Review of the

Returning Carers Fund

'What Works to Support Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) in Research Careers' Project

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Executive Summary

The University established the Returning Carers Fund in 2014 to support academics and researchers who have taken a break for caring responsibilities to re-establish their research careers. These career breaks include maternity and shared parental leaves, as well as breaks to care for disabled or elderly family members.

In the four academic years between 2017/18 and 2020/21, the Fund supported more than 150 academics and researchers and helped them re-establish their careers by funding a wide range of activities chosen by the academics and researchers themselves. These include conference attendance, short-term research and administrative assistance, teaching buyout, and training or professional development activities. **The Fund gave out grants worth more than £530,000 in total in the four academic years**.

This review, conducted in mid-2022, collected and analysed the Fund's application data, its grant use reports, one-to-one interviews and parental leave data. It finds that the **Returning Carers Fund has been effective in achieving its two objectives:**

1. **Support those who have taken a break for caring responsibilities to re-establish their research careers.**
2. **Increase the visibility of the University's support for carers, with a view to changing perceptions of balancing a research or academic career with caring responsibility.**

More specifically, the review finds that the Fund has had a significant and positive impact on grant recipients' research careers as demonstrated in many **successful research outputs** (e.g., academic journal articles, book chapters, scientific investigation data) as well as **grant and fellowship applications**. This was achieved through the Fund encouraging **collaboration and networking**, increasing returning carers' **confidence and motivation**, increasing their **work efficiency** (by funding research assistance and equipment), and enabling learning of **new skills**.

The Fund has also **contributed to achieving the University's equality objectives**, such as: increasing the proportion of women in senior academic roles; helping staff members balance their careers and caring responsibilities as competing demands; as well as investing in people and supporting uptake of career development opportunities.

In addition to the impact, the review also studied the criteria and administration of the Fund. Based on the findings, it makes the following recommendations:

1. **Continue the Fund in its current format but increase the upper limits of grant per application by 20%** to account for the increased costs of goods and services.
2. **Relax the eligibility criterion on lengths of shared parental leaves (from 6 to 3 months)** to better support men who take on caring responsibility and accordingly encourage uptake of these two kinds of parental leave.
3. **Provide clearer guidance on post-acceptance financial arrangement**, particularly that for short-term research assistance and teaching buyouts. This is to alleviate any worries that prospective applicants may have.
4. **Strengthen the promotion of the Fund on the departmental level and via alternative communication channels**.

5. **Enforce the requirement on submitting a report** at the end of the period for using the grants; this is for better monitoring and evaluation of the Fund.

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1. About the Review

This review of the Returning Carers Fund (referred to as 'the Fund' and 'RCF' hereafter) was conducted between March 2022 and August 2022. The Fund was last reviewed more than six years ago in December 2015.

1.1   Purposes of Review

The review of the Fund aims to achieve the following.

- To assess whether the fund is effective in meeting its aims, i.e., to support applicants to develop their research career following a break in their career or a period of leave for caring responsibilities.
- To inform the possible changes to be made to the fund's eligibility criteria, maximum amount to be awarded, scope of the fund, and the administration process of the fund.
- To assess whether the number of applications for the fund is appropriate.

1.2   Review Questions

The review of the Fund was guided by the following three questions.

Table 1 Review questions

	Review questions (RQs)	Corresponding chapters in report
RQ1	What are the application rates to the fund in 2017/18, 2018/19 and 2019/20? What factors lead to people applying for the fund or not? Are there potential applicants who the fund is not reaching and, if so, why?	3, 4, 5
RQ2	What is the impact of the fund on: a. Academics and researchers receiving the fund on an individual level; and b. Helping address the 'leaking pipeline' issue for female academics and researchers in higher education; and c. Supporting the University to meet its equality objectives?	4
RQ3	Are the fund's original aims and objectives still relevant to today's work circumstances and the University's equality goals? If not, how and why are they not, and what changes should be made?	5

1.3   Use of Report

This report is to:

- Inform the University and its staff members of the impact of the Fund.
- Summarise 'lessons learnt' and identify areas for improvement.

- Help divisions and departments to design actions and activities that are supplementary to the Fund in promoting equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI), and more specifically gender equality.

1.4   Data Collected

The review collected and used the following data:

- All application forms of the 154 grant recipients (i.e., successful applications) in academic years 2017/18, 2018/19, 2019/20 and 2020/21.
- 58 reports submitted using the electronic submission system set up as part of this review.
  - A total of 101 grant recipients in academic years 2017/18, 2018/19 and 2019/20 were contacted, with 33 (around one-third of the) them unable to be reached, mainly because they had left the University.
  - 58 out of the remaining 67 responded and submitted a report. The response rate is therefore 86%, with 9 grant recipients did not respond to requests to submit a report.
- 5 reports submitted before the start of the review.
- Leave data held in the central university human resources (UAS-HR) system.
- One-to-one interviews with 7 fixed-term contract academic/researchers (6 females and one male), including a divisional researcher representative.
- Meetings with divisional leads of the Fund.

1.5   Limitations of Review

This review has several limitations. First, for the grants approved in academics years 2017/18, 2018/19 and 2019/20, there were only 5 reports submitted, despite the requirement on submitting a report within 12 months of receipt of the funds or on completion of the report. The reviewer retrospectively requested the grant recipients in May 2022 for their reports, but about one-third of them had already left the University. Therefore, the reports submitted were from those who stayed in the University to continue their careers, and the responses are thus not representative of all grant recipients.

Second, it was very difficult to identify and reach academics and researchers who were ineligible for the Fund as well as those who were eligible but chose not to apply. This limited how the criteria and administration of the Fund could be reviewed objectively. That said, the divisional leads have offered insights in this regard.

Lastly, while the Fund is for staff members returning from all kinds of leave for caring responsibilities, the data available for studying application rates were mainly of maternity leave. It is worth noting that there was no grant recipient returning from career breaks other than parental leave.

2. Background and Objectives of the Fund

2.1   Background

The Returning Carers' Fund was established in Trinity Term 2014 with £500,000, whereof £400,000 was from the Vice Chancellor's Diversity Fund and £100,000 was from the Oxford Biomedical Research Centre (BRC). The BRC's contribution was ring-fenced for the support of women in the Medical Sciences Division (MSD) working under the BRC remit. The Fund as a whole is for all divisions, though, to avoid disparities.

The Fund is based on a model piloted in MPLS in 2011/12. It is a small grants scheme open to academic and research staff who have taken a break of at least six months for caring responsibilities. Applicants determine what support would best meet their needs, which has included activities such as conference attendance, visits by research collaborators and short-term research assistance.

