So you want to apply for an NIHR Fellowship?
- an RDS SE introduction
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www.rds-se.nihr.ac.uk/
1. Welcome

Welcome to this introduction to applications to National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) training and career development personal awards – ‘Fellowships’. We are pleased that you are considering a Fellowship application.

Advisers at the NIHR Research Design Service South East (RDS SE) have produced this guide as part of the support we can offer with your application.

Scope
The purpose of this guide is

- to provide an overview of the NIHR Fellowship schemes
- to walk you through the process from initial discussions to interview
- to give advice on creating a good application and preparing well for your interview
- to signpost to sources of support and advice.

We hope you find this guide useful and wish you success with your application!

- RDS SE
2. What is the NIHR?

The NIHR was created to be the research arm of the NHS. The NIHR Mission is to ‘improve the health and the wealth of the nation through research’: [www.nihr.ac.uk/](http://www.nihr.ac.uk/)

The NIHR Health Research System

The NIHR structure is complex and interlinking but can be summarised in the Figure below. A core principle is that patients and the public are central to all research activity as shown in this diagram. Support for research careers evolves so always check the training and career development website for up-to-date information. [www.nihr.ac.uk/researchers/apply-for-funding/how-to-apply-for-career-development-support/apply-for-an-award](http://www.nihr.ac.uk/researchers/apply-for-funding/how-to-apply-for-career-development-support/apply-for-an-award)

Research Career support for Individuals

This guide focuses on the support which NIHR offers individuals through its funding schemes for training and career development via personal awards which we have summarised as ‘Fellowships’. A successful applicant becomes a member of the NIHR Academy (see diagram above.

The NIHR Academy Executive manages the Fellowships application and supports successful trainees throughout their award.
3. What is an NIHR Fellowship?

Characteristics

An NIHR Fellowship is an award to a specific individual to support their research, clinical and professional training and development while undertaking a high-quality research project. The Fellowship enables aspiring health researchers to develop an applied health/clinical academic career and to become future research leaders. The current pathways run from pre-PhD to Professor as shown below.

They are available for all professions, and include social care, and entry may be at any level. The schemes are designed to be flexible and you can move between the different pathways relevant to your profession.

An important point to note is these are not project grants. This can cause confusion - particularly if you work with teams who are unfamiliar with Fellowships. There is as much emphasis on you, your track record and potential as a research leader, as on the research proposal.

The research must have clear potential to benefit patients and the public and there should be active involvement of patients and the public with the research.

Current Fellowship pathways
What does it cover?

Funding is for three to five years full-time, depending on the scheme and the level, but may be taken part-time.

The Fellowship covers your salary for the duration of the award plus the costs of your research and your bespoke training and development programme. You do not need a current contract to apply at the chosen level, as long as the host institution will agree one for you when you receive the Fellowship.

What does it involve?

You will need to write a substantial application in two stages covering:

- your CV and your track record
- a detailed research proposal with timelines and project milestones
- how your research will benefit the NHS and its likely impact
- a detailed training and development plan unique to you
- justification of the financial support you request
- an intellectual property plan
- justification for your choice of supervisors/mentors
- a research management plan
- details of institutional support
- your patient and public involvement activity and plan.

You can see that the preparation will be lengthy and demanding, so you need to give yourself sufficient time to produce the highest quality application.

Remember!

It usually takes between six months and a year to prepare a competitive application.
What is the assessment process?

The process starts with an initial triage check for eligibility, for example that your research is within NIHR remit.

NIHR panel members (including external peer review for higher-level awards) carry out the shortlisting. Shortlisted applicants will then complete the Stage 2 form.

If you are successful at the shortlisting stage, you are invited for an interview where you will give a five-minute presentation and have 20 to 25 minutes of Q&A with the panel members.

You are notified of the outcome around two months after the interview and successful candidates usually take up their Fellowship within the following 4 months. All applicants receive feedback.

Tip:

*Spend time looking at the Fellowship schemes and guidance notes on the NIHR website, so you really understand the remit, eligibility criteria and process.*

*Talk to the NIHR Academy, if you have queries: 0113 532 8410 or email: Academy-awards@nihr.ac.uk*

What are the assessment criteria?

In essence, the assessment for Fellowships can be summarised as

‘*Person, Project, Place*’

or

Why you? Why this project? Why this place?

It is helpful to remember this while thinking through and preparing your application.

The order is important, as a Fellowship is personal award to an individual so you, your track record and potential are crucial components.

Fellowships are career development awards, so your bespoke training and development plan, and how it aligns to your research proposal and your personal development, are included in the assessment.
4. First steps

Before launching into writing a research proposal, or filling in the application form, it is good to step back and ask ‘Why do I want to do this?’ and ‘What does my CV look like?’ The panes below give questions and suggestions to guide your reflections.

