



WELSH GOVERNMENT RESEARCH FELLOWSHIP OPPORTUNITY

Research Project Title/Question	<i>River Basin Management Plans in Wales beyond 2027: an alternative water quality improvement framework for setting environmental water quality standards in Wales</i>
Department	Water Policy, Climate Change and Environmental Sustainability
Contact Name	James Dowling (Water Directive Programme Manager) james.dowling@gov.wales
Proposed start date	ASAP
Duration	12-18 months
Funding	Welsh Government will match fund the researcher's university salary.
Working arrangements	Flexible – able to work remotely, from host institution or from Welsh Government offices. In person attendance will be required for engagement activities from time to time.

RESEARCH SPECIFICATION

Summary of the policy area

Water is one of Wales's most valuable natural assets and an essential contributor to our economy. Welsh Government's Water policy team is responsible for developing bespoke policy for Wales to sustainably managing its water systems (i.e. inland waters, estuaries and coastal waters), and also oversees the effective functioning of Wales' water industry and safeguards drinking water quality in line with statutory specifications.

The team's remit falls under the portfolio of the [Cabinet Secretary for Climate Change & Rural Affairs](#) and supports the delivery objectives identified under primary legislation, such as the [Environment \(Wales\) Act 2016](#) and [Well-being of Future Generations \(Wales\) Act 2015](#). The team works closely with a wide variety of internal and external stakeholders and representatives of the UK Government and the other Devolved Administrations.

Summary of the research area and policy context

The European [Water Framework Directive](#) (WFD) provides the main framework for managing the water environment throughout Europe. At its heart is an ecosystem approach that requires measures to be taken to encourage the sustainable use of water and to protect and improve inland surface waters, ground waters and coastal waters, with the aim of achieving 'Good' status. The directive's requirements apply in Wales under Retained EU Law. The [Water Environment \(Water Framework Directive\) \(England and Wales\) Regulations 2017](#) (WFD) updated the 2003 framework in England and Wales.

Under the WFD, Wales is divided into three river basins: Western Wales (which lies wholly in Wales) and the Severn and the Dee (both of which cross-border with England). Natural Resources Wales (NRW) is the Competent Authority for the implementation of the WFD in Wales and has responsibility for leading-on and publishing the River Basin Management Plans (RBMPs) for the Western Wales and Dee River Basin Districts (RBDs) - working in partnership with a wide range of public, private and voluntary organisations, including water companies, local authorities, eNGOs, businesses & industry.

RBMPs are issued on a six-yearly cycle, set objectives for water bodies and summarise the measures that stakeholders will deliver to achieve these outcomes for the water environment. Actions range from tackling urban and rural diffuse pollution, habitat restoration and mitigation of physical modifications (such as removal of redundant weirs), metal mines remediation, water efficiency and tackling invasive non-native species.

The WFD is the main mechanism for improving environmental water quality in Wales and establishes a target for all waters, i.e. 'Good Overall Status' (e.g. insect, plant, fish life, chemistry) which is a measure of a healthy and robust ecosystem. Since its introduction, there has been a gradual improvement in water quality. Whilst part of the EU, Wales was under obligation to give effect to EU environmental law and benefitted from research, evidence and policy direction set by the European Commission. At present and following the UK's exit

from the EU, there is no agreed replacement mechanism for setting environmental water quality standards in Wales.

The [Water Environment \(Water Framework Directive\) \(England and Wales\) Regulations 2017](#) is in its third cycle and currently aims to achieve 'Good' or 'Better' ecological status by 2027. The Regulations allow for one additional cycle of RBMPs from 2027 and NRW are currently developing the plans for this cycle (i.e. Cycle 4). However, post-2027 the legislative framework is unclear and there is a significant risk that the legal basis for improving water quality will fall after Cycle 4.

It is essential that the Welsh Government considers policy and legislative options that will continue the trend of water quality improvement beyond cycle 4 of the RBMPs. The implications of EU Exit present challenges to Welsh Government as well as opportunities in terms of the flexibility to develop a bespoke Welsh regime or scheme for water quality improvement.