The initial intention was to run the scheme in the academic year 2014/15, and to evaluate it after this time to consider how the University might best support those who take a break for caring responsibilities. Funding proved to be sufficient to continue to run the scheme in the academic year 2015/16.

In Trinity Term 2015, the Fund Advisory Group, comprising representatives from each Division and from the Equality and Diversity Unit (EDU), reviewed the functioning of the scheme. It was felt to have worked well and to have been well received by applicants. The criteria and guidance were amended slightly to provide additional clarity where it was felt to be needed and to address questions raised by applicants.

In December 2015, the EDU conducted an evaluation of the outcomes of the scheme. The evaluation concluded that the Fund: (a) provided an important indication that the University was serious about supporting the careers of those with caring responsibilities; (b) improved the University's profile as an institution committed to investing in and supporting its academic and research staff; and (c) had a demonstrable impact on the careers of many staff returning from a period of leave for caring responsibilities.

The Fund was established with permanent funding from 2017-18 and has continued in the same format. The Fund has not been formally reviewed or evaluated since December 2015. That said, the Advisory Group for the Fund has been meeting regularly and has made some minor changes to the guidance where necessary.

2.2   Objectives

The Fund's objectives have remained the same since 2015. The purpose of the Fund is to:

(a) Support those who have taken a break for caring responsibilities to re-establish their research careers.
(b) Increase the visibility of the University's support for carers, with a view to changing perceptions of balancing a research or academic career with caring responsibilities.

It is worth noting that the Fund's objectives are aligned with the University's equality objective to increase the proportion of women in senior roles and that an underlying assumption of the Fund

is that increased support on return from family leave will retain women in the academia and grow the pipeline of female academics.

2.3   Eligibility Criteria

The scheme is open to all members of academic and research staff employed by the University, including those holding joint appointments, but excluding those who have achieved full professorial title or who hold statutory chairs. The scheme is nonetheless not open to members of staff with college-only contracts.

One must meet at least one of the following criteria at the closing date for applications:

- Is currently on leave for a minimum of six months;
- Has returned from a break of at least six months within the last two years;
- Has returned from two breaks each of at least six months within the last five years.

A break may comprise two or more discontinuous periods of leave totalling at least six months provided that they relate to a single life event, for example, as part of a shared parental leave arrangement. Only one application may be made per career break.

Those on a fixed-term contract should hold a contract of employment for a sufficient period beyond the date of their application to permit the grant to be spent and to have an impact that increases the likelihood of them securing a new contract; the application should give evidence of being on a research or academic career trajectory and clearly outline any future career plans; applicants may submit a supporting statement from their supervisor if they wish to do so.

Applications must be signed by the staff member's supervisor, Head of Department or Faculty Board Chair and by their Departmental or Faculty Administrator to confirm that: (a) the department/faculty supports the application; and (b) the applicant is eligible for funding, as per the above criteria.

3. Fund Applications and Grants

3.1   Fund Applications

The **number of applications** to the Returning Carers Fund averaged at around **40** per year. The number was particularly low in the academic year 2019/20.

Table 2 Number of returning carers, returning carers who were eligible for RCF, and successful RCF applications (by year)

Return date between	ML returned	ML eligible for RCF 2017/18 to 2020/21	Eligible ML as % ML	SPL returned	SPL eligible for RCF 2017/18 to 2020/21	Eligible SPL as % SPL	Eligible ML+SPL	Successful RCF applications	RCF % as eligible ML+SPL
06/2017 to 05/2018	252	113	45%	37	3	8%	**116**	**47**	**41%**
06/2018 to 05/2019	241	86	36%	39	3	8%	**89**	**38**	**43%**
06/2019 to 05/2020	263	112	43%	32	3	9%	**115**	**27**	**23%**
06/2020 to 05/2021	199	73	37%	46	1	2%	**74**	**42**	**57%**
Average	*239*	*96*	*40%*	*39*	*3*	*7%*	*99*	*39*	*41%*

As shown in Table 2, on average, **around 40% of staff members who previously went on maternity leave (ML) were eligible[1] for the Fund**. That is, they: (a) are academics or researchers; and (b) took a parental leave that was at least 6 months' long. Since most maternity leaves were longer than 6 months, the ratio of those who were eligible over those who were not was largely dependent on how many leave takers were academics/researchers. As for **shared parental leave (SPL) takers**, around **7%** of them were eligible.

Around 41% of eligible parental leave returners applied for and were given grants under the Fund in the four academic years. This figure, however, does not consider the staff members who went on leave for longer than 6 months for other reasons (e.g., for taking care of old parents), although numbers are likely to be very small.

It is worth noting that, in the four years that this review covers, **all successful applicants were returning from either maternity or shared parental leaves**. A vast majority of them were returning from maternity leave[2].

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[1] The eligibility ratios given in Table 2 were only estimates. This is because all academics and researchers are eligible for the Fund for up to 2 years following their returns from their breaks. Therefore, technically speaking, someone returning from leave in June 2017 would have been eligible for both the 2017/18 and 2018/19 rounds of the Fund. These estimates nonetheless were conducive for illustrating the trends over time and how likely takers of a certain type of leave are eligible for the Fund.

[2] The EDU does not ask about applicants' legal sex and gender.

Table 3 provides data on number of people returning from maternity and shared parental leaves, as well as on number of successful Fund applications and that as a proportion of eligible returning staff. Departmental-level analysis results are not included in this report owing to data privacy concerns, but they were given to the Fund's divisional leads for follow-up actions.

Table 3 Number of returning carers, returning carers who were eligible for RCF, and successful RCF applications (by Division)

Divisions	ML returned between 06/2017 and 05/2021	ML eligible for RCF 2017/18 to 2020/21	Eligible ML as % ML	SPL returned between 06/2017 and 05/2021	SPL eligible for RCF 2017/18 to 2020/21	Eligible SPL as % SPL	Eligible ML+SPL	Successful RCF applications	RCF % as eligible ML+SPL
C. Edu.	15	2	13%	2	0	N/A	**2**	**2**	100%
GLAM	69	0	0%	4	0	N/A	**0**	**0**	N/A
HUMS	34	18	53%	6	0	N/A	**18**	**17**	94%
MPLS	98	40	41%	28	2	7%	**42**	**21**	50%
MSD	464	263	57%	77	7	9%	**270**	**82**	30%
SSD	149	61	41%	25	2	8%	**63**	**32**	51%
UAS	126	0	0%	12	0	N/A	**0**	**0**	N/A
Total	*955*	*384*	*40%*	*154*	*11*	*7%*	*395*	*154*	*39%*

Over the last four years, the **rejection rates remained low at less than 8%**. The main reason for rejecting applications to the Fund is that applicants could not demonstrate how proposed activities could help develop their research careers after a break. These applicants were usually given the opportunity to amend their applications following the initial outcome. In addition, a small number of applications were disqualified because the applicants were not academics/researchers.