**Your motivation**
- What are your career aspirations?
- Are you committed to applied health research/a clinical academic career?
- Are you at the correct stage in your life/career?
- Is a Fellowship right for you?
- Is it your decision or your manager’s?

**Your CV**
- Review your CV thoroughly and critically.
- Involve others in the review.
- Is it at the appropriate level?
- Where are the gaps?
- What do you need to do to strengthen it?
- How long will it take to improve your CV?

**What support is there for you?**

An aspect of your application which the panel will review is the institutional support for you and their commitment to you and your career beyond the Fellowship – ‘Place’ in the ‘Person, Project, Place’ summary.

Your line manager and institution(s) need to support you so you need their commitment and that of the team that you build around you. Have these discussions early so that managers can plan for back filling your post or create a case for a role/post after the Fellowship. The NIHR Booklet ‘Building a Research Career. A Guide for Aspiring Clinical Academics’ gives a useful overview for managers. [www.nihr.ac.uk/documents/building-a-research-career/20571](http://www.nihr.ac.uk/documents/building-a-research-career/20571)

**More insight into building a Clinical Academic career?**

**Contact:**
- Current/former award holders (RDS and the NIHR Academy can help with making contact)
- Clinical Academics in your profession or a related one
- The NIHR Research Training Advocates

[www.rds-se.nihr.ac.uk/](http://www.rds-se.nihr.ac.uk/)
Which scheme?

If you do decide to pursue a Fellowship, you need to decide which scheme is best for you. An in-depth discussion with an RDS Adviser is beneficial to support you with this decision.

There are schemes combining research with your clinical work, the ‘Integrated Academic Training’ (IAT) for doctors and dentists, and the ‘Integrated Clinical Academic’ (ICA) programme for non-medical healthcare professions. These have time for your clinical work and clinical development built into the scheme.

The IAT programme can be found at [www.nihr.ac.uk/explore-nihr/academy-programmes/integrated-academic-training.htm](http://www.nihr.ac.uk/explore-nihr/academy-programmes/integrated-academic-training.htm)

The ICA programme can be found at [www.nihr.ac.uk/explore-nihr/academy-programmes/hee-nihr-integrated-clinical-academic-programme.htm](http://www.nihr.ac.uk/explore-nihr/academy-programmes/hee-nihr-integrated-clinical-academic-programme.htm)

These programmes are for those wishing to combine clinical research and research leadership with continued clinical practice and clinical development.

The Fellowships Programme may be more appropriate for those wishing to pursue a career as an applied health researcher. The scheme is aimed at those aspiring to become independent research leaders within six to ten years of completing a PhD.

The Fellowships Programme can be found at [https://www.nihr.ac.uk/explore-nihr/academy-programmes/fellowship-programme.htm](https://www.nihr.ac.uk/explore-nihr/academy-programmes/fellowship-programme.htm)
What else do you need?

If you are new to research applications, you may be unaware of the other groups and infrastructure with which you may need to engage to complete your application and to be successful in your research.

Examples of the most common are:

- your Trust and/or Higher Education Institution (HEI) Research and Development (R&D) team
- University and/or NHS Trust internal grant review panels
- the finance team who deal with research and development
- the Intellectual Property (IP) group for your institution(s)
- the Clinical Research Network (CRN) for your area
- a Clinical Trials Unit (CTU)

Your finance or R&D team sign off applications. You may need to have completed all your sections several weeks earlier than the published deadline so that internal reviewers and these teams have time to complete their approvals.

Training and Development Plan

Use your preparations to think about what would be useful for your research, your clinical and your professional development. Be ambitious and do not be restricted to local or national training or only research techniques. This is your opportunity to design a package unique to you.

If you have carried out a review of your CV, you may find that you can use some of the gaps that you identified to build your bespoke training and development plan. Some examples of training needs are: statistics, systematic review, qualitative methodology. Do not forget your professional development and consider leadership, communication and presentation skills.

Patient and Public Involvement in research

Patient and public involvement (PPI) is fundamental to NIHR-funded research.

NIHR define PPI in research as ‘research being carried out ‘with’ or ‘by’ members of the public rather than ‘to’, ‘about’ or ‘for’ them. Considering your PPI early in your preparations is essential to produce a high quality application.

The RDS can support you with your PPI, including making an application for a grant to facilitate your PPI activities. PPI in research must be taken seriously. It is a prerequisite for research funding, particularly for NIHR. Funding applications will be severely criticised, and potentially rejected if the PPI is not of good quality or ‘box ticking’ only.
Patient/public/carer representatives sit on the Fellowship interview panels. They are skilled in assessing the commitment of researchers to PPI in research. Token PPI will jeopardise your application.