Improving water quality is a key priority of the Welsh Government. It is imperative that a regulatory framework which is currently in place is maintained in some form, with potential improvements tailored to needs of our country. This is a priority not only in the context of water policy, but also in the context of the wider environment - healthy waters underpin thriving ecosystems and provide multifaceted benefits to the economy and society.

Outline of Project Activities

In order for Welsh Government to develop feasible options beyond cycle 4 of the RBMPs, a thorough review and assessment of WFD is required and the work of this project will encompass the following:

- Examination of the existing evidence base to identify the elements of the WFD that have worked well and those that have not
- Review of WFD implementation in other European countries
- Identification of best practice in non-EU countries that do not have the WFD to support them, but have separate domestic legislation
- Working with NRW to understand how WFD is implemented by their organisation and identify any limitations the current regulatory regime poses to NRW
- Consideration of how the WFD work can be delivered alongside other WG plans and how it can best deliver against wider priorities

Expected Project Outputs

The outcome of this research project will be a series of recommendations that propose an alternative water quality improvement framework post-Cycle 4 of the RBMPs', i.e. post-2027, and to include the feasibility, risks and benefits to implementation.

In the first month of the contract period, the Research Fellow will be expected to develop a programme plan of work and agree with Welsh Government the outputs over the contract period.

The Research Fellow will report and discuss progress to the project steering group on a monthly basis.

It is anticipated that the outcome of the project will contribute towards one or more research publications submitted by the Research Fellow (as first author) to peer-reviewed journals.

There is the potential for the first phase of this project to identify a number of more detailed areas of focus (some of which may be taken forward by the same Research Fellow or subsequent Fellowships).

Welsh Government anticipate the need for a certain amount of flexibility in the research project to accommodate priority shifts.

Expected Benefits to the Research Fellow

The embedded nature of the Fellowship presents a unique opportunity to work within Welsh Government to:

- Influence and shape a framework for monitoring and improving water quality in Wales.
- Directly apply scientific expertise to a policy question and gain understanding of the policy making process and the role of evidence within it
- Influence future activities and actions 'on the ground'
- Develop insight into the complexities of balancing and achieving policy outcomes desired by Government and within the context of wider government priorities

- Working with policy decision makers and Ministers
- Engaging with a diverse group of stakeholders from government, regulators, industry and third-parties in delivering a new framework

It is envisaged that this project will complement the Research Fellow's (and university's) existing and published research activities and offer the opportunity to improve the impact of their future research.

Welsh Government Support

Access to relevant WG advisors, analysts and policy colleagues will be available to support this role. Attendance at meetings in the main WG office in Cathays Park, Cardiff, and/or regional office locations across Wales (partly depending on the successful candidate's location) may be required.

External Stakeholder Engagement

The research project will require engagement with UK Government, particularly Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (DEFRA) and Devolved Administration departments as well as colleagues in public and regulatory bodies such as NRW

Liaison with academia via you own networks and those facilitated by [Environment Platform Wales](#) would also be expected.

PERSON SPECIFICATION

Applicants can be at *Senior Researcher / Early Career Researcher* stage of their career, or be able to demonstrate equivalent professional experience gained in a stakeholder organisation.

Applicants with a permanent academic position (or equivalent in institutions other than universities) are also eligible.

The applicant must be the Principal Investigator and may only submit one proposal to this specification. Co-Investigators or other named researchers are not eligible.

Criteria:

- Awareness of Welsh policy landscape and devolution
- Track record in undertaking ecological or water quality research projects
- Understanding of monitoring and evaluating water quality methodologies
- Ability to write concise reports
- Ability to present research findings succinctly
- Ability to communicate in Welsh an advantage but not essential.

WELSH GOVERNMENT COMMITMENTS

Equality & Diversity

The Welsh Government is committed to providing services which embrace diversity and which promote equality of opportunity. This is underpinned by the Equality Act 2010 and will be adhered to at each stage of the recruitment process. Our goal is to ensure that these commitments are also embedded in our day-to-day working practices with all our customers, colleagues and partners.