The review takes a closer look at the reasons for applying and not applying in Section 5.2.

3.2   Amounts and Proposed Uses of Grants

The Fund approved, on average, £175,884 worth of grants each academic year. The actual cost to the Fund was on average £120,018 annually (see Table 4).

Table 4 Financial overview (2017/18-2020/21; by academic year)

Academic year	Amount of grant approved	Number of successful applications	Average of grant approved per application	Actual cost
2017/18	£197,485	47	£4,201	£172,475
2018/19	£159,328	38	£4,192	£108,936
2019/20	£133,010	27	£4,926	£78,642
2020/21*	£213,711	42	£5,088	N/A
Average	*£175,884*	*39*	*£4,602*	*£120,018#*

* Some grants awarded in academic year 2020/21 were still active; therefore, the actual cost cannot be calculated at the time of the review.
# Average of academic years 2017/18, 2018/19 and 2019/20 only.

The differences between the approved amount and the actual cost were caused by the fact that some grant recipients did not spend as much as they anticipated; a large proportion of these cases were related to the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused cancellations of conferences and visit plans.

Nine recipients over three academic years did not claim any of the grant approved because of administrative reasons on the departmental level. Table 5 provided the financial overview with these cases excluded. The average actual cost per application (with those unclaimed excluded) was £3,535, about £900 lower than the average grant approved per application.

Table 5 Financial overview (2017/18-2019/20; by academic year; with applicants who did not claim any grant approved excluded)

Academic year	Amount of grant approved	Number of successful applications	Average of grant approved per application	Actual cost	Number of grant recipient who did not submit a claim form	Average actual cost per grant recipient (who submitted a claim form)
2017/18	£197,485	47	£4,201	£172,475	1	£3,749
2018/19	£159,328	38	£4,192	£108,936	3	£3,112
2019/20	£133,010	27	£4,926	£78,642	6	£3,744
Average	*£163,274*	*37*	*£4,440*	*£120,018*	*3.33*	*£3,535*

Table 6 provides a financial overview broken down by Division.

*Table 6 Financial overview (2017/18-2020/21; by Division)*

Division	Amount of grant approved	Number of successful applications	Average of grant approved per application
C. Edu.	£7,062	2	£3,531
HUMS	£81,443	17	£4,791
MPLS	£105,240	21	£5,011
MSD	£342,622	76	£4,508
SSD	£145,920	32	£4,600

Table 6 provides details on the amounts of grants approved to different Divisions. The differences between Divisions are small.

Figure 1 shows the uses of grant proposed in the 154 successful applications in the four academic years. **Conference attendance** was the most popular, with 60 successful applications out of the 154 in academic years 2017/18 to 2020/21 had that selected. It was followed by: **short-term research or administrative assistance** (54); **teaching buyout** (27); and **training or professional development** (27).

Most grant recipients (72.4%) who submitted a report had spent the grant as planned. The COVID-19 pandemic, which caused disruptions to conferences and research activities, was the major cause of plans changed.

Figure 1 Proposed uses of grants in 154 successful applications
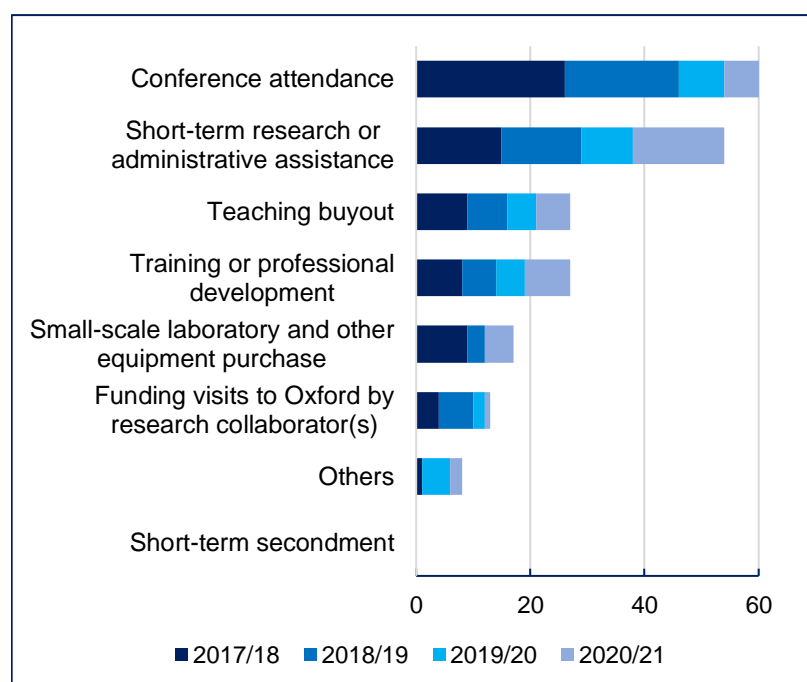
4. Impact of the Fund

This chapter reports on the impact of the Returning Carers Fund.

The review finds that the Fund has had a **significant and positive impact on grant recipients' research careers**. There is ample evidence to demonstrate that the Fund has effectively achieved its first objective (i.e., support those who have taken a break for caring responsibilities to re-establish their research careers). Section 4.1 in this chapter illustrates how such impact was achieved and what it meant to academics and researchers on an individual level.

It is also found that the Fund **has increased the visibility of the University's support for carers and changed perceptions of balancing a research or academic career with caring responsibilities**. In other words, the Fund's second objective has been met. Section 4.2 provides further details on this.

Given the impact on the two aforementioned areas, **the Fund contributes to achieving the University's equality objectives** on the institutional level. Section 4.3 provides more details.

There were a few **unintended positive outcomes** of the Fund. The most significant is that some grant recipients used the fund to hire research assistants, who were mainly early-career researchers and doctoral students; the research experience advanced the careers of these younger researchers. Section 4.4 provides more details.

This chapter includes many excerpts; they were adapted from what responding grant recipients wrote in their reports. The review intends to use their voices to report the impact of the Fund more directly.

4.1 Individual Level Impact

The positive impact of the Fund on grant recipients' careers can be categorised into six interconnected aspects[3], namely: research output and grant applications; collaboration and networking; confidence and motivation; latest knowledge and new skills; work efficiency; and new areas of expertise and career orientation.

