity in Northern Ireland, important gaps remain in understanding the dynamic nature of inactivity, the aspirations of those who wish to work, and the place-based and intergenerational dimensions of long-term detachment from the labour market. As policy and funding decisions increasingly call for targeted, data-informed interventions, it is essential to go beyond static statistics and explore who is inactive, why, for how long, and under what conditions they are most likely to re-engage.

**4a.1 Understanding the Flows of Economic Inactivity.** This focuses on understanding the characteristics, transitions, and spatial patterns of economic inactivity - with the aim of identifying what works, where, and for whom.

- What are the typical inflows and outflows into and out of economic inactivity (by primary stated reason: e.g. illness, caring, study)?
- What role does past trauma, emotional regulation, and attachment style play in shaping an individual's capacity to obtain and sustain employment?
- How do people move between reasons for being inactive over time (e.g. from caring to disability to job displacement due to technology)? What does this suggest about compounding needs?
- What is the average duration of economic inactivity by client profile, and what are the characteristics of those who successfully transition into employment?

How do skills levels, previous work experience, or household responsibilities influence the likelihood and timing of upskilling and entering/re-entering work?

##### **4a.2 To what extent does the nature of data collection and production of statistics on economic inactivity frame or constrain our understanding of economic inactivity?**

- Does current measurements affect understanding of inactivity in rural and urban areas or understanding of how close individuals are to the labour market (would/wouldn't like to work).
- Is the statistical presentation and disaggregation of economically inactive individuals (as students, retired, looking after the family/home, sick and disabled) optimal for our understanding of economic inactivity in NI?

#### **4a.3 Who Are the Economically Inactive People Who Want to Work?**

- What are the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of this group (age, gender, skills, work history, benefit receipt)?
- Are there geographical patterns (urban/rural, deprivation, segregation) that differentiate this group? What is the relationship between the availability of particular types of work/supply side issues related to work.
- To what degree is their interest in working aspirational versus realistic, and what are the perceived and actual barriers to employment?
- How many in this group transition to and sustain work, and what enables or prevents this?

#### **4a.4 Relationships Between Social Deprivation and Economic Inactivity**

- What is the prevalence and nature of economic inactivity in the most socially deprived areas (top 10–25%), and how does this compare to the least deprived areas and areas in the middle of the deprivation range?
- What is the prevalence and nature of economic inactivity in the most and least deprived urban areas? How does this compare to rural areas?
- Do area-based factors (beyond household characteristics) influence labour market outcomes?
- How do outcomes differ between neighbouring areas with similar populations but different levels of economic deprivation?
- Do rural vs. urban or religiously segregated areas show significantly different intergenerational patterns?

### **Theme 4b: What Works – International Best Practice and Integrated Approaches to Engagement and Activation**

To improve labour market participation among the economically inactive, Northern Ireland must not only understand its own context, but also learn from what works elsewhere. Across Europe and beyond, innovative and integrated models have been developed to reach and support people outside traditional employment services, including those with complex or multiple barriers to work.

This theme explores how other nations and regions are engaging the economically inactive, particularly those hardest to reach, such as people with health conditions, women, older adults, rural populations, and individuals with low skills. It also examines the value of joined-up approaches, where employability is integrated with health, care, and other public services to create a more holistic support system.

We are interested in evidence that provides practical lessons for Northern Ireland and identifies high-potential models for adaptation or piloting.

## **Suggested Research Questions and Focus Areas**

### **Theme 5: The Caring Economy**

The caring economy, encompassing both unpaid care (childcare and adult care) and the paid care sector, plays a vital role in Northern Ireland's social and economic fabric. Yet it remains under-recognised, under-resourced, and a major driver of economic inactivity, especially for women.

Currently, around 1 in 20 working-age individuals in Northern Ireland are economically inactive due to caring responsibilities. Over 80% of these are women, reinforcing the gendered nature of care and the pressing need for inclusive, flexible labour market solutions.

At the same time, the paid care workforce, essential to health, social care, and early years sectors, faces challenges in terms of skills, progression pathways, pay, and long-term sustainability. A more inclusive, better supported, and strategically developed caring economy could unlock significant participation, productivity, and wellbeing gains.

This theme explores both how to support those with caring responsibilities into and within work, and how to ensure the paid care sector is equipped for the future.

### **Suggested Research Questions and Focus Areas for Theme 5**

#### **5.1. How do employers in Northern Ireland support staff with caring responsibilities, and what innovative or inclusive practices could be expanded?**

- What policies (e.g. flexible hours, carers' leave, job-sharing) are offered and used?
- What are the perceived barriers among employers to supporting carers?
- What is the lived experience of working carers in Northern Ireland, and how do employer policy and practice, and changes in Health and Social Care support, impact their ability to balance work and care?
- In what ways has the changes in Health and Social Care impacted the effectiveness of past employer policy initiatives aimed at supporting working carers?

#### **5.2. Who are adult carers in Northern Ireland, and what labour market barriers do they face?**

- What are their characteristics (age, gender, income, care intensity)?
- What types of support, flexible, financial, skills-based, would make employment possible or sustainable?

#### **5.3. How can we meet the future skill needs of the paid caring economy (e.g. childcare, social care, elder care and home care)?**

- Are recruitment, training, pay, and progression structures aligned with future demand?
- Are these roles sufficiently valued and recognised across society?

**5.4. What are the labour market challenges facing young carers, and how can their strengths and skills be better recognised and supported by employers?**

- What barriers do young carers face in accessing education, skills, and employment?
- How can employers better understand and value the transferable skills young carers develop?

**5.5. What are the economic and social impacts of creating a more inclusive labour market for carers?**

- What are the potential gains in workforce participation, productivity, and wellbeing?
- How might inclusion reduce long-term dependence on benefits or health services?

**5.6. What is the current level of awareness and uptake of childcare support among parents pursuing skills development or returning to work?**

- What barriers exist in accessing support (awareness, cost, availability)?
- How does support influence participation in training or education?

**5.7. What international models exist for making high-quality, affordable childcare accessible to all, including families of children with special educational needs (SEN) and disabilities?**

- What affordability schemes, funding models, and integrated care systems are most effective? How can these be adapted for Northern Ireland?

**5.8 What international models of parental leave, including flexible or transferable leave offer effective outcomes for parents and children, and how could these be adapted for use in Northern Ireland?**

- What international approaches exist for parental leave, including the option to transfer leave to non-parent caregivers (e.g., relatives or friends)?
- Which models have shown the most effective outcomes in terms of parental wellbeing, child development, and family economic stability?
- What legal, cultural, or policy adaptations would be necessary to implement such models in Northern Ireland?

