EPIC Futures NI Policy Commissioning Fund

Phase 1 Information Session
October 2024

Local Policy Innovation Partnerships

Economic and Social Partnering for Inclusive Innovation and Collaboration (EPIC), which contributes towards a prosperous and sustainable future for Northern Ireland (NI).

Address social, community, economic and environmental priorities that contribute towards inclusive sustainable economic growth.

LPIPs will:

- Connect local policy and research partners.

- Providing research, evidence, data and expertise to take advantage of opportunities and find place-based solutions to challenges that matter to local people and communities.

- Partnerships will be equitable and sustainable with co-creation and co-delivery at their heart.

What we do: Partnership Working

EPIC FUTURES NI

Filling data gaps with evidence-based research & development of a Labour Market Observatory

Working with the public sector to provide evidence to inform policy and programme design

Engaging with communities in their places – using behavioural insights

Exploring the role of business in developing inclusive workplaces

Exploring how to bridge research and practice across boundaries e.g. skills, labour markets, employment practices, health, wellbeing, economic and social development, sustainability…

Aim of the EPIC Futures Policy Commissioning Call

- To examine a range of thematic issues related to economic activity and topics more broadly which have relevance for the NI skills and employability landscape.

- To build a robust evidence base exploring key themes that can contribute towards a more inclusive and sustainable labour market in Northern Ireland.

- Proposals which bringing unique and innovative approaches to place-based challenges and provide insights into the lived experiences of individuals facing skills and employability challenges.

- Proposals which are in collaboration with stakeholders from different backgrounds and disciplines.

Key Dates	
Call opens	18th October 2024 at 12pm (noon)
Call closes	18th November 2024 at 12pm (noon)
Deadline for clarification questions	1st November 2024 12pm (noon)
Award notification date	Week beginning 6th January 2025
Project start date	17th February 2025
Project end date	31st August 2025
Final reports	15th September 2025
Invoices submitted by	31st October 2025

Projects with a maximum funding of £30K to be completed in 6 months

Phase 1 commissioning fund: £250K budget

Who can apply?

- Research Organisations

- University Researchers / Academics

- 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).

Lead applicant must be based in the UK, but we encourage collaborations across the Island of Ireland and beyond, where learnings can be gained for NI

Statutory organizations are welcome to be a partner but can not be a lead applicant

What types of projects are eligible?

- Scoping studies, literature reviews, benchmarking, and empirical projects (quantitative and qualitative).

- Pilot studies, in preparation for potential Call 2 applications will also be considered.

- Policy benchmarking studies must have a particular reference to areas where policy is set by devolved institutions and can therefore contribute to the evidence base for local NI stakeholders with policy responsibilities.

- Projects must clearly articulate the importance of the topic chosen (with relevant facts/literature), how your proposal will advance prior work in the area and identify potential implications for policy and practice.

What types of projects are not eligible?

- Projects which solely involve the delivery of a service.

- Projects which do not align with the 9 themes.

- Projects where the key outcomes will not have implications for advancing knowledge, policy and practice within Northern Ireland.

- Projects which can not generate outcomes within 6 months and within the threshold of £30K.

Thematic Priority Areas

- **Theme 1.** Understanding how to better support individuals with disabilities

- **Theme 2.** Pathways to work

- **Theme 3.** Knowing what works

- **Theme 4.** The caring economy

- **Theme 5.** Quantifying the benefits of work

- **Theme 6.** The role of employers

- **Theme 7.** The role of 'place'

- **Theme 8.** Health and work

- **Theme 9.** Inclusivity and Green Sector Skills

Theme 1. Understanding how to better support individuals with disabilities

- Examining transitions from education to the labour market for young people with disabilities, and identifying barriers within current available pathways.

- Understanding the labour market barriers facing people with mental health challenges and exploring potential policy interventions that would help people return to work and prevent those in work from becoming economically inactive.

- Considering the role of employers (private and/ or public) in supporting labour market inclusion for disabled persons and preventing those in employment from becoming permanently detached following a period of absence from work due to sickness and/or disability.

Theme 2. Pathways to work

- How to identify alternative educational routes that are most effective in the journey from education to the labour market.

- Mapping the transitions of individuals with additional needs and/or disabilities through all layers of the education system to the labour market.

- Exploring the potential for entrepreneurial activity amongst those from socioeconomically deprived backgrounds and identifying place-based barriers to business start-up.

- Exploring any link between workless families and one person households and the pathways for their children.

Theme 3. Knowing what works

- How do other nations/regions engage with economically inactive individuals? Successful approaches engaging 'hard to reach' groups outside a traditional Job Centre type environment are of particular interest.

- Examples of interventions that have successfully helped key groups successfully return to the labour market following a period of economic inactivity.

- How have other regions/nations responded to the rising incidence of mental health conditions both within the workforce and amongst those out of work?

- Are best practice examples available from which NI can learn for successfully raising labour market participation through an integrated health and employability policy?

Theme 4. The caring economy

- Understanding the profile of adult carers, labour market barriers and alternative systems of support that could encourage employment. This workstream should recognise the vital role played by those providing unpaid care and the wider socio-economic impacts.

- How to meet the future skill needs of the caring economy, and assessing whether current recruitment, progression pathways, workplace environment, recognition processes and pay scales are consistent with the long-term sustainability of the sector.

- Quantifying the economic and social impacts of achieving a more inclusive labour market for NI's working-age carers.

- Exploring innovative models, bespoke strategies and affordability schemes across other countries and regions that may make high-quality childcare affordable for all families including those with special educational needs and disabilities.

Theme 5. Quantifying the benefits of work

- Identifying international examples of best practice which have successfully illustrated how relatively low work incentives can be addressed.

- Modelling the fiscal and social impact of moving a higher proportion of the economically inactive out-of-work benefit caseload into sustained employment.