Figure 2 shows the six aspects of the individual level impact identified, with the number of reports mentioning such aspects provided in brackets. There were 63 reports collected. Most reports mentioned more than one aspect of impact.

Figure 2 Six aspects of impact of the Fund on the individual level, and number of reports (out of 63) mentioning such aspects

Research Outputs & Grant Applications (49)

Collaboration & Networking (27)

New Areas of Expertise & Career Orient. (6)

Confidence & Motivation (14)

Latest Knowledge & New Skills (11)

Work Efficiency (11)

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[3] The six aspects were drawn up by the reviewer rather than by the grant recipients themselves. The reviewer first read all the responses to the question 'what outcomes and/or achievement resulted from the award?'. He then generated themes, or aspects, following the first reading. Similar themes were then merged. The finalised six themes were used to code the responses in a second reading.

4.1.1 Research outputs and grant applications

Most responding grant recipients (49 out of 63) mentioned in their reports that the Returning Carers Fund resulted research outputs and grant applications of theirs. A wide range of research outputs were mentioned, including **academic journal articles, book chapters and books**. This review report unfortunately cannot list these outputs because respondents' identities are protected.

These research outputs themselves were of course great achievements, and they, in addition, helped some academics/researchers advance their careers, mostly through **applying for fellowships** and other kinds of funding for research.

Some grant recipients have since been **promoted** and have continued to contribute to the University's research after their career breaks. Figure 3 shows some objective measurements of career advancement of the grant recipients[4]. It is worth noting that around one-third of the grant recipients have left the University when the reviewer retrospectively requested for a report.

Figure 3 Career advancement since receiving grants from the Fund
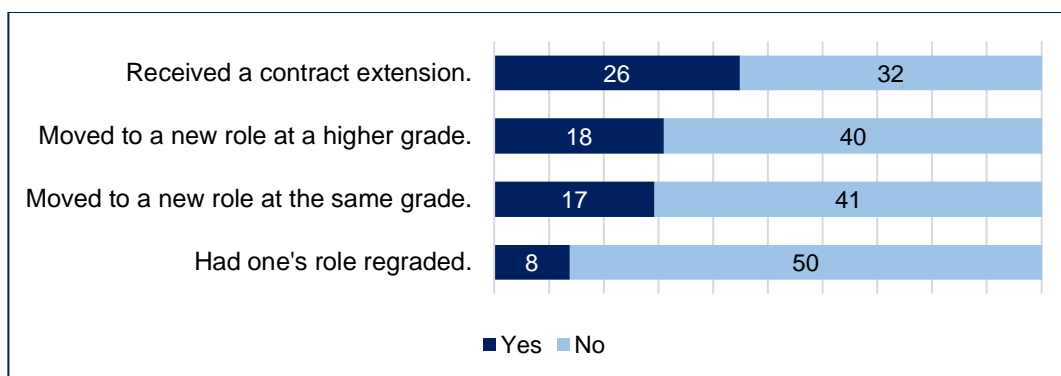
Career advancement and development are certainly not only about one's pay grade and the status of one's work contract. The following sections explore other aspects of the Fund's impact beyond re-grading and contract extension.

4.1.2 Collaboration and networking

The Fund **effectively facilitated academics'/researchers' collaboration and networking efforts** following their returns from career breaks; this was mainly achieved through paying for conference attendance, which is the most common proposed use of the grant. About 39% of the 154 successful applicants intended to use all or part of the grant to attend conferences (see Figure 1). 27 out of 63 reports received mentioned collaboration and networking as outcomes of receiving the grant.

Returning academics and researchers consider conferences as great opportunities for initiating collaborations with colleagues both in and outside of the University. This is key because some of them had not been working with their colleagues for months – if not years.

> I had not seen much of my colleagues nor gotten to know them well over the previous few years with two maternity leaves. I had budding collaborations with a group of researchers

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[4] Only those who used the electronic report submission system (n=58).

> who were at the second conference, and we had a great time together. We have since written three papers together.

Conferences were also considered by grant recipients as an effective way to increase one's **visibility** – both nationally and internationally. Visibility is instrumental to future collaboration; they are particularly needed for 'catalysing' career development following a career break.

> The main objectives of my RCF application were to raise my profile post-maternity leave through attendance at 2 conferences and to have the opportunity to create new collaborations to advance publications. […] Attending the [conference name] in [a city in Western Europe] allowed me to establish a collaboration with [name of an academic] from [a university in North America]. He has been instrumental in allowing us to develop a new technique in the lab, and the success of this is evident in our paper published.

A small number of grant recipients saw conferences as precious '**protected time**' for them to develop ideas and to focus on their work.

> Normally I only had a few hours a day where I could focus on my career before taking care of the children was the dominating priority. Even at work it was hard to turn off that part of your brain. But at the conference I was able to purely focus on work entirely for a few days, which was very helpful for me to assess what I had accomplished over the few preceding years, and where I wanted to go.

By attending conferences and/or inviting collaborators to Oxford, grant recipients were able to subsequently collaborate with others in their fields. This has helped them immensely in re-starting their careers. Many also provided in their reports a list of publications and fellowship applications that were enabled by such collaborations.

4.1.3 Increased confidence and motivation

In 14 of the 63 reports received, increased confidence and motivation were explicitly mentioned by grant recipients as an outcome of the Returning Carers Fund for them.

There are multiple ways that grant recipients gained confidence and motivation after their career breaks. A few early career researchers shared that the **successful application to the grant is an achievement** that strengthened their confidence.

> I was able to put on my CV that I had received some independent funding.

Some mentioned that **attending conference increased their confidence and self-perceptions as researchers**.

> As a parent I found these [conference] experiences of complete immersion in science for several days hugely valuable to reinstating my self-perception as a scientist as well as finding out about the latest developments in the field.

Many grant recipients used the grant for short-term research assistance (27 out of 154) and teaching buy-in (54 out of 154) to allow for more time for research (also see the next sub-section). This **impetus** and accordingly **increased research outputs** were also considered important to increasing confidence.

A smaller number of reports mentioned that **coaching and career development opportunities** (e.g., attending courses) were key to increasing their confidence and motivation after a career hiatus. About one-fifth of applications had 'training and career development' as a proposed use of grant.

> The coaching made possible by my Returning Carer's award has really made a difference to my work, particularly in terms of my vision and ability to articulate my research. This confidence is difficult to quantify, but I have just had my position regraded and been awarded the title of Associate Professor which is a good outcome to start with!