**Theme 6: Health and Work - Understanding the Intersections Between Health, Employment and Economic Inactivity**

In Northern Ireland, over 12% of the working-age population is economically inactive due to ill health, the single largest stated reason for inactivity. While employment is not a remedy, there is strong evidence that good work can contribute to better physical and mental health outcomes, while sustained unemployment can exacerbate health conditions and deepen social exclusion.



The relationship between health and work is complex and bi-directional. Individuals may exit employment due to illness or disability, but the longer they remain out of the labour market, the more difficult return becomes, both physically and psychologically. These transitions carry significant fiscal, social and human costs. There is a pressing need for better data, insight and joined-up approaches to ensure that both preventative and re-engagement strategies are designed to support individual wellbeing while benefiting the broader economy and public services.

This theme invites proposals that explore the interplay between health and work, drawing on international best practice and new forms of data to support more responsive policy and service delivery.

## **Suggested Research Questions and Focus Areas for Theme 6**

### **6.1 From which occupations or industries are employees most likely to exit work due to ill-health?**

- For industries or occupations with high levels of exit, what are the most likely opportunities for re-skilling and upskilling to related occupations?

### **6.2 Are there employer-led interventions that successfully prevent people from exiting the workplace due to ill health?**

- What models of occupational health, workplace flexibility, or job redesign help retain employees with emerging health needs or complex social needs?
- What can be learned from employers with lower-than-average attrition due to health reasons?
- How do HR leaders ensure equitable access to health-related interventions across diverse and complex needs groups?
- How can HR strategies be extended to engage people with ill health or complex needs as part of inclusive workforce planning , recruitment and development efforts?
- In what ways can employer-led approaches deliver broader societal value and return on public investment?

### **6.2. How can the health benefits of working be communicated and embedded into support for the economically inactive?**

- What narratives or evidence are most effective in showing the positive relationship between work and health?
- What motivational or behavioural change mechanisms support engagement?

### **6.3. How can data linkage be used to explore the relationship between health and changes in employment status over time?**

#### **6.4. What is the relationship between employment and wider social determinants of health (SDH)?**

- How do employment status and job quality interact with health outcomes over time?
- How do community, housing, education, or transport systems reinforce or alleviate poor health and work outcomes?

#### **6.5. What employability or skills development models also support improvements in health and wellbeing?**

- Are there training or support programmes that explicitly integrate health outcomes?
- How is progress in mental health, wellbeing, or physical capability tracked alongside employment readiness?

#### **6.6. What can Northern Ireland learn from other regions with integrated approaches to health, employability, and skills?**

- How have other jurisdictions aligned employment services, health systems, and skills policy?
- What governance, funding, and delivery models have enabled effective integration?

### **Theme 7: Inclusive Access to the Green Economy**

We are seeking research that explores how to ensure the green economy is inclusive and accessible to all, particularly those currently underrepresented in the labour market. This includes addressing inequalities in access to green skills, jobs, and finance, especially for groups such as NEETs (young people Not in Education, Employment or Training), women returners, older adults (50+), and those living in economically disadvantaged areas. Many careers in the green economy do not require formal qualifications, with a recent report suggesting that as much as 90% of green jobs are manual or technical and don't require a university degree (PwC and Connect 2024) therefore are accessible careers for many.

Northern Ireland is at a pivotal point in transitioning towards a net zero and circular economy. However, evidence points to significant mismatches between the green skills required for this transition and the current labour market's capacity to meet that demand. Despite the growing discourse on the green economy, there remains limited granular data on the inclusivity of green job creation, the accessibility of green skills provision, and pathways into green entrepreneurship for marginalised groups.

### **Suggested Research Questions and Focus Areas for Theme 7**

**7.1 Mapping green skills demand and gaps** across key sectors in Northern Ireland (e.g. construction, energy, transport, manufacturing, agriculture).

- What are the priority skills for emerging green jobs, and how are these being communicated to jobseekers (different age ranges, gender, qualifications, disabilities) and training providers?

**7.2 Barriers and enablers to participation in green skills programmes and green jobs** for underrepresented groups.

- What prevents underrepresented groups from working in green jobs? What interventions might be effective?
- What prevents underrepresented groups from engaging with green skills provision?
- What tailored outreach, mentoring, or wraparound support might be effective?

**7.3 Inclusive models of green entrepreneurship:** What support ecosystems exist or are needed to enable diverse groups to develop green enterprises (e.g. community energy projects, circular economy initiatives)?

- How can green startup finance become more inclusive?

**7.4 Accessibility of green finance pathways:** How do women, ethnic minorities, or working-class entrepreneurs access capital for green innovation?

- What role could models like peer-to-peer finance, community wealth building, or mission-aligned investment play?

**7.5 Pathways for re-skilling and just transitions:** How can a just transition to a green economy ensure that workers in high-carbon sectors, especially those with lower formal qualifications, are supported to reskill and re-enter employment?

**7.6 International and UK-wide good practices:** What lessons can be drawn from inclusive green economy initiatives elsewhere, and how might these be adapted to the NI context?

## **Theme 8: AI, Digital Capability and Inclusive Workplaces**

The growing adoption of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and advanced digital technologies is rapidly transforming how we work, reshaping job roles, required skills, and the structure of entire sectors. For Northern Ireland, this presents both a strategic opportunity and a critical challenge: ensuring the workforce is equipped not just to adapt, but to thrive in an increasingly digital economy.

Evidence suggests that digital capability is unevenly distributed across sectors, occupations, regions, and demographic groups. Gaps in access to digital infrastructure, training provision, and confidence may leave some workers at greater risk of displacement or exclusion, particularly in lower-paid roles and sectors with low digital maturity. At the same time, AI's potential for productivity, innovation, and workplace augmentation is significant, if harnessed inclusively.

This theme seeks to explore how Northern Ireland can build a digitally capable and inclusive workforce, leveraging AI not only to boost economic competitiveness but also to support fair transitions, minimise risk, and enhance work quality.

### **Suggested Research Questions and Focus Areas for Theme 8**

#### **8.1. Where are the key gaps in digital and AI skills training provision, access, and engagement?**

- What groups are most likely to be left behind with AI transformation across businesses/sectors?
- Who is currently excluded from existing training opportunities, and why?
- What delivery models are most effective in reaching disengaged or digitally excluded groups?

#### **8.2. What are the implications of AI adoption for inclusivity in the workplace?**

- How can job design and workplaces incorporate AI in ways to aid inclusivity for certain marginalised groups such as SEN and people with disability?