- Providing evidence for the wider and longer-term benefits of reducing economic inactivity. This could include a focus on health outcomes, poverty, well-being, social inclusion, child development and pressure on public services.

Theme 6. The role of employers

- What are the financial and non-financial barriers to recruiting economically inactive persons facing Small and Medium sized Enterprises?

- Are there examples of effective practice amongst employers which have been successful in 'stemming the flow' of people leaving the workplace due to ill health?

- What approaches do employers take to support staff with caring responsibilities?

- Can Northern Ireland learn from approaches in other countries that manage the transition from education to employer-based training for those with disabilities.

Theme 7. The role of 'place'

- What are the multi-dimensional factors across 'places' which influence patterns of inter-generational joblessness and economic inactivity?

- To explore if subjective and perceptual barriers influence the distance which someone would travel to access training or employment opportunities (across the economically inactive or young people).

- To explore the factors which have helped some regions to improve and other regions stay deprived. This could be across NI or other regions which have learnings for NI.

- To explore how women, persons with disabilities or long-term health conditions who are living in rural, peripheral and border areas, can be better supported.

- To understand how border regions may present unique labour market and skills-based opportunities and challenges for both individuals living there and firms located in those regions.

Theme 8. Health and work

- How to capture and effectively communicate the health benefits of working for the economically inactive/unemployed in Northern Ireland. What mechanisms and practices may influence economically inactive persons to improve their health and well-being through work?

- A review which explores the relationship between employment and other social determinants of health (SDH). These determinants can include the healthcare system, community and social contexts, neighbourhood and physical environments, and other forces and systems shaping the conditions of daily life.

- Examples of best practice employability and skills development models which support and capture health and well-being outcomes, alongside employability.

- What can we learn from other regions who have joined up approaches to tackling employability, skills and health outcomes?

Theme 9. Inclusivity and Green Sector Skills

- What best practices, models and mechanisms can help foster inclusive green employment for all individuals through an improved equality, diversity and inclusion agenda. This could include exploring how technical, soft, hard skills or leadership competencies can be fostered to reach people from a variety of diverse backgrounds.

- To explore how underrepresented groups, such as women returning to the workforce, can be better supported to work in the green economy. This could include how to encourage more underrepresented groups including women to choose green skills pathways and reskill.

- How to enhance accessibility to funding for green startups.

How to Apply?

- www.ulster.ac.uk/epic

- Lead applicant submission

- Online application form and maximum 4 attachments
  - Case for support (8 pages)
  - Justification of resources (1 page)
  - Applicant CVs (max 2 pages per person)
  - Letters of support from partners (max 1 per partner)

- Eligible costs must follow the UKRI Research Funding Guide (see pages 27-34)

Assessment Process

- Stage 1. Eligibility Screening base on eligibility criteria (Ulster University EPIC Futures Team)

- Stage 2. Scored independent assessment (2 policy experts and 2 academic reviewers)

- Stage 3. Reviewer assessment panel

- All reviewers will rate the applications independently in line with the scoring criteria outlined at application stage before attending the panel assessment for peer review and consensus.

- Applications which pass eligibility checks and score over a minimum threshold will be recommended for funding. Funding will be awarded up to a maximum of £30K per project, until the £250k funding pot for phase 1 is allocated.

Criteria	Explanation	%
Relevance to policy and practice related to employability and skills	Identification of a clear need for the proposal to advance knowledge within the employability, skills and labour market landscape. Demonstrable evidence of relevance to UK, NI and/or Cross Border key policy agendas. There must be reference to how findings/outputs will have relevance for NI stakeholders with policy responsibilities and/ or for strengthening policy in practice.	40%
Methodology and Approach	Demonstrate an understanding of the EPIC Futures NI theme(s) being addressed. Identification of knowledge gaps related to theme(s). Identification of the approach. This will include key stages, milestones, deliverables, outputs and timelines. A detailed overview of the proposed methodology. Depending on the type of proposal, this may/should include, the data being used/collected, sampling and access. Data management and ethics (if applicable). Engagement, dissemination and impact strategy.	40%
Lead/Team, experience and collaboration	Outline how the skills and experience of the Lead/Team align with the proposed project. If relevant, outline team composition and dynamics. 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.	20%

Additional Considerations

- **Governance and ethics** - proposals which seek to collect empirical data with human participants will be required to work to follow appropriate Governance and Ethical Standards.

- **Engagement, dissemination and impact** – It is important that the outputs of projects are widely disseminated to a range of audiences. This should be detailed in the proposal.

- **Open Access** – All data and outputs derived from the commissioning call will be open access.

- **Branding** - All outputs should acknowledge funding by EPIC Futures NI and UKRI and be co-branded.

- **Due diligence** – individuals who are recommended for funding will have to submit additional documentation for checks prior to contract exchanges (e.g. financial accounts).

Additional Considerations

- **Progress Updates**
  - Monthly meeting
  - Midpoint reporting – short report and 10 min presentation to EPIC Futures NI Co-director Team
  - Present Findings at Commissioning Call Policy Workshop – first week of September, (tentatively 4th September 2025)
  - End of project reporting on milestones aligned to financial payments

- **Payments** will be quarterly in arears
  - Spending needs to incur prior to project end date – 31st August 2025
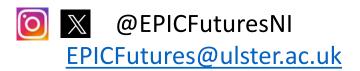
- **Reminder on clarification questions**
  - Email EPICFutures@ulster.ac.uk by the 1st November 2024
  - EPIC Futures NI team members are unable to personally discuss the commissioning call with prospective applicants

We look forward to receiving your proposals

Connect with us:

@EPICFuturesNI

EPICFutures@ulster.ac.uk

www.ulster.ac.uk/epic