4.1.4 Increased work efficiency

In 11 of the 63 reports received, **increased work efficiency** was explicitly mentioned as an outcome of the Fund. This increase was usually a result of having **short-term research assistance and teaching buy-out** funded to allow for more time for research.

> I am grateful for the support from the Returning Carer's fund which allowed me to outsource some labour-intensive experimental talks [...] and focus my energies efficiently on the most important tasks at hand.

In addition, a small number of grant recipients said that the grant allowed them to buy **equipment**, including consumables like reagent, to conduct research more speedily. During the COVID-19 pandemic, a small number of researchers also used the fund to buy a laptop to allow them to work from home and balance caring responsibilities.

The above usually resulted in increased research outputs and in increased in confidence, both were instrumental to restarting recipients' careers as explained before.

4.1.5 Latest knowledge and skills

Some grant recipients opined that, after relatively long career breaks, it was important to **learn about the advances made in their fields of work**. This was achieved through actively working in research teams again (with the help of teaching buyouts and short-term research assistance) as well as through conference attendance and taking career development courses. The reviewer found 11 out of 63 reports mentioning acquisition of latest knowledge and skills as an outcome.

> The course has introduced to me a highly novel technique which has great potential in my research field. After taking the course, I have discussed with my supervisor on how to adopt this technique in my present project and future work to enhance the output and impact of the future publications.

4.1.6 New areas of expertise and career orientation

A small number of grant recipients used the grant to **adjust their career orientations**; 6 out of 63 reports had this adjustment mentioned. This was mostly achieved by developing expertise in a slightly different subject area and/or new skillsets, such as leadership skills mentioned in the excerpt below.

> [The Fund] allowed me to have the time and space to get a clearer sense of leadership techniques, which in turn gave me the knowledge and skillsets to overcome some of the

> challenges I faced on the path to establish my independent research group. [… The Fund] placed me in a stronger position when I applied for highly competitive Fellowships, which jumpstarted the establishment of my research group at the University.

A couple of grant recipients expressed that the new career options enabled would help them better balance their careers and family lives.

4.2   Visibility of University's support

The grant recipients were asked to comment on any wider impact that the Fund has had. Many commented on how the Fund has made the **University's support** for returning carers – as well as more widely on equality, diversity and inclusion – become **more visible** to them.

This proves that **the Fund has achieved its second objective**, that is, **increase the visibility** of the University's support for carers, with a view to changing perceptions of balancing a research or academic career with caring responsibilities.

This achievement was succinctly captured by a grant recipient's comment:

> It also made me believe in the equality and diversity work that the University has committed to.

Some of them **felt valued** as a member of staff at the University, for instance:

> The existence of this award makes me feel more valued as a member of staff returning from maternity leave. At [the] time that can feel quire overwhelming, it is a good demonstration of support from the university to help with this transition period, and I am very grateful that it has been set up.

Some felt that the University **understood the needs of returning carers**, for example:

> [The Fund] showed that the University understood the challenges faced by returning carers.

The Fund also demonstrated that the University **acknowledged the hard work** of its academics and researchers.

> I think it had appositive psychological impact: it made me feel that I am employed by an organisation that takes EDI seriously, understands diverse facets of people's lives beyond the workplace, and takes positive steps to allow people returning from caring responsibilities to advance professionally and to feel acknowledged. That in itself is extremely valuable […]

The Fund was mentioned in another Wellcome-funded[5] project led by Dr Mahima Mitra, who found that researchers commented very positively on the existence of the Fund when discussing the University's efforts on ensuring gender equality.

The Fund has also **helped offer the perception that it is possible to balance caring responsibilities with careers** as academics and researchers.

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[5] This review is partly funded by the Wellcome Institutional Strategic Support Fund (ISSF).

> I think the award had a positive impact on my wellbeing and confidence – I was able to return to larger conferences, undertake podium presentations, whilst knowing that I could still care for my young baby simultaneously. I also believe that the impact of the award on university culture enables you to feel better supported in general.

In addition, several Divisions have organised workshops for returning parents wherein academics and researchers shared how they achieved the balance. The Fund was mentioned in these workshops to demonstrate how it can support returning carers and to encourage applications.

This report could not gauge how well the general staff knew about the impact of the Fund, but it recommends using the findings in this report to further raise the visibility of the Fund and of the support that the University has been providing for carers (see recommendation 4).

4.3 Achieving University's Equality Objectives

By supporting returning carers' career development and by increasing the visibility of the University's support, the Fund has been **contributing to achieving the University's equality objectives**.

First, the Fund has helped advance careers of more than 330 female academics and researchers and gave out nearly £1.5 million since its establishment. More specifically, the support is given at one of the most critical moments of one's career – coming back from a maternity leave and, for some, from years of being a full-time mother. This effectively helped address the 'leaking pipeline' of female academics and researchers and helped the University to continue to **increase the proportion of women in senior academic roles** (one of the equality objectives). Also, the Fund helped retain the University's talent (commitment 1 under 'People' in the Strategic Plan 2018-24).

Second, the Fund helped returning carers **balance** their careers and caring responsibilities as **competing demands**. It also **promotes** staff's **wellbeing**. Both objectives are mentioned in 'People Priorities' in the Strategic Plan 2018-24. A grant recipient shared that:

> I was able to concentrate my efforts on getting my career back on track, rather than juggling my research position with another job, my work-life balance became much healthier, and I was much less stressed.

Lastly, the Fund has given grants to many academics and researchers for **career development**. The Fund was deliberately designed to be flexible so that returning carers can choose what would work best for them according to their own needs. This was mentioned by a grant recipient, who wrote:

> I really appreciate the existence of the Returning Carers fund; even though the grants are small, the flexibility of the criteria mean that it is possible to target it towards career-development activities that would otherwise be very difficult to fund.

This demonstrates that the Fund has contributed to the Strategic Plan's third commitment under 'People' (i.e., to support staff in personal and professional development).

4.4   Unintended Positive Outcomes

The grant recipients also reported unintended positive outcomes of the Fund. First and foremost is that the Fund has had an impact beyond the recipients themselves; it **supported the career development of early-career researchers and doctoral students, many of them are women**. This is mainly because 54 out of 154 applications made in the 4 academic years proposed having short-term researcher and/or administrative assistance. A grant recipient shared that:

> It also contributed to [research assistant's name]'s academic development, and she has now secured an Academic Clinical Fellowship. As such, I am proud of the contribution I have been able to make to nurturing my colleagues and consider this a key success, in addition to the research outputs of publications and conference presentations.