#### **8.3 What novel AI tools can be used to aid:**

- Employers seeking to find labour and associated government support schemes
- Individuals seeking courses on skills development
- Support providers to collate and analyse appropriate programme data,
- Skills development for marginalised groups, especially SEN and people who are disabled.

This theme is looking for novel and applied AI solutions/tool development which can be piloted to aid NI employability and skills ecosystem. These tools should embed an element of evaluation/data collection to discuss their effectiveness/value.

## **ROUTE 2: POLICY PRIORITY CALL**

Under Route 2, funding of £270,000 has been allocated to invite bids to deliver 5 priority projects. These 5 projects have been developed in collaboration with policy leads from the Department for Communities and Economy, and have very specific relevance and value for Northern Ireland policy. We are therefore seeking suitable applicants with the appropriate skills and experience to submit proposals to deliver upon these projects.

The assessors will allow slight deviation from the suggested topics if applicants feel they can provide additionality through their own knowledge and expertise and/ or due to data access considerations.

Whilst research questions are suggestions and can be adapted, the core topics and expected outputs for each priority topic should be achieved to be considered for funding.

### **Policy Priority Oversight Group**

Projects funded under this Route 2 will be supported by an oversight group, comprising of policy leads from Department for Communities (DfC), Department for Economy (DfE) and EPIC Futures NI. This Oversight Group will help to steer Projects to ensure that research objectives are met, provide feedback, and support linkages to key stakeholders and data, where possible.

### **Policy Priority Topic 1: A study on Distanced Travelled / Progression Models to inform an NI model.**

The current Outcomes Model for employability in NI can be simplistic and fragmented, with many organisations and stakeholders utilising different approaches. Assessments of 'Work readiness' play a significant role in determining a client journey, but current models can be linear or focus on fragments of a whole journey, rather than start to finish. Additionally, in terms of progression along that journey and through support provision, Outcomes Models generally capture 'completion points' and 'work outcomes,' rather than more detailed / incremental milestones reached.

Recently, Workable NI has adopted a more sophisticated model to measure progression and wider outcomes, and there is a track record of more holistic assessments under European Social Fund and UK Shared Prosperity Fund, but an excepted 'Distanced Travelled model' for NI and best practice in measuring progressive outcomes does not exist.

In activating economically inactive clients, many who are furthest from the labour market, success needs to be reframed to include capturing smaller and more incremental steps on a journey towards a work outcome.

*The aim of this project is to design, implement and complete a study which explores Distanced Travelled / Progression Models, their methodology, design/structure, application, and effectiveness in assessing clients and measuring progress.*

This study will explore the application of different models for different client groups who may face different barriers to work. It will cover pre-employment through to in-work support stages, include components of education/up-skilling, and consider challenges with integration within the current NI system.

An outcome of this study should be an assessment of the most effective and scalable components on Progression/Distance Travelled Models. Outputs will include a full report with all findings, and a more policy orientated report which will detail the recommended Distanced Travelled Model for NI with various outcomes/reporting milestones.

### **Potential Research Questions for Priority Topic 1**

- How is the current NI model for work readiness and progression within employment and skills delivered within DfC? And how does it compare to best practice?
- What progression models/model components are used effectively across the world to assess and measure progress towards and within work – with a specific focus on economic inactivity? Are any of these models scalable or currently being used at scale, and to what success?

- What data would need to be collected from clients to enable effective assessment phases and monitoring of progression throughout a journey?
- What challenges to implementation / integration would a new model face?
- What components could be combined to create an effective Distanced Travelled Model for NI, which assesses and monitors progression on a client's journey towards, and within work? This should consider different client groups and their unique needs.

**Expected outputs** should include a blueprint for the model best suited to NI, with a logic model, indicators and implementation plan. These should be incorporated into a full report with findings, and a shorter policy orientated briefing.

**Budget:** The maximum budget for this priority area is £60,000. The full award will be made only for proposals that offer novel, innovative or otherwise high-value approaches to approaching the research questions and collecting data. We anticipate that proposals employing more traditional methods may be able to achieve the intended outcomes with a smaller budget.

## **Policy Priority Area 2: Modelling the Macroeconomic Impact of Reducing Economic Inactivity**

Northern Ireland currently lacks a robust, NI-specific model that can quantify the fiscal and wider economic gains when economically inactive residents move into sustained employment. A comprehensive macro-level tool, capable of running “what-if” scenarios would strengthen business cases for activation measures by estimating savings to the social-security budget, additional tax/National Insurance Contribution (NIC) receipts and knock-on benefits such as reduced demand for health, justice and housing services.

### **This study should:**

- Conduct a literature review of UK, Ireland and international studies that monetise activation impacts, identifying transferable modelling approaches.
- Build or adapt a macro-economic model that can simulate changes in inactivity rates and estimate resultant savings/revenues for “NI PLC.”
- Produce headline estimates for diverse groups reflecting the composition of NI benefit caseload (e.g., disabled adult, full-time carer, 50+ returner, NEET young person, lone parent etc.). DfC analytical support will be available to help refine the client-caseload typologies used in the modelling.
- Include capability to vary key policy levers (e.g., childcare subsidies, disability supports, wage incentives) and client-group parameters.

### **Potential research questions**

- What is the baseline annual cost to NI of current levels of economic inactivity, disaggregated by major client groups?
- How would reducing economic inactivity affect public-spending and tax/NIC revenues?
- Which policy levers deliver the highest return on investment when modelled individually and in combination?

- Which client groups benefit most from different policy interventions?
- What wider societal savings (healthcare, justice, housing) can be evidenced and credibly included in a NI model?

**Expected outputs** include a technical report, spreadsheet model with adjustable inputs, a full report with findings and a shorter policy briefing.

**Budget:** The maximum budget available for this priority area is £60,000. Proposals seeking the full amount must demonstrate novel, innovative, or otherwise high-value approaches to addressing the research questions and collecting data. We anticipate that proposals employing more traditional methods may be able to achieve the intended outcomes with a smaller budget.

### **Policy Priority Area 3: Developing “Better-Off” Calculators for Key Client Profiles**

While macro-level figures are vital for strategic planning, frontline advisers and clients need clear, individual-level calculations to show whether moving into work, or increasing hours, will leave them financially better off. A suite of NI-specific calculators, covering diverse household types, would support decision-making and increase the credibility of activation programmes. At project initiation, the successful bidder will agree the final set of client archetypes with DfC’s analytical team, who will provide guidance on benefit rules and caseload prevalence.