Start with an attitude of goodwill and collaboration – patients/public/carers are enthusiastic about research and want to support good research which has impact in the NHS.

PPI is not difficult, however it may be unfamiliar depending on your profession e.g. you may not be used to running a session with patients to discuss an emerging research idea. Your lead RDS adviser can help to organise specialist advice in PPI, including assistance with the costings for PPI activity in your application.

How can patients/public/carers support your Fellowship?

- Work with you to refine the research question so it is relevant to patients, the public and the NHS,
- Help you write a high quality Plain English Summary (PES),
- Offer advice via a project steering group throughout the project life cycle,
- Comment/develop materials with you e.g. a Participant Information Sheet (PIS),
- Give you mock interview practice,
- Create a dissemination plan with you to maximise the impact of your research beyond peer review journals,
- Assist you with long-term co-production work with patients and the public.
5. How the RDS can help you

Applying for a Fellowship may seem a daunting prospect. However, you do not have to do it alone. You have supervisors/mentors, senior colleagues and other Trust/HEI support.

And the RDS provides a free, confidential service - with support tailored to you.

How can RDS support your Fellowship application?

- Assign you a lead adviser who will be your contact throughout the application process.

- Discuss different Fellowship options available and support you in deciding which might suit you best at your current career stage.

- Help you review your CV.

- Give insight on what reviewers and NIHR Fellowship panels look for.

- Discuss how your project proposal might best align to NIHR remit/priorities.

- Signpost to specialist advice and NIHR infrastructure e.g. statistics, PPI, health economics, Clinical Trials Unit and the Clinical Research Network.

- Read and give feedback on your application as you prepare it.

- You can submit your application to a panel comprised of RDS advisers who will review it and give you feedback – this mimics the real review process.

- Support you in preparing for your interview, e.g. reviewing your presentation and discussing your approach to answering questions at your interview.

- Should you be unsuccessful, your RDS adviser can discuss the feedback with you and support your resubmission.
6. Writing your application

Access to the online application system is around two months before the closing date. This is a short period of time to complete all the preparatory work, which is why we recommend you start six to twelve months before the deadline.

Ideally, when the system opens you will have had discussions with your manager, your supervisors or mentors; engaged with other parties; have your research questions and methodology well developed; be carrying out your PPI work and have the outline of your training and development plan.

Now you can transfer all that you have worked on into the application form in an engaging, readable style that is jargon-free and makes a convincing, robust case for you and your research.

Tip:

Obtain a blank form and work on it before the scheme is launched

Realistically, you are likely to be working on many aspects of the proposal concurrent with filling in the application form. Build a realistic timetable leading to the submission date. Make sure that you set target dates so changes from reviews of your application can be made prior to your submission.

We (RDS SE) can set up a panel review process to which you can submit your application for feedback before you send it in. We strongly recommend this, as it mimics the NIHR Fellowship panel review both in style and in the composition of the review team.

Remember that other groups such as finance and the research office may be the last to sign off your application, so build this into your timeline.

The submission deadline is non-negotiable.

Remember:

- Why me?
- Why this project?
- Why this place?
Person

Writing positively about yourself

This is difficult for most people so use others to help you. Have a clear message about yourself and your commitment to research; your desire for a clinical academic or applied health research career and your track record. Make the impact of your previous research activity very clear.

When writing use strong, true statements in the first person:

- I identified....
- I led....
- Independently I ....
- I was the first to demonstrate....
- I have been recognised for....

Training and development programme

NIHR Fellowships are training awards so your training and development programme is an important component of the assessment.

Do not be afraid to be ambitious. This is a great opportunity to devise a bespoke programme to support your research, clinical, teaching and professional development. Attending conferences is important but do not restrict yourself to these only. Consider a short placement in another department (including overseas) to learn a new technique or develop new collaborations; leadership and project management; training in statistics; presentation skills and so on.

Remember to include courses that your institutions provide to support researchers, for example courses for PhD students or Early Career Researchers. Think about your training and development plan – how does it fit with your research plan? Aim to link the two together to make your application coherent.
**The Project**

The research needs to fit the NIHR remit. Explain clearly how it will have a positive benefit to patients, the public and the NHS. If you are applying at Doctoral level ensure it meets the PhD criteria for the proposed higher education institution (HEI) and be feasible in three years (remember you are training as well).

Reviewers will look for a relevant and important research question with detailed and appropriate methodology that is described accurately. Ensure that there is a real need for the study and it is not just a replication of other work. Provide a clear, logical plan to achieve challenging, exciting objectives. Be specific about what you aim to achieve, how you will do it and the project milestones (provide a Gantt chart or equivalent).

Include pilot data to support your proposal and accept that risks are inevitable so demonstrate a plan to mitigate them.