The Fund also helped **mitigate the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on research**. (Some grant recipients were also given grant under the COVID Rebuilding Research Momentum Fund.)

> My book project had been significantly disrupted by the pandemic. I managed to collect further data, thanks to the fund, which enabled me to continue with the book project. I have also used the fund to write the most of my monograph.

Since many fund recipients collaborated with academics and researchers outside of Oxford, the Fund also contributed to the University's collaboration on research both nationally and internationally.

4.5   Relevance of the Fund

Considering the Fund's significant and positive impact on returning carers and on increasing the visibility of the University's support for them and commitment on promoting equality, it can be established that **the Fund remains relevant** to today's work circumstances and to the University's equality objectives.

Also, **the Fund's flexibility also contributed to its relevance** to the returning carers: it allows applicants to identify what would help them re-start their careers. Applicants are required to seek approval from their supervisor, Head of Department or Faculty Board Chair and by their Departmental or Faculty Administrator; this encourages them to discuss their career plans with others. Some applicants, after the first submission of their applications, were asked to make amendments to their applications, and this process can be seen as helping them better elucidate the connections between their needs, their proposed uses of grant and their career goals.

The Fund, however, has been **less relevant to those who went on shared parental leaves**, many of them are men. The review therefore recommends changing the criteria to allow them to also be benefited and subsequently increase the uptake of shared parental leave (see recommendation 2). Other groups' needs are discussed in the next chapter (5).

5. Criteria and Administration of the Fund

5.1   Criteria of the Fund

The Fund has the following eligibility criteria:

'The scheme is open to all those who, at the closing date for applications:

- Are currently on leave for a minimum of six months;
- Have returned from a break of at least six months within the last two years; or
- Have returned from two breaks each of at least six months within the last five years.'

All 160+ applications in the academic years from 2017/18 to 2020/21 were from staff members returning from maternity leave, except for 6 from shared parental leave and 1 from adoption leave.

The criteria of the Fund were considered by most of the grant recipients as **clear** (see Figure 4).

Figure 4 Grant recipients' views on criteria of the Fund
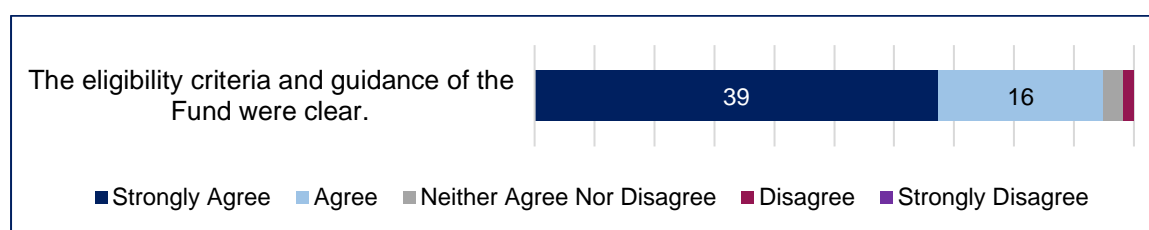
However, it is worth noting that these respondents had their applications accepted and were therefore more likely than prospective applicants and the general staff body to say that the criteria were clear.

In the remaining of this section, the report focuses on a few groups of staff members regarding their eligibility to apply for the Fund:

1. Academics and researchers who take **shared parental leaves** (mostly men). As discussed in Chapter 3, in the past four academic years, only around 7% of those returning from shared parental leave were eligible. The main reason was that the Fund has the same criterion on length of leave for staff members returning from all types of parental leaves. Regarding this, the review makes a recommendation on relaxing the requirement on length of leave for those returning from shared parental leaves. Please refer to chapter 6 for details.
2. Academics and researchers who are **employed by colleges only.** They are currently ineligible (although those with a shared contract with Divisions are eligible). The review considers this arrangement to be appropriate; it also agrees that this should not be changed because the Fund is financed by Divisions rather than colleges and administered by the central University (the EDU).
3. **Teaching-only staff members**. There have been a small number of applications rejected because the applicants were teaching-only staff members (specifically language assistants), and they could not demonstrate how the grant can support their career development in research and in progressing in an academic career. The review considers the current eligibility criteria clear regarding these cases. It may be worth reiterating in the Fund's guidance document that teaching-only staff members are

eligible, as long as they intend to – and can demonstrate how they intend to – use the grant to start or restart their careers in research.

4. Academics and researchers on **fixed-term contracts**. Although they are technically eligible for the Fund, the promotion of the Fund mostly only targets those returning from paid parental leaves. Some of these fixed-term contract academics/researchers may not have had paid parental leaves, and it may be worth working with the newly established Researcher Hub to strengthen the promotion of the Fund to them.

5.2   Administration of the Fund

The administration of the Fund was considered by grant recipients to be effective. Figure 5 provides more details.

Figure 5 Grant recipients' views on administration of the Fund
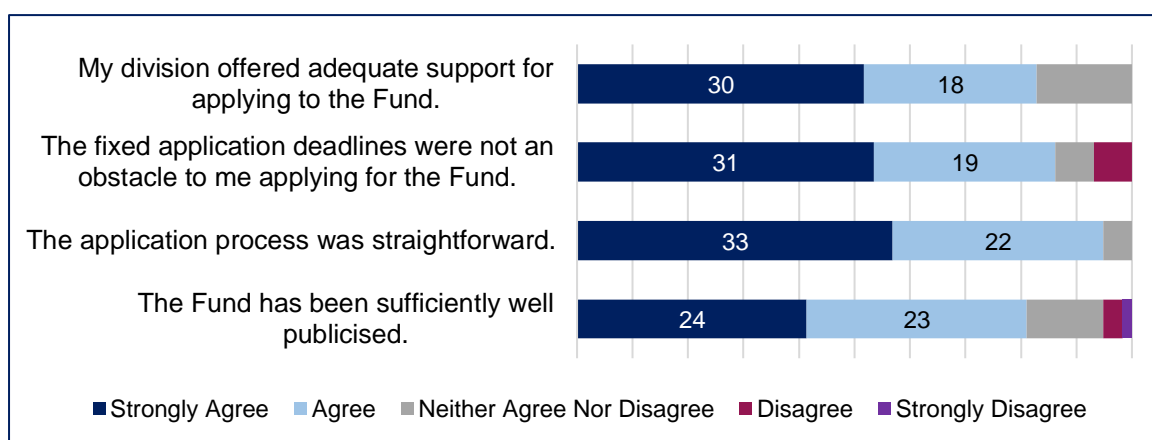
Like the responses on the criteria of the Fund, these responses are not representative of all prospective applicants. That said, the positive feedback collected proved that the departmental support given, the application deadlines set, the application process and the promotion of the Fund are functioning well.