#### **This study should:**

- Identify and build detailed client profiles (e.g., single disabled adult, dual-earner couple with childcare costs, part-time carer etc.) using the latest NI benefit and tax rules.
- Map current income levels (benefits, allowances) and living-cost outlays for each profile.
- Model net income changes under common work scenarios and include costs such as childcare and travel.
- Design an interactive calculator or updateable template that advisers and clients can use, with clear guidance notes.

#### **Potential research questions**

- For different client profiles, at what wage/hour thresholds does work provide a positive net income after typical work-related costs?
- How do taper rates, mitigation payments and forthcoming welfare reforms alter “better-off” points?
- Which profiles face the steepest effective-marginal-tax rates and how might policy adjust to improve incentives?
- What presentation formats (web tool, PDF tables, printable leaflets) best support adviser and client understanding?
- How can the calculators be maintained and updated in-house as benefit rules change?

**Expected outputs** include a full report with findings, a shorter policy orientated briefing, a user-tested calculator tool/template and a concise practitioner guide.

**Budget:** The maximum budget available for this priority area is £30,000.

#### **Policy Priority Area 4: Assessing the Readiness of the Derry~Londonderry Labour Market to Meet Future Skills Needs**

Over the next decade, the Derry~Londonderry and Strabane District will experience an unprecedented wave of public-sector capital investment, Ulster University's campus expansion, City Deal developments, Towns Fund projects, and major health and regeneration schemes. These programmes are landing just as local employers report acute skills shortages and persistent mismatches. To ensure that local residents, especially those currently inactive, can secure high-quality jobs created by this investment, we must understand how well the region's education and training pipelines align with emerging demand, where the pinch-points and gaps lie, and what support structures will let individuals and micro-businesses fully participate. This theme therefore seeks evidence on the region's skills readiness, the barriers preventing people from accessing new opportunities, and the policy levers that can convert capital spend into inclusive, long-term employment growth.

##### **Potential research questions for Policy Priority Area 4 are:**

- How do upcoming capital projects align with current and projected skills requirements in public administration, project management and delivery of large-scale infrastructures projects, construction, digital, health and life sciences, advanced manufacturing, and related sectors?
- Which occupations offer the most viable long-term employment prospects for local residents?
- What are the progression rates across the pipeline, and where do attrition points occur (e.g., between vocational and higher education)?
- Which sectors successfully absorb education leavers (across all levels), and where are mismatches most pronounced?
- What barriers prevent priority groups (for example, young people, long-term inactive adults, NEETs, economically inactive women) from accessing courses that are essential to deliver capital projects (e.g., apprenticeships)?
- What HR, mentoring or administrative support do micro and small construction firms need to participate effectively in schemes (e.g., pooled payroll, shared-apprenticeship schemes)?
- How effectively are transversal skills, digital literacy and industry experience integrated across the pipeline, and how can employers shape curriculum design, placements, and employer-led pathways?
- What are the perceptions of students, employees and employers regarding the preparedness and work-readiness of those entering the labour market across the region.

**Expected outputs** include a full report with findings and a shorter policy orientated briefing.

**Budget:** The maximum budget available for this priority area is £60,000.



## **Policy Priority Area 5: Widening Participation: Employability of those from disadvantaged backgrounds or under-represented groups**

Widening Participation (WP) into higher education (HE) is a key priority for the Departments. WP supports those from disadvantaged backgrounds and under-represented groups, including low socio-economic backgrounds, disabilities, adult returners, and care experienced, into and through HE. Other groups could include carers, refugees, and asylum seekers. Identifying if students from WP backgrounds are gaining appropriate employment is limited through the outcomes survey. Research papers have highlighted the pay gap for various groups (e.g. disability and gender) however, there has been no research carried out in NI to determine the employment status of those supported through WP activities in higher education, for example, if they are employed to the same level as their non-WP peers and if it is appropriate employment given their level of education.

When learners from a WP background secure employment there is no data on how they get on when in employment. It is suggested that those with disabilities are historically underemployed and struggle to reenter the labour market if they leave it. Furthermore, understanding and identifying potential barriers for students from disadvantaged backgrounds gaining, progressing, or reentering appropriate employment would be vital in improving pathways to good jobs appropriate for the level of education. Understanding the issues would allow policy makers to address and target support where it is needed. It would also give insight into the perception of those graduates from WP backgrounds and if their background has an impact on their employment. Gaining an insight into regional variances and variances between sectors or for specific jobs would allow for a targeted approach to breaking down potential barriers to progression. Overall, having data and evidence on WP learners journeys and the outcomes of those with a WP background would be beneficial in driving policy. The overall aim of this policy priority area 5 is to explore what are the employment and progression outcomes for students from Widening Participation (WP) backgrounds in higher education.

### **Suggested research questions for policy priority area five are:**

- Are WP students securing employment appropriate to their qualification level compared to non WP student peers? If not, why not?
- Are they succeeding and progressing in the workplace? If not, why not?
- Are they overrepresented in graduate underemployment or economic inactivity? What are the reasons for this?
- Are there regional, sectoral, or occupational differences? What are the reasons for this?
- Is there a perceived or actual skills or preparedness gap compared to non-WP peers?
- Is there a perception that WP students are less skilled/educated than their peers?
- How does NI compare to the rest of the UK, ROI and internationally regarding WP? Are there regional variances within NI?
- What is the employability outcome or progression pathway for WP students?

- How do WP leavers view their experiences of their higher education courses and their effectiveness for gaining employment?

**Expected outputs** include a full report with findings and a shorter policy orientated briefing.

**Budget:** The maximum available budget for this priority area is £60,000. Proposals requesting the full amount must demonstrate novel, innovative, or otherwise high-value approaches to data collection. We anticipate that proposals employing methods such as consultations or focus groups may be able to achieve the intended outcomes with a smaller budget.

## Application

### How to Apply

Applications should be submitted via the website [Phase 2 Policy Commissioning Call - Epic Futures NI](#) by **Tuesday 9<sup>th</sup> September, 2025, 5pm.**

The online application must be completed in one sitting by one organisation, who will take on the role as the Lead Applicant. If there is more than one individual/organisation collaborating, the name and affiliate organisation of all applicants needs to be included in the appropriate sections.

Applicants must fill in the online form and include a maximum of four attachments.

#### **1) Case for support**

- a. Maximum of eight pages. This needs to use the template provided in Appendix 1. Complete all sections. Appendix 2 provides detailed information to guide each section.
- b. Pictures and tables are allowed but completed documents must not exceed eight pages.
- c. Where relevant, references should be included within the 8 page limit.
- d. Do not include hyperlinks to other documents or pages.

