

Key information

- Research grants of up to £25,000 for 12-month projects commencing February 2026
- Vulnerability and policing **final open call**. We welcome applications on any relevant topic (see below), and reserve one award to be focused on:
 - Vulnerability in drugs markets (Dr Leah Moyle Commemorative Award)
- Proposed projects need to align with ESRC Vulnerability and Policing Futures Research Centre [programme of work](#) and [values and principles](#)
- Further info:
 - webinar on Tuesday 10 June ([register](#) here)
 - contact – vulnerabilitypolicing@york.ac.uk
- Deadline for applications: **Monday 29 September 2025, 4pm BST**
- Application form and FAQs available via our [researcher development fund](#) webpage

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1. Aims of the Fund

The aim of the Early Career Researcher (ECR) Development Fund (“the Fund”) is to build research capacity and capability to tackle current and emerging challenges related to vulnerability and policing. Aligned with the strategic priorities of the ESRC Vulnerability & Policing Futures Research Centre (“the Centre”), the Fund supports grants led by UK-based ECRs, that generate new knowledge, embed innovation, demonstrate effective partnership working to facilitate both co-production and impact planning, and seek to generate follow-on research funding through further grant applications.

The Fund aims to widen the reach of the Centre’s work, enabling ECRs to co-produce trailblazer projects that will contribute new findings, methodological applications and conceptual insights. In so doing, it promotes co-production rooted in experimental test-beds of frontline policing. It provides pump-priming funds to support research

into vulnerability and policing in areas where gaps in knowledge are most prominent and where research benefits are of greatest value.

The Fund provides financial and logistical support for teams of named researchers and practitioners or civil society groups led by an ECR as Principal Investigator (PI). Teams may include senior researchers who provide mentoring and support but will be led by the named PI. Capacity building and support for ECR project leads/PIs is provided through structured support overseen by the Centre's ECR Champion, Dr Laura Bainbridge (Leeds). The Centre also works with PIs to develop engagement, impact, networks and follow on plans that maximise the reach and significance of the research.

[See examples of previous ECR Development Fund projects.](#)

2. Criteria

2.1 What we are looking for

Proposals must:

- Be led by an ECR¹, employed by a UK research organisation² and whose employment contract extends at least to the end of the proposed grant period.
- Include co-production with at least one non-academic partner organisation, and have a strong collaborative approach, with clear partner support
- Present original and innovative ideas.
- Address the theme of vulnerability and policing and complement rather than duplicate the [wider research programme](#) of work across the Centre
- Advance the Centre's [values and principles](#).
- Be feasible and rigorous in terms of methodology and sound logic.
- Explicitly address equality, diversity, and inclusion issues.
- Have the potential to secure longer-term 'follow-on' funding and/or scalability across other partners.
- Have high potential impact and identify the pathways to impact, including by explicitly considering the translation and application of the research findings for policy and/or practice and how these might best be secured.
- Contribute to capacity building, e.g. through career development of the ECR Principal Investigator.

Preference will be given to proposals that:

¹ In line with the definition previously used by UKRI, and which we have used for the previous three calls for applications to this Fund, we are defining an ECR as an individual who:

- has a PhD (or equivalent professional training) and is within eight years* of their PhD viva.

*Durations exclude any period of career break, e.g. for family care or health reasons.

² See link to ESRC guidance on eligible research organisations under [Eligibility](#)

- Enable co-production with service providers and/or service users and vulnerable groups.
- Comprise approaches that are multi-disciplinary.

2.2 Thematic steer for the 2025-26 call

For the Fund's fourth year (for projects commencing in 2026), we welcome applications in all fields relating to vulnerability and policing for this Open Call.

We will reserve one award to be focused on:

- Vulnerability in drugs markets (Dr Leah Moyle Commemorative Award).

This award is named in memory of our Round 1 grantholder, Dr Leah Moyle, who sadly passed away in May 2024.

We are keen to solicit applications that deploy **quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods approaches** and/or make effective use of secondary data.

All applications will be equally assessed against the criteria regardless of thematic focus and the strength of the proposals will be the first and foremost priority when allocating funding.

2.3 Addressing Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

In line with Centre Values and Principles, it is important that applications pay careful attention in terms of project design, to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI). Applicants are encouraged to refer to the resources linked below to enhance their understanding of expectations in terms of building EDI into projects.

Addressing EDI issues such as race, gender, disability and neurodiversity is an essential assessment criteria and applications in previous rounds have often been weakened by a lack of focus on these issues.

- [Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy, University of Leeds](#)
- [The Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Research Centre, University of York](#)

2.4 Eligibility

- Funds can only be awarded to a recognised research organisation (RO), not a person.
- Guidance on organisations eligible to apply for funding can be found on the [ESRC website](#). This includes a list of independent research organisations (IROs) and other organisations eligible to apply.