There are a few areas of improvement that this review identified through meetings with the Fund's Divisional leads and interviews with researchers.

First, **promotion** of the Fund. In the four academic years, around 40% of those who returned from parental leave and were eligible at the time were given grant. The Fund's application form asked applicants how they knew about the Fund (see Figure 6). Most applicants knew about the Fund from their colleagues, and this could include administration staff and human resources (HR) staff, as the form did not ask for names, and applicants sometimes only wrote down 'a colleague'. Some applicants provided more accurate response and said that their **line managers** and principal investigators (PIs) told them about the Fund. It remained unclear whether departmental HR staff consistently told academics and researchers leaving and returning from leave about the Fund, but it is advisable to continue to regularly remind departmental HR staff of the Fund, preferably a few weeks before each term's deadline. **Mailing lists and circulars**, on the other hand, proved to be effective in promoting the Fund, as about 40 applicants knew about the Fund in them.
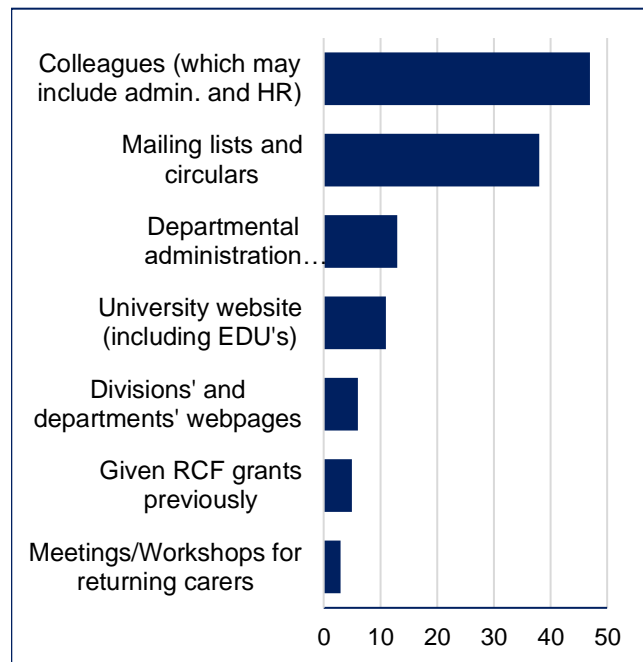
Second, **information and guidance document** of the Fund. Apart from promotion of the Fund, another barrier to further increasing the number of applications is a lack of details on in the guidance document **post-acceptance financial arrangement**. Some academics and researchers opined that such information, should it be provided, will help them better plan for application. Such information is particularly important when arranging for short-term research assistance and teaching buyouts; it helps applicants identify the right research assistants and teaching staff earlier in the process.

Also, the document should make clear the circumstances in which the grant can be used to pay the salary of the individual, e.g., through contract extensions or to increase units of full-time equivalent (FTE) (if the grant recipient is not a full-time employee). These two uses are not currently included in the guidance document, and the divisional leads believe that this should be made more transparent.

Figure 6 How applicants knew about the Fund

The two areas of improvement above should address the major reasons of eligible staff not applying: not knowing about the Fund; and not sure how the grant can be used.

Third, **end-of-project reporting**. All grant recipients are required to write a report 12 months after receiving the Fund or when the project closes. This requirement was not fulfilled; in the four academic years, only <10% of them submitted a report. A digital form, like the one used in this review, may help applicants write their reports. The monitoring and evaluation data collected can help the University ensure the Fund's effectiveness and understand how it can be improved.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1 Conclusion

The University established the Returning Carers Fund in 2014 to support academics and researchers who have taken a break for caring responsibilities to re-establish their research careers. These career breaks include maternity and shared parental leaves, as well as breaks to care for disabled or elderly relatives.

In the four academic years between 2017/18 and 2020/21, the Fund supported more than 150 academics and researchers and helped them re-establish their careers by funding a wide range of activities chosen by the academics and researchers themselves. These include conference attendance, short-term research and administrative assistance, teaching buyout, and training or professional development activities. **The Fund gave out grants worth more than £530,000 in total in the four academic years**.

This review, conducted in mid-2022, collected and analysed the Fund's application data, its grant use reports, one-to-one interviews and parental leave data. It finds that the **Returning Carers Fund has been effective in achieving its two objectives:**

1. **Support those who have taken a break for caring responsibilities to re-establish their research careers.**
2. **Increase the visibility of the University's support for carers, with a view to changing perceptions of balancing a research or academic career with caring responsibility.**

More specifically, the review finds that the Fund has had a significant and positive impact on grant recipients' research careers as demonstrated in many **successful research outputs** (e.g., academic journal articles, book chapters, scientific investigation data) as well as **grant and fellowship applications**. This was achieved through the Fund encouraging **collaboration and networking**, increasing returning carers' **confidence and motivation**, increasing their **work efficiency** (by funding research assistance and equipment), and enabling learning of **new skills**.

The Fund has also **contributed to achieving the University's equality objectives**, such as: increasing the proportion of women in senior academic roles; helping staff members balance their careers and caring responsibilities as competing demands; and investing in people and supporting uptake of career development opportunities.

In addition to the impact, the review also studied the criteria and administration of the Fund.

6.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings reported in this document, the reviewer recommends the following:

1. **Continue the Fund** in its current format but **adjust the upper limits of grant per application** to account for the increased costs of goods and services.
2. **Relax the eligibility criterion on lengths of paternity and shared parental leaves** to encourage uptake of these two kinds of leave.
3. Provide **clearer guidance on post-acceptance financial arrangement**, particularly that for the hiring for short-term research assistance and teaching buyouts. This is to alleviate any worries that prospective applicants may have.

4. **Strengthen the promotion** of the Fund on the departmental level and via alternative communication channels.
5. **Enforce the requirement on submitting a report** at the end of the period for using the grants; this is for better monitoring and evaluation of the Fund.

6.2.1 Continue the Fund but Adjust the Upper Limits of Grants

Given the significant impact of the Fund, the University should **continue the Returning Carers Fund in its current format**. However, considering that the maximum amount of grant per application (i.e., £5,000, and £10,000 for very exceptional cases) was set in 2015 and that the costs of goods and services have increased significantly in the last 7 years, the maximum amount should be adjusted.