#### **2) Justification of resources**

- a. Maximum one page
- b. Use the headings as specified in Appendix 3.

#### **3) Applicant CV(s)**

- a. Maximum 2 pages for each team member, appended into one document. CVs are needed for all named team members.

#### **4) Letters of support from partners** (maximum 1 page per partner, appended into one document). All organisations involved in the application should provide a letter of support indicating their involvement in the project.

Attachments should be in doc, docx or PDF format (odt files are not accepted). Text in documents should be font size 11 with 2cm margins (recommended font type; Arial, Garamond or similar).

Missing documentation will rule the application as ineligible and the application will not be scored by the assessment panel.

### Who can Apply?

The EPIC Futures NI Policy Commissioning Call is defined as a secondary funding scheme administered by Ulster University. The primary funder is UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), Economic and Research Council (ESRC), Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and Innovate UK. Therefore the guidance and rules of the primary funder must be upheld across the EPIC Futures NI project.

Applications are welcome from all types of organisations as noted below as either lead applicants or as collaborators, providing they fulfil all the eligibility criteria identified in this call specification and in the call governance document:

- UKRI Recognised Research Organisations (Research led pathway)
  - University Researchers / Academics
  - Research Institutes
  - NHS Bodies
  - Public Sector Research Establishments
- UKRI categorized non-research organisations/other types of organisations (Partner led pathway)
  - Independent Research Organisations
  - Community Interest Company (CIC)
  - Social Enterprises
  - 'Not for Profit' Community and Voluntary Organisations
  - Registered Charities or Charitable Incorporated Organisations
  - Sole Traders or Private Businesses/ companies (VAT registered)
  - Sole Traders or Private Businesses/ companies (Non-VAT Registered – below turnover threshold)
  - Government organisations

Collaboration with statutory/government organisations is strongly encouraged. However, as per UKRI rules, government organisations are limited in regards to the costs which can be claimed. Therefore, it may be difficult within government procurement rules to deliver effectively within the six to nine month timeframe for this phase 2 call. Please check ESRC Funding Guidance [ESRC research funding guide – UKRI](#) and further guidance is given below in the section on eligible costs.

### **Information for All Lead Applicants**

All lead applicants must have a registered address in the UK and have a UK bank account. They must also be over 18. Following UKRI guidelines, there are different rules if the lead applicant is a research organisation (as categorised by UKRI and registered with UKRI as having this status) versus a UKRI categorised non-research organisation/other types of organisations (which includes Independent Research Organisations, UK Businesses, Community and Voluntary Sector and Government). The above list of eligible organisations defines the type of organisation you may fall into. Please check here if you are a UKRI recognised research organisation [Research organisations eligible for UKRI funding – UKRI](#).

### **Lead Applicant - Research Led Pathway**

This pathway is for projects which are led by an institution recognised by the UKRI as a research institutions. Costs should be charged at 80% Full Economic Costing (FEC) for eligible costs, other than 'exceptions', which if relevant, can be charged at 100% FEC. These projects are encouraged to include non-academic partners to help bring in lived experiences, business and community perspectives. These organisations can claim 100% FEC, however, the percentage of costs which can go to these partners are capped at 30% of the total proposed project FEC.

### **Lead Applicant - Partner Led Pathway**

This pathway is for projects which are led by non-UKRI recognised research organisations/other types of organisations, as identified above. These types of organisations are eligible for 100% FEC of eligible costs, Academics are eligible to be part of these projects, however, their costs can still only be charged at 80% FEC of eligible costs and are capped at 25% of the total proposed project FEC.

As noted, projects which involve the collection of data from human participants need to include an academic collaborator who can secure institutional ethical approval, therefore for these types of projects, you may wish to follow the Lead Applicant Research Led Pathway, unless the academic institution is content to secure ethics, without them being a lead partner.

### **Inclusion of International Research Organisations**

International Research Organisations can only apply to EPIC Futures NI Policy Commissioning Call if they form part of a UK based lead applicant submission. The costs must not form more than 30% of the Full Economic Costs (FEC). Their overheads are capped at 20% of directly incurred staff salary costs. International non-research organisations which are based outside the UK are not eligible to be a named collaborator.

International Research Organisations however, under the Lead Applicant, Research Led Pathway, are permitted to be engaged through a subcontracted procurement route of the relevant lead partner. These costs will be at 80% FEC of their costs (with the rule of 30% of non-research organisation applying, as noted above). The corresponding research organisations procurement rules should be followed. (Please read full details [ESRC research funding guide for the UKRI Funding Service – UKRI](#)).

#### **Important information *for individuals – partner led pathway:***

- If you are applying as a sole trader on behalf of your business or company, you will need a UK individual or business bank account in the exact name you are applying.

#### **Important information *for organisations – partner led pathway:***

- Organisations must have a governing document.
- All organisations need to have a UK bank account in the name you are applying in the organisation's name, with two signatories. A signatory is someone that is authorised to make transactions and manage an account, for example can sign cheques.
- Limited companies and registered charities need to have a registered office in the UK.
- For non-constituted consortiums or groups, one organisation must act as the lead organisation. If the application is successful, this organisation will be accountable for the grant.

#### **Important information *for all applicants:***

- If the proposal is a collaboration, a letter of support must be submitted from each partner organisation and attached to the application by the lead applicant.
- The lead applicant must be based in the UK and have a UK bank account. They will administer the payment to other collaborators.