- Principal Investigator (PI):
 - Only one person on the application can be named as Principal Investigator (PI).
 - The PI must be an ECR³ employed by their UK research organisation, with a contract of employment that does not end before the proposed project ends.
 - Applicants must be able to confirm the support of their institution to enable them to fulfil the commitments of the project.
 - A PI can only submit one application to the Fund but can be Co-I on other applications.
- Organisations outside the UK are not eligible to apply to lead an application. They are however, eligible to be included as project partners or Co-investigators (who would be expected to make a contribution, either financially or in-kind) or Consultants; please note, overseas consultants cannot be named as Co-investigators. Please see the '[Funding](#)' section regarding costings for international external partners.
- We would normally expect applications to include collaborations with external organisations, such as public service and/or third sector organisations. Time of practitioners, NGO staff or service users can be costed, where explicitly justified. Non-academic applicants can also co-lead projects. Third sector, government/public sector organisations and businesses can be included for up to 30% of the budget (at full economic costing), but a justification will be needed. It is not expected that large businesses would be able to justify this, but charities/NGOs/social enterprises could.
- ECR Development Grant awards will be transferred from the University of York to eligible ROs.
- We are not able to fund PhD studentships or Knowledge Transfer Partnerships (KTPs).
- Awards funded through the ESRC Vulnerability and Policing Futures Research Centre ECR Development Fund should follow UKRI's standard [terms and conditions of funding](#) and align to the [ESRC's research funding guide](#). Please note, however, that all correspondence should come to the Centre.
- Those directly involved in the Centre are not eligible to be PI of any Fund application but they can be included as a part of an applicant's Project Team. This also applies to Centre advisory board members (including National Engagement Group, International Advisory Board and Ethical Oversight Panel).
- Given the stated aim of the Fund to support ECR development and capacity building, applicants should consider the balance of responsibility for the proposed project between the PI (ECR) and any more experienced Co-Is. The primary role of experienced Co-Is in the context of these grants should be to provide guidance and mentorship to the PI.

³As previously defined.

3. Funding

3.1 How much funding is available

Grants of up to £25,000 will be awarded to successful applicants, for projects of up to 12 months in duration.

A total budget of £375,000 has been allocated to the Fund, to be distributed across four annual calls (2023–26). We have previously funded four or five awards following each call, and expect to be able to do the same this time.

Panel members will be given the discretion to make awards and apply conditions, which means funding awards may differ from the amount requested.

3.2 Eligible and ineligible costs

- Up to a maximum of 50% of the total cost of the application may be allocated to PI staff time. No other directly allocated academic staff time (including for Co-Is) will be funded from the grant but may be included as institutional match funding.
- Directly incurred research staff time (e.g. postdoc researchers/research assistants) may be included.
- Any staff time may be included only as direct costs; no overheads, i.e. estates or indirect (fEC) costs may be included.
- Up to a maximum of 30% of the total cost of the application may be allocated to external partner costs, with specific justification provided.
- Other direct costs associated with delivery of the proposed project, including reasonable travel and consumables.
- Information regarding costing a UK business, third sector or government body can be found in the [ESRC's Research Funding Guide](#). Please note: the combined costs for business, third sector and government bodies must not exceed 30% of the total fEC of the grant application. Investigators involved as project team members (whether academic or non-academic, or within/outside the UK) must bring their own funds. [Further information on eligible partner costs](#).

Please note: we are **not** using the UKRI Funding Service so some details on ESRC guidance documents do not directly apply. All funding awarded will be received via the University of York, not directly from the ESRC. Financial reporting will be required according to Vulnerability and Policing Futures Research Centre and University of York requirements. All eligible costs will be funded at 100% fEC in line with the agreed budget for the project and within the funding limits for individual awards.

3.3 Costing your project

Costs should be calculated using the full economic costing model, and submitted in the budget table provided as part of the application form (see section 7). As noted above however, no estates or indirect costs may be included in the requested funding for the project, and Directly Allocated staff time is limited to the PI only (up to a maximum of 50% of the total cost of the award).

These principles have been applied in order to maximise the potential for the relatively small grants to have maximum impact and reach in terms of the work they can fund.

4. Deliverables

Each funded project will be required to provide an **accessible final summary report** (4 pages), which will be peer reviewed by members of the Centre team and made publicly available on the Centre website, acting as a briefing document on the project and its key findings for a non-academic audience.

Additionally, researchers will be expected to produce a more **detailed report** of their research findings and methods and asked to present a **webinar or workshop** following the completion of the project, to be arranged and promoted through the Centre.

The 4-page report and webinar or workshop will be conditions of funding.

In line with the Centre's **commitment to open research**, we encourage grant holders to explore formal means of sharing their methods and tools to support replication and extension by others. Similarly, in line with ESRC funding conditions, where datasets can be appropriately anonymised to permit sharing, this must be organised, e.g. via the [UK Data Service](#) who can provide guidance from the early stages of projects. Further guidance will be provided to successful applicants before projects commence.

Other project-specific deliverables outlined in proposals will be reflected in individual Award Letters but will not be deemed conditions of funding.

4.1 Ethics

PIs will be responsible for ensuring ethical approval from their own institution.

4.2 Intellectual Property

Authors retain Intellectual Property rights. The Centre will have the right to publish, share, and use the short summary reports.