We are committed to being an anti-racist organisation and increasing diversity in the Welsh Government by removing barriers and supporting all our staff to reach their potential. We are committed to recruiting Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic people and disabled people who are currently under-represented in Welsh Government.

We welcome applications from everyone regardless of age, marriage and civil partnership (both same sex and opposite sex), impairment or health condition, sex, sexual orientation, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, gender identity or gender expression.

We are a Stonewall Diversity Champion and a Disability Confident Level 3 (Leader) organisation. Key to supporting this work and providing peer support are five Board sponsored Staff Networks (Disability Awareness and Support (DAAS); Minority Ethnic Support Network (MESN); Mind Matters (Mental health and well-being); PRISM (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex +) and Women Together.

Disability Confident

The Welsh Government has adopted the social definition of disability, in which it is recognised that barriers in society act to disable people who have impairments or health conditions, who are neurodivergent or who use British Sign Language. We are committed to removing barriers so that all (or potential new) staff can perform at their best.

We guarantee to interview any disabled person who meets the minimum criteria for the post. By 'minimum criteria' we mean that you must provide us with evidence at each stage of the assessment process before interview, which demonstrates you generally meet the job description requirements. We are committed to the employment and career development of disabled people.

Welsh Language Requirements

The Welsh Government is a bilingual organisation and Welsh language skills are considered an asset to the organisation. We encourage and support staff to learn, develop and use their Welsh language skills in the workplace.

General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR)

This privacy notice tells you what to expect when you contact Welsh Government and provide us with your personal information: <https://gov.wales/welsh-government-privacy-notice#section-8567> All of the information you provide during the selection process will only be used for the purpose of progressing the application, or to fulfil legal or regulatory requirements where necessary.

HOW TO APPLY

Applicants should submit the following 4 documents to the Welsh Government Research Placements – Lleoliadau Ymchwil mailbox: acedemicplacements.gov.uk

1. A covering letter (maximum one side of A4) outlining why you are applying for the post and what you will bring to the role.
2. Project proposal (maximum four sides of A4) outlining how you would seek to develop the fellowship, the opportunities and the areas of research
3. Curriculum Vitae (maximum two sides of A4).
4. A letter from your academic institution. This needs to state how it will support your release from teaching and administrative duties, as necessary, and provide formal acceptance of the conditions of the scheme.

Deadlines:

The deadline for submitting the above documentation is 3rd March 2025. Applicants may contact James Dowling (Water Directive Programme Manager) via james.dowling@gov.wales before the deadline to discuss the research question in more detail.

ASSESSMENT PROCESS

The assessment process for applications will involve a two-stage process.

All applications received will be assessed by independent experts at a sift panel. An expert panel of Government researchers and users will review submitted applications and make recommendations on those suitable to progress to stage two. Applicants will be notified on whether their application will progress to the second stage.

For applications recommended for second stage assessment, the applicants will be invited to an interview panel, where they will have the opportunity to present their Research proposal and answer questions from the panel. This will be undertaken via the Microsoft Teams platform.

It is anticipated that virtual interviews will take place during the weeks commencing 17th March 2025.

The assessment criteria to be used are detailed below:

- Excellence of Proposal – quality and novelty of the proposed research synthesis, research translation or community engagement activities
- Suitability of Applicant – relevant experience and potential of the applicant, potential benefit of the fellowship to their career development/transition

Feedback will be provided to successful and unsuccessful applicants following the stage of assessment at which a decision is made concerning their application

Welsh Government will use the recommendations of the interview panel along with the Research Specification and available budget when making the final funding decisions.

Welsh Government reserve the right to use the recommendations to create a balanced portfolio for this Research Fellowship opportunity.

Welsh Government Vetting Checks will be required to be carried out with the successful candidate prior to any appointment being made.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION AND BACKGROUND READING:

Useful documents to consider (not exhaustive):

[Natural Resources Wales / River basin management plans](#)

[Water Framework Directive - European Commission \(europa.eu\)](#)