- Phase 2 projects that involve the collection of data with human participants must have an academic that has confirmed with their University Institution that the ethics application can be processed through the ethics committee. Ethical requirements will be reviewed as part of the stage 1 assessment (eligibility screen). The Lead Applicant must declare ethical requirements and provide the name of the University and Lead Academic for processing ethical approval at application stage. This is a pass/ fail process at eligibility screen therefore it is essential to consider and agree the approach to ethics as early as possible during the development of your application. The letter of support from the academic should include confirmation that ethical approval can be achieved within the required timeframe. A letter of confirmation after award, ideally during the Project Initiation Phase, will be required to demonstrate that ethical requirements have been met. For projects involving a vulnerable population, a date can be set for the achievement of ethics, where payments cannot be claimed until this is met.
- If smaller projects are collecting data from vulnerable populations which might result in additional time to achieve ethics, then the case can be made by applicants to apply for a smaller award which requires an extended timeframe of up to 9 months, and ends on the 30th September 2026. Please outline the rationale for this in your case for support.
- Academic time should be costed as a percentage of their time, at 80% FEC as per UKRI rules and not as consultancy.
- All projects will be required to sign a data sharing agreement, where the applicants and EPIC Futures NI will be independent data controllers. Projects funded by EPIC Futures NI need to fulfil open access data requirements as specified by UKRI and therefore requires an independent data controller agreement to allow all new data to be assessed and processed for depositing (where relevant) in an open access depository such as UK Data Services <https://ukdataservice.ac.uk/>
- Applications for projects which have the potential to develop proprietary technology, tools, or other potentially commercialisable outputs will be subject to further discussion at assessment stage to determine the support required from the University's technology transfer office. Arrangements for the disclosure, protection and commercialisation of intellectual property arising from successful projects will be discussed in good faith, in consideration of the administrative and intellectual contributions of the University and its obligations under UK subsidy control.
- All project outputs should acknowledge funding from EPIC Futures NI, ESRC, AHRC, Innovation UK and UKRI. A branding and communications toolkit will be administered for successful projects to use.
- All dissemination events associated with funded projects should be held in conjunction with EPIC Futures NI.
- EPIC Futures NI views projects funded as being collaborators and therefore projects and named individuals involved in projects will be featured on our website and social media.
- All projects will be required to provide an update on any multiplier impacts of funded projects up to 5 years post award. This is in line with the reporting period which EPIC Futures NI must follow for their funding. Lead applicants will be contacted via email during February each year asking for a short email update. Please ensure your correspondence is up to date and email [epicfutures@ulster.ac.uk](mailto:epicfutures@ulster.ac.uk) with any changes.

- The lead applicant or a named member of the team must be available to attend and present the findings at the EPIC Futures Policy Commissioning Call Phase 2 dissemination conference which will take place at the end of October/ beginning of November 2026.
- All projects must end by 30th September 2026. We will fund projects up to 6 or 9 months depending on the award category, however, projects which can be finished sooner are encouraged to allow the release of results in real time.
- Applicants who applied for phase 1 of the commissioning call are permitted to submit a similar proposal to phase 2. However, this must be significantly revised to strengthen their application to achieve a higher score to be considered for funding.
- Applicants can submit multiple proposals however limits apply on the number of proposals they can be a lead applicant on. Applicants can be a lead applicant on a maximum of three projects (one small award, one large award and one policy priority award) but can be a collaborator on an unlimited number of proposals. Applicants submitting multiple proposals must be able to demonstrate they have capacity to deliver on all the proposals submitted within the specified time frames. Funding will not be awarded unless capacity to deliver is clear.

### **Who can not apply**

International non-research organisations which are based outside the UK are not eligible to be a collaborator (Please read full details. [ESRC research funding guide for the UKRI Funding Service – UKRI](#)).

No named individuals who are an investigator on EPIC Futures NI are eligible to apply for this funding. However, other individuals within their respective organisations are eligible to apply.

If your organisation currently works with Ulster University in any form which could be considered a conflict of interest. A strict conflict of interest policy will be followed during the review process. A list of the named co-investigators can be requested from [epicfutures@ulster.ac.uk](mailto:epicfutures@ulster.ac.uk) please reach out before application to check eligibility.

### **Guidance on Eligible costs**

Eligible costs must follow the ESRC Funding Guidance [ESRC research funding guide – UKRI](#). Only eligible costs can be claimed. Eligible costs will vary depending on the type of organisation and who is leading the project (as noted above). Examples are provided below but please check the full guide before submission:

Costs are divided into four summary fund headings:

- directly allocated costs
- directly incurred costs
- indirect costs
- exceptions

### **Directly Incurred**

Directly incurred costs are explicitly identifiable as arising from the conduct of a project, are charged as the cash value actually spent and are supported by an auditable record.

- staff
- equipment
- travel
- other

### **Directly allocated**

Directly allocated costs are resources used by a project that are shared by other activities. They are charged to projects on the basis of estimates rather than actual costs and do not represent actual costs on a project-by-project basis.

- staff
- estates
- other

### **Indirect costs**

Indirect costs are non-specific costs charged across all projects, based on estimates, which are not otherwise included as directly allocated costs.

### **Exceptions**

Exceptions are directly incurred costs that are funded at 100% of FEC, subject to actual expenditure incurred, or items that are outside FEC.

Only certain items specified in the UKRI guidance should be included as exceptions under the following subheadings:

- staff
- travel
- other

All costs submitted must be VAT Inclusive amounts.

UKRI recognised research organisations should charge eligible directly allocated, directly incurred and indirect costs at 80% FEC. UKRI categorised non-research organisations/other types of organisations should charge eligible directly allocated, directly incurred and indirect costs at 100% FEC. All organisations can charge exceptions at 100% FEC.

For non-research led lead applicants, please ensure that in collaborations with academics (even if they are not leading the project), that academics follow the 80% FEC rules. Costs submitted may be queried and where costs are viewed to be unreasonable or ineligible, reduced funding may be offered.



Table 1. Examples of eligible Costs for non-research organisations

	Business and Community, Voluntary Sector in receipt of a subsidy*	Community and Voluntary Sector	Government
Staff – Salary	Yes	Yes	No
Staff – NI/ Superann	No	Yes	No
Total Research Staff – FTE Limits	1 year FTE	No FTE limit	No
Travel and Subsistence	Yes	Yes	Yes
Other Direct Costs	No	Yes	No
Overheads	No	Yes	No

\* Where an application is recommended for funding, any community and voluntary sector organisation which is engaged in economic activity will be checked to assess if a Subsidy has been given, in line with the UK Subsidy Control Act 2022. Where it is deemed that a Subsidy has been given the costs awarded to the organisation will be in line with the costing rules governing PcLs from business organisations.

## Assessment Process

A five stage process will be adopted.

- Stage 1. Eligibility Screening based on eligibility criteria (Ulster University EPIC Futures Team)
- Stage 2. Scored independent assessment (1 policy expert and one academic reviewer)
- Stage 3. Moderation between assessors
- Stage 4. Portfolio review and balance
- Stage 5. Reviewer assessment panel

Please refer to the governance document for more details on the stages.

