

Science Secretary calls on research funders to back women with better maternity leave and flexible working support

11.3.2026 - | Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs

Research funders urged to back a voluntary charter including commitments to paid maternity leave for PhD students and more help to return to work and flexible working.

- Science Secretary proposes new charter to better support female researchers
- Improved support for parental leave to be a key focus of the charter, with views from the research sector to help shape its design
- Science Secretary to call for greater support for researchers 'when they need it most' as funding doubles for Daphne Jackson Trust ahead of Women in Science discussion in London later today

Science Secretary Liz Kendall will today (Wednesday 11 March) call on research institutions and funders to do more to support women in research.

In an open letter, she will urge them to back a voluntary charter including commitments to paid maternity leave for PhD students, more help to return to work and flexible working so women do not have to choose between family responsibilities and a flourishing career.

Addressing the Royal Society's Women and the Future of Science conference in London, Science Secretary Liz Kendall will set out how government will help to knock down the obstacles that many women face in building research careers.

The aim of the charter is simple - to agree a small number of clear, tangible commitments that government, funders and employers can sign up to so they can drive lasting culture change. This will cover ways to tackle issues facing researchers like access to paid maternity leave, support for those returning to work with caring responsibilities, greater job flexibility and addressing sexual discrimination and harassment.

A key focus will be actions to improve support for parental leave for doctoral students, with the Science Secretary setting a firm expectation that all PhD funders, including businesses, charities and other government bodies, commit to meeting or exceeding parental leave offers currently provided by UK Research and Innovation (UKRI).

Currently, this includes 52 weeks of maternity leave, at full stipend for 26 weeks and a further 13 weeks of support commensurate with statutory maternity pay.

Speaking ahead of a fireside discussion at The Royal Society's Future of Science conference, Science and Technology Secretary Liz Kendall said:

Women scientists and researchers are responsible for driving some of the most important breakthroughs that are improving lives for people right across the country. Yet too many see their career ambitions delayed or even halted by vital responsibilities

like raising a family or caring for a loved one - trade-offs that should never have to be made.

The charter will set clear expectations on funders of research - they must act quickly and decisively to give more women the backing they need to resume their studies, whether through greater maternity support or flexible working.

These changes are rooted in fairness, and give future generations of women the confidence and backing they need to join the ranks of the pioneers who make up our expert research community.

Taking support for research professionals further, the government will more than double its support for the Daphne Jackson Trust from £1.7 million to £4 million per year - helping unlock the talent of more women whose research careers have been paused and giving them a path back to work so we can all benefit from their skills, ideas and experience.

Current UKRI support for the Trust allows for up to 15 fully funded fellowships per year. This additional government support will fund up to 10 new fellowships, allowing more researchers to build the confidence and skills to make a successful return to research and deliver more of the pioneering innovations that improve millions of lives. The Trust will also launch up to 15 new Research Technical Professional Fellowships per year, a programme for retraining and reskilling research technicians who are vital to UK science as they return to R&D.

The Daphne Jackson Trust helps people to restart their careers in research, providing tailored fellowship support for those who have taken a career break for 2 years or more for family, caring or health reasons, as research shows women are 40% more likely than men to leave research within 20 years.

The Trust has awarded more than 500 fellowships since they were launched in 1985 and have contributed to over 2400 years of research training that would otherwise have been lost.

More than 70% of former fellows remain in research 5 years after their fellowship, winning £3.50 of additional research funding for every £1 invested.

These Fellowships have supported vital work like Professor Pia Ostergard's research into lymphoedema - a chronic condition causing swelling due to a build up of fluid - at City St George's University of London. It has also helped Dr Catherine Elton undertake research on parasite proteins and vaccine development at the Wellcome Trust Sanger Institute. Following this work, she founded and was CEO of the biotech company Qkine which supports stem cell research and regenerative medicine, before joining Axol Bioscience as CBO and the board of Atelerix.

The support comes as separate analysis published by the Intellectual Property Office (IPO) shows the share of patents filed by female inventors has more than doubled over the past 29 years, but that women continue to account for just over 10% of all inventors named on UK patents.

The steps being taken today highlight both what can be achieved when barriers are removed and why continued and focus action is still needed to ensure we can deliver a level playing field for all communities and backgrounds across the UK.

Notes to editors

- The Daphne Jackson Trust helps people to restart their careers in research, providing tailored fellowship support for those who have taken a career break for 2 years or more for family, caring or health reasons
- UKRI is the UK's largest public funder of research and innovation
- Read the IPO report on female inventorship on GOV.UK
- Views from the sector will help shape this charter, with further details on its scope and the ways in which improvements will be delivered expected to be set out in the coming months

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/science-secretary-calls-on-research-funders-to-back-women-with-better-maternity-leave-and-flexible-working-support>