5. Process

Following the Fund launch, a webinar will be held to publicise the Fund, explain the criteria and answer questions from potential applicants. A recording of the webinar and FAQs will be available via the Centre website. Applicants are invited to review the overview and detailed guidelines, and to submit an online application using the Fund application form (see below), by the deadline.

Initially, applications will be checked for eligibility against criteria. All those eligible will be peer reviewed, and depending on volume of applications received, a shortlisting exercise may be undertaken. Those that meet a scoring threshold will be considered by the ECR Development Grants Funding Panel, who will review applications against the criteria and make recommendations. The Centre's Leadership Team will ratify decisions and communicate outcomes to successful applicants.

5.1 Scoring criteria

Essential (each scored from 5/Outstanding to 1/Poor in line with the scoring table below):

1. Intellectual rigour, originality, and significance
2. Potential for impact on vulnerability and policing policy and practice
3. Potential for future external funding and research development
4. Feasibility, and rigour of methodology
5. Co-production with service providers and/or vulnerable groups.
6. Strong collaborative approach, with clear partner support.
7. Alignment with Centre Values and Principles
8. Complementarity with the Centre's existing programme of work
9. Potential for academic development - career development/capacity building of ECR
10. Attention to equality, diversity and inclusion

5.2 Scoring table

Score	Assessment	Description
5	<i>Outstanding</i>	The proposal is outstanding in terms of its potential merit against the criteria and is likely to produce important outcomes.

4	<i>Excellent</i>	The proposal is excellent in terms of its potential merit against the criteria and is likely to produce valuable outcomes.
3	<i>Good</i>	The proposal is important as it has considerable potential merit against the criteria and is likely to produce beneficial outcomes.
2	<i>Fair/some weaknesses</i>	This proposal will add to understanding and is worthy of support, but is of lesser quality than more highly rated proposals.
1	<i>Poor</i>	The proposal is flawed in its approach, or is repetitious of other work, or otherwise judged not worth pursuing; or, though possibly having sound objectives, appears defective in its methodology.

5.3 ECR Development Grants Funding Panel

An assessment panel will be convened to review shortlisted applications to this fund, comprising a mix of academic and practitioner representatives to bring a balance of research and service delivery expertise in the context of vulnerability and policing. Membership will be built from a sub-group of the Centre's existing Core Academic Team of Co-Investigators, combined with representation from a range of the Centre's external partner organisations.

The composition of the panel will reflect the principles and values of the Centre.

6. Timetable

The timetable for this fourth and final call is included below. Note this will be reviewed and may be adjusted.

Fund launch	Wednesday 28 May 2025
Application deadline	Monday 29 September 2025 (no later than 4pm BST)
Review proposals	October–November 2025
Successful Applicants Notified	Mid–December 2025
Contracts agreed	December–January 2026
Projects commence	Early February 2026
Projects conclude & report	End January 2027

Please note that the Centre grant which is funding these projects finishes on 30 April 2027. Therefore, all project costs must be invoiced by the PI's institutions no later than 31 March 2027 or payment cannot be guaranteed.

7. Application Form

Applications should be submitted using the application form. For reference this includes the following sections:

- Project PI
- Project title
- Brief project summary, including aims, methods, impact (maximum 50 words)
- Chosen thematic steer/s
- Co-applicants
- Partner organisations
- Project aims (maximum 200 words)
- Brief summary of the research need/problem, indicating how this relates to the mission and research of the ESRC Centre (maximum 300 words)
- Academic and practical significance (maximum 200 words)
- Project work plan, design, methods, data collection and analysis (maximum 2 pages, minimum font size 10)
- Anticipated deliverables, outcomes, impacts and follow on plans (maximum 1 page, minimum font size 10)
- Ethical approach and fit with Centre values and principles and how the proposal addresses EDI (maximum 200 words)
- Expertise of the research team and relationship with the project partners (maximum 200 words).
- How the PI is well placed to lead the project and how they see themselves benefitting from an ECR Development Grant and the support provided by the Centre (maximum 300 words)
- Project costs (see below)
- Justification of costs (maximum 300 words)
- Letter(s) of Support from Project Partners (outlining any match commitments)
- Letter of support from the lead institution (where the PI is based) - this must be provided by someone with authority to sign contracts and in-kind commitments on behalf of the institution, e.g. a Head of Department/School/Contracts team.

We ask applicants to adhere to the word count limits provided. Please note a list of references can be provided as a separate supporting document if required.

7.1 Budget

A breakdown of the total cost of the project should be provided in the budget template spreadsheet and submitted with your application form. This should include the total anticipated costs per budget item, and details of the funding requested. A justification of all costed items should also be provided.

Please note that Directly Allocated (DA) costs are not eligible (other than a contribution to the PI salary costs, up to 50% of the total grant value). Applicants should include other relevant DA costs as an indicator of institutional in-kind support, but a zero value should be entered against these in the 'Amount requested' column. Where in-kind support is indicated, these should be included in the 'Other costs' section.