## Scoring Criteria

Criteria	Explanation	%
<b>Relevance to policy and practice related to employability and skills</b>	<p>Identification of a clear need for the proposal in terms of how it will advance knowledge and practice within the employability, skills and labour market landscape in Northern Ireland (NI).</p> <p>Demonstrate evidence on how the proposal will have relevance to wider UK, and/or Cross Border key policy agendas (if relevant).</p> <p>Clarity on how learnings from other countries can inform policy and practice in Northern Ireland (if relevant).</p> <p>There must be a clear explanation of how the findings or outputs will demonstrate novelty and provide value for Northern Ireland stakeholders with policy responsibilities and/or contribute to strengthening policy implementation in practice.</p>	40%
<b>Approach and methodology</b>	<p>Clear aim/objectives/research questions. Alignment or proposal to EPIC Futures NI and theme(s) being addressed.</p> <p>Identification of context and knowledge gaps. A clear overview of the approach being taken in the project and steps involved.</p> <p>A detailed discussion of the proposed methodology. Depending on the type of proposal, this should include, the data being used/collected, sampling, quantity of data being collected and clarity over how data will be accessed in time frames.</p> <p>Data management plan and research ethics approval processes (if applicable).</p> <p>Engagement and dissemination plan (if applicable).</p> <p>Clearly stated outputs, outcomes and impact. Clear timelines for delivery.</p>	40%
<b>Lead/Team, experience, and collaboration</b>	<p>Outline how the skills and experience of the Lead/Team align with the proposed project.</p> <p>Outline team composition and responsibilities.</p> <p>Demonstrate ability to develop policy orientated knowledge and outputs.</p> <p>Demonstrate track record of collaboration.</p> <p>Outline recruitment process for any new team members to be hired to ensure it will be within timeframe of the project (if applicable)</p> <p>Capacity to deliver (particularly if applying for multiple projects).</p>	20%

- Considerations of equality, diversity and inclusion and environmental sustainability are an important element within all applications and will be assessed within the criteria set out above.
- Reviewers will consider the appropriateness of costs sought therefore full justification of costs should be given in line with being able to achieve the outcomes of the project.
- For Route 1 Open Call, applications which pass eligibility checks and score over a minimum threshold will be recommended for funding under the appropriate award category. For small awards, funding will be awarded up to a maximum of £30,000 per

project, until the £160,000 funding pot is allocated<sup>3</sup>. For large awards, funding will be allocated between £30,001 - £100,000 up until the £320,000 is awarded. For Route 2 Policy Priority Projects, there is a maximum budget of £270,000 and one project in each of the five topics will be awarded up to the maximum thresholds stated for each project, providing they meet eligibility checks and are of appropriate quality to meet the outcomes sought.

- If the full funding pot for any of the routes or award categories are not allocated due to not enough projects meeting the threshold, quality or feasibility within timeframes, funding may be moved across categories until the full £750,000 is allocated.
- In instances where scores align and funding is limited, projects may be partially funded. This decision will rest with the assessment panel.
- The panel may request minor changes to the methods or scope (if relevant) which if offered funding, would be a condition of acceptance.
- Additional pre-award checks will be completed with successful applicants.

## Research Ethics and Governance

All projects which propose to collect data from human participants are required to have an academic in their collaboration team who can achieve ethical approval from their institution within a suitable timeframe which allows the project to be completed no later than 30<sup>th</sup> September 2026. Proof of ethical approval from a relevant institution will be required to be able to claim back full expenses. Please note that achieving research ethics approval from some institutions can take many months if collecting data from vulnerable populations.

Ethical requirements will be reviewed as part of the stage 1 assessment (eligibility screen). The Lead Applicant must declare ethical requirements and provide the name of the University and Lead Academic for processing ethical approval at application stage. This is a pass/ fail process at eligibility screen therefore it is essential to consider and agree the approach to ethics as early as possible during the development of your application. The letter of support from the academic should include confirmation that ethical approval can be achieved within the required timeframe. A letter of confirmation after award, ideally during the Project Initiation Phase, will be required to demonstrate that ethical requirements have been met. For projects involving a vulnerable population, a date can be set for the achievement of ethics, where payments cannot be claimed until this is met.

If projects applying for the smaller award category are collecting data from vulnerable populations which might result in the need for additional time to achieve ethics, then the case can be made by applicants to apply for a smaller award which requires 9 months (instead of the specified 6 months), and ends on the 30<sup>th</sup> September 2026. Please outline the rationale for this in your case for support.

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<sup>3</sup> Your proposal could score over the threshold but due to other projects scoring higher and the allocations of funds, it may not get funded.

Appropriate informed consent processes and data management policies should be followed in line with the relevant institutional ethical and governance processes.

## **Dissemination and Impact**

It is expected that projects funded will have implications for policy and practice across Northern Ireland. It is important that the outputs of projects are widely disseminated to a range of audiences. Engagement, dissemination and impact activities must be captured, to report on the value of this funding. This should be detailed in the proposal. Any dissemination activities should be co-hosted with EPIC Futures NI and follow the communication and branding guidelines which will be distributed to successful applicants.

All projects funded will be profiled on the EPIC Futures NI social media pages, website and relevant reporting requirements by the funder.

## **Post Award Process**

### **Letter of Offer**

The Letter of Offer will be issued on the week commencing 10th November 2025<sup>4</sup>.

### **Grant Funding Agreement**

The Grant Funding Agreement and supporting paperwork must be completed by 18<sup>th</sup> December 2025.

### **Expenditure**

- All projects must have started delivery by the week commencing 5th January 2026.
- All claims will be paid quarterly in arrears in line with your project start/end date upon successful completion of project milestones as verified by a member of the EPIC Futures NI Team.
- Only eligible costs can be claimed otherwise claims will be rejected.
- The projects must finish delivery no later than the 30th September 2026 (with a 30th June 2026 deadline for smaller awards). All costs must have incurred by this date.
- Invoices must be submitted by 31st October 2026.

### **Ethics**

- If collecting data from human participants, ethical approval documentation will need to be provided to allow for release of payments.

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<sup>4</sup> Timings are subject to change depending on the number of applications submitted which may delay the review process

## **Appendix 1. Case for Support Template**

**Title of Project**

**Section 1 Background and justification**

**Section 1.1 Context**

**Section 1.2 Aims and objectives (and/or research questions)**

**Section 2 Relevance of proposal for policy and practice related to employability and skills.**

**Section 3 Methodology**

**Section 3.1 Ethics (if applicable)**

**Section 3.2 Data management**

**Section 3.3 Engagement and dissemination and impact strategy**

**Section 3.4 Timeline**

**Section 3.5 Expected outcomes, outputs and impact**

**Section 4 Lead/ Team experience and collaboration**

**Section 5 References (if relevant)**

## Appendix 2. EPIC Futures NI Case for Support Detailed Guidance

This document outlines the different sections and structure which your case for support should follow. Please ensure you include information on each of the sections specified in this document as these align with the scoring criteria and will maximise your chances of attaining funding. Please note that the case for support should **not exceed 8 pages**.