Using the four-year average of approved amount between 2017/18 and 2020/21 £175,884 (see Table 4) and assuming that there needs a **20% increase**[6] (with maximum amount per grant adjusted to £6,000 and in exception cases to £12,000), the University will need to earmark just over £211,000 a year for the Fund to operate, excluding the administrative costs.

6.2.2 Relax Requirement on Length of Shared Parental Leaves

Only a very small proportion of staff member returning from shared parental leave (SPL; 7%) were eligible for the Fund (see Table 2). Also, considering that the University's new gender equality action plan aims to promote the two kinds of parental leave, it is advisable to encourage applications from this group of staff members. To do so, the EDU should consider relaxing the eligibility criterion on lengths of parental leaves, as, for these returners, this criterion has been a major barrier to apply for the Fund. This relaxation should in the long run **encourage uptake of SPL** and further promote gender equality.

The reviewer suggests that, for academics and researchers returning from SPL, the **required length of their leave be halved to 3 months (around 13 weeks)**. This should continue to **allow 'blocks' of leaves** that add up to at least 3 months' long (e.g., a 10-week 'block' and a 7-week 'block' for the same child), considering that many SPL are not taken in one-go. The maximum grant per application should accordingly be halved (i.e., £3,000, using the new proposed upper limit) if the total length of blocks of leave is between 3 to 6 months.

According to the leave data, **about 30% of SPL takers (24% of SPL returners) who are academics and researchers had SPL of lengths between 13 and 24 weeks** (see **Error! Reference source not found.**). Assuming that 50% of these returners apply for the Fund and have their applications accepted[7],

Figure 7 Lengths of shared parental leaves submitted by academics and researchers between 2017 and 2021 (n=154)

there will be about an extra of 8 grant recipients every year. This will incur an initial **extra annual cost of £24,000**.

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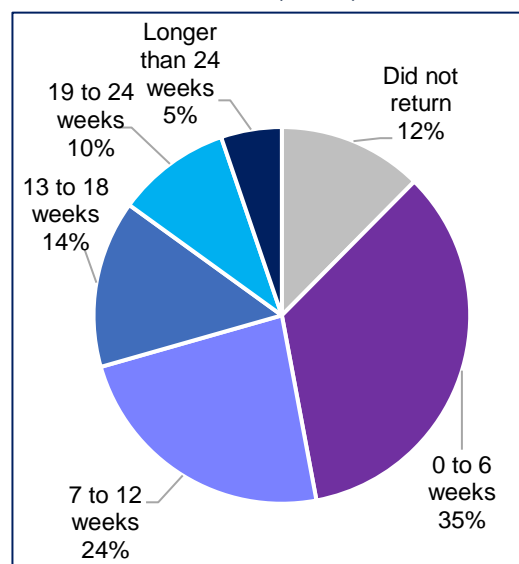
[6] According to the Bank of England, goods and services costing £5,000 in 2015 costed £5,578 in 2021.
[7] Nine (9) percentage points higher than the current average for all eligible applicants.

It is worth noting that about 70% of all the 154 SPL takers shown in **Error! Reference source not found.** are men.

Combining the first and the second recommendations, the **new projected annual investment needed for the Fund will be £235,000**, excluding the administrative costs to the EDU. It is worth noting that this is still well under the £300,000 mark made in the 2016 review of the Fund.

The relaxed requirement should apply to maternity leaves as well. This could potentially benefit those just moving to Oxford from other countries wherein they take maternity leaves, for, in some European countries, the maternity leave entitlement is in the range of 14 to 20 weeks.

6.2.3 Provide Clearer Guidance on Post-Acceptance Financial Arrangement

The review found that the financial arrangement for hiring for short-term research assistance and teaching buyout was unclear to prospective applicants and to some grant recipients (see Section 5.2). This could cause hesitance among prospective applicants. It is advisable to **provide further details on the guidance both for prospective applicants and for department-level HR personnel**.

6.2.4 Strengthen Promotion of the Fund

The review found that the application rates tend to be lower in larger Divisions and Departments (in terms of number of staff members). A reasonable assumption is that the flow of information is more complicated in larger work units.

One possible way of strengthening the promotion is to **ensure that all departmental HR personnel are aware of the scheme**, so that they give out information of the Fund in their discussions with academics and researchers both when they are about to go on leave and when they return. The information should be given to leavers and returners of all kinds of eligible leave (not only parental leave).

Additional communication channels are needed to further promote the Fund. The EDI newsletter set up this year and the short presentations in workshops for returning parents are two good examples; they reminded potential applicants of the Fund's termly deadlines. EDI practitioners are key information providers, and it is recommendable to ensure that all incoming EDI practitioners are aware of the Fund.

The findings of this report will be conducive to further promoting the Fund, as they will help prospective applicants understand how they can make best use of the grants to re-start their careers. Case studies will be developed for promotional use.

6.2.5 Enforce Requirement on Submitting Reports

The **requirement on submitting a report** within 12 months of receipt of the funds or on completion of the project **must be enforced**. This is to ensure that the University can continue to monitor and evaluate the Fund as well as to use the data collected to demonstrate success and encourage applications. Digital forms, such as the ones used for this review, may be easier for grant recipients to fill in and could be used to replace the old forms.

[Post-review notes added on 13 October 2022]

The steering group of the Returning Carers Fund met on 27 September 2022 to review the findings and recommendations. The following were agreed:

- The steering group approved all recommendations made in the review. Implementation of the approved recommendations will take place during MT2022 and HT 2023.
- No significant changes will be made to the MT2022 round considering that there is limited time before the round's deadline. Implementation of recommendation 1 (increase the cap of grant from £5,000 to £6,000) is an exception, as it will be implemented for the MT2022 round: all applicants for this round will be notified that the cap has been increased by 20%, so that they can adjust their budgeting.

To implement the recommendations, the EDU will work with the divisional leads from December 2022 to February 2023 on the following:

- Update the amount of upper limit of grants on the webpage and other documentation.
- Establish the route for returners of shared parental leave (this route will be retroactively open to those who would have been eligible in MT2022).
- Update guidance and application forms to include recommended courses and services for professional development.
- Develop a one-page RCF information sheet for applicants to share with their managers or supervisors. Alternatively, on the Fund's webpage, add a 'for managers and supervisors' section. This is to help facilitate discussions between prospective applicants and their managers/supervisors.
- Develop a post-acceptance note that includes a check list and a timeline to help grant recipients understand what needs to be done to use the grant more efficiently.
- Based on the electronic report submission tool developed in this review, develop a system to allow applicants to submit a report electronically.
- Approach grant recipients of 2020/21 and ask for end-of-project reports.