If you are applying for Route 2, Policy Priority Areas, please ensure you provide your own additional data beyond what is in the specific call to demonstrate your knowledge/research/expertise in the area.

We have not specified word count for each section due to the variability of projects being proposed. However, please be mindful of the scoring criteria and the weighing attributed to each sections. This should help guide how you much information is needed for relevant sections.

### Title of Project (maximum 20 words)

#### Section 1 Background and justification

Provide information on the rationale for the project. For example, you might wish to state:

- Why the topic you are proposing is important? (You are not required to include general information on economic inactivity/labour market shortages issues, as this is already known)
- What problem are you seeking to address?

**Section 1.1 Context:** How your project will align with the overall aim of EPIC Futures NI? What route and theme(s) are being addressed? Has there been research in this space already? Are there any key theories relevant to understanding the topic (if applicable)? How your project seeks to address limitations or gaps in knowledge? What novelty does your approach bring?

**Section 1.2 Aim and objectives (and/or research questions):** Clearly state what the project aim(s) to achieve (what subject or issue will it explore/examine/understand). State the objectives and/or research questions and how these will help you to explore the aim(s).

#### Section 2 Relevance of proposal for policy and practice related to employability and skills.

Ensure you clearly identify how your proposal will advance knowledge within the employability, skills and labour market landscape. How does your project have value for i) policy and ii) practice. For example, what is the contribution to Northern Ireland policy priorities? How does it contribute to other wider policy agendas which have relevance for the UK more widely and Ireland (cross border policy agendas)? Will it provide new data? Will it

provide new knowledge or insights? Will it provide insights and recommendations for policy and practice? Will your research/project strengthen policy in practice?

### **Section 3 Methodology**

Please give a detailed overview of your approach and rationale for methods. This will include key stages in the project, the data being used/collected (secondary data, quantitative, qualitative data, mixed methods), sampling process (who are you collecting data from and how e.g. surveys, interviews, focus groups), quantity of data being collected (how many participants will be involved – important to give clear indication to judge value for money and impact) and access (how will you reach/recruit participants or engage with appropriate stakeholders).

This section should also include information on data analysis techniques to be used.

#### **Section 3.1 Research Ethics (if applicable).**

If your proposal involves data collection with human participants, an academic partner from a university capable of securing institutional ethical approval is required. This academic partner needs to manage the process since EPIC Futures cannot apply for ethical approval for the Phase 2 Policy Commissioning Call on your behalf.

Research ethical approval needs to be gained in the country where the research is being conducted. If the research is being conducted in the UK, then a UK based institution needs to approve the research ethics. If research is being conducted in other countries, then an appropriate institution in that given country may be required. This is standard for all projects which involve the collection of new data and aligns with Ulster University's Governance and Ethical Standards.

Confirmation of the institution from which ethics will be sought and the timescales for approval for the research being proposed. Provide confirmation of when approval will be sought/achieved in your timeline to show how the project will be finished within the specified 6-9 month timeline.

Other aspects which need considered for ethics are:

- **Informed Consent:** All participants should be provided with clear information regarding the purpose of the study, the methods involved, and the potential risks and benefits. Informed consent needs to be obtained before participation in any data collection with human participants. All collaborators on the project should be included in this consent form for transparency.
- **Confidentiality:** Personal data should be kept confidential, and participant anonymity needs to be ensured unless they give explicit permission. Any

identifiable information will need to be securely stored, protected and shared across partners.

### **Section 3.2 Data management**

How will you collect, store and share the data securely across partners?

### **Section 3.3 Engagement and dissemination**

If relevant, how will you engage with stakeholders and disseminate the outputs of your findings? How will you maximise the impact ?

### **Section 3.4 Timeline**

Provide an estimated timeline for the project, indicating key milestones and deadlines. An example is below.

- Project Initiation - (Date)
- Ethical Approval - (Date)
- Literature review (if relevant) – (Date)
- Research design/methodology – (Date)
- Data collection – (Date)
- Data analysis – (Date)
- Writing up and dissemination – (Date)

### **Section 3.5 Expected outcomes, outputs, and impact**

Describe the anticipated outcomes of the research. What specific outputs will you deliver? How will the findings contribute to the theoretical field and/or impact policy/practice. Clearly list the type, number and timings related to deliverables.

### **Section 4 Lead/Team experience and collaboration**

Outline how the skills and experience of the lead applicant/team align with the proposed project. If relevant, outline team composition and responsibilities. Demonstrate ability to develop policy orientated knowledge and outputs. Demonstrate track record of collaboration. Outline recruitment process for any new team members hired to ensure it will be within timeframe.

If applying for multiple projects, demonstrate capacity to deliver on them all.

### **Section 5 References** (if relevant)

Provide a list of all the sources cited in your proposal, formatted according to the Harvard Style.

Please note - Considerations of equality, diversity and inclusion and environmental sustainability are an important element within all applications and will be assessed within the criteria set out above.



### Appendix 3 Justification of Costs Template

Where relevant, give a brief description/justification on how stated costs align with delivering on the project. Adjust boxes, as necessary. This document should be a maximum of two pages. [ESRC research funding guide for the UKRI Funding Service – UKRI](#)

<b>DIRECTLY INCURRED COSTS</b>			
Directly Incurred at 80% FEC	£	Directly Incurred at 100% FEC	£
Total Directly Incurred Costs		£	
<b>DIRECTLY ALLOCATED COSTS</b>			
Directly Allocated Costs 80% FEC	£	Directly Allocated Costs 100% FEC	£
Total Directly Allocated Costs		£	
<b>INDIRECT COSTS</b>			
Indirect Costs 80% FEC	£	Indirect Costs 100% FEC	£
Total Indirect Costs		£	
<b>EXCEPTIONS</b>			
Total Exception Costs (100% FEC for all lead applicants) £			
<b>TOTAL PROJECT COSTS 80% FEC</b>		£	
<b>TOTAL PROJECT COSTS 100% FEC</b>		£	
<b>TOTAL PROJECT COSTS (VAT INCLUSIVE)</b>		£	

# Support and Further Information

The following resources are available at <https://epicfuturesni.org>

- EPIC Futures NI Phase 2 Webinar Recording
- EPIC Futures NI Phase 2 Webinar Slides
- EPIC Futures NI Phase 2 LinkedIn Networking Group
- Email [epicfutures@ulster.ac.uk](mailto:epicfutures@ulster.ac.uk) with queries before 19<sup>th</sup> August 2025.