The description of your research proposal should:

- contain a clear **hypothesis** and/or a set of research questions,
- show the **impact** of the research and the pathway to patient benefit,
- be of the correct **size and scale** for the award,
- use appropriate **methods**,
- provide a good **description** of the analysis, including the statistics,
- include the impact of **costs** on the NHS.

The preparations and discussions you will have had with your supervisors/mentors/RDS/others should enable you to achieve these.

Now the task is to write a compelling story. You have to convince a diverse group of readers that this research needs to be carried out - and by YOU. **Remember that the reader needs to engage and care about your research. If you do not seem enthused and passionate about it, no one else will be!**

**Tip:**

**Persuade as many people as you can to review your application:**

- Your RDS SE Adviser
- Your supervisors/mentors
- Colleagues
- Family and friends
The place

The reviewers will be considering:

- Are you in the best place for the subject and for you? Is the project making the best use of the HEI/NHS Trust strengths?
- Are your supervisors/mentors appropriate and can they give you the correct level of support? Can they help build your network? Are they on national committees, UK screening panels, NICE or others?
- Do your institutions offer you strong support for your Fellowship and beyond?

Tips for writing an attractive application

- Plain English throughout
  - No jargon
  - Be careful of abbreviations and acronyms
- Excite, and do not annoy, the reviewers
  - use spelling and grammar checks
- Write clearly for non-specialists
  - Do not add unnecessary components
- Ensure accurate references
- Make your proposal easy to read
  - Highlight important concepts
  - Clear signposting:
    - Numbering, bullets, headings and bold text
  - One idea per paragraph
  - Break up big blocks of text
    - Use white space
  - 2 to 4 sentences per paragraph
- Use figures and/or tables for clarity and to avoid words
  - Use good figure legends
  - Do not repeat information from figures/tables/legends elsewhere
- Put strong statements at the beginning and end of each paragraph and each section.
In the sections describing your supervisory/mentoring arrangements and the institution support, ensure you address these points are clearly. You will need to work with your senior colleagues to hone these sections.

**Patient and Public Involvement**

Show you understand and have carried out excellent PPI work by embedding it throughout your application, not just in the sections labelled PPI. When you come to write your application, your PPI work should be well advanced, just requiring a thorough and convincing description in your application.

**And finally**

The Stage 1 application form does not cover all aspects of the Fellowship proposal but do not neglect to consider them prior to completing Stage 1. It is not possible to make changes between Stage 1 and Stage 2 so your overall budget figure needs to be known for Stage 1 even if the justification is not submitted until Stage 2.

**Detailed budget**

Have the appropriate parties discussed, checked and approved the finances?

Sorting out research costs, NHS treatment costs and NHS support costs is not trivial. This is why we advise speaking with your finance teams and the NIHR Clinical Research Network early.

All your proposed expenditure requires justification; ensure you have sufficient time to complete this in a comprehensive way.

**Management and Governance**

Build your plan for the management of your research as you prepare your proposal. Think about the oversight of the research and all of the ethical permissions you will require.

All research generates Intellectual Property (IP). Speak to your institutions’ IP departments for advice. Do not rely on vague, generic statements about the IP of your research. Aim to be as specific as possible.
7. The interview

Congratulations!

Allow yourself to enjoy the success of being shortlisted before launching into the preparations for your interview.

Interview format

Interviews take place in Leeds over two to three days. Each level of award has its own panel. Information about the panels and the Chair reports are on the NIHR website: https://www.nihr.ac.uk/researchers/apply-for-funding/how-to-apply-for-career-development-support/how-to-apply-for-career-development-support

The interview starts with a brief introduction by the panel Chair who will then invite you to give your five-minute presentation on your research proposal. This is followed by 20 to 25 minutes of Q&A.

Two panel members will lead the Q&A. One will focus on your research proposal and the other on you, including questions about your training and development. The Chair may offer the opportunity to ask questions to the rest of the panel and explicitly may invite the patient/public/carer member to ask questions.

Tip: Research the panel members for your award to gain an idea of their likely approach to questions.

Mock interviews

Have several mock interviews with a variety of different groups. This helps you become used to giving your presentation and taking questions from people with very different perspectives. Ask your immediate work colleagues; family and friends; patients/carers; supervisors. Your RDS adviser can support your interview preparation.

Presentation

You must keep to time (five minutes) and you will be stopped if you overrun so practice, practice, practice! A five-minute presentation means only five to six slides and speaking at around one minute per slide.

Give your presentation to anyone you can persuade to listen. By speaking aloud to your slides you will discover how to identify the essential, and only the essential, material. Remember the panel members will not be experts in your specific area so, as in the style of your application, keep to plain English - do not use jargon.
The presentation enables you to start your interview in control – you know your slides and the message you want the panel to hear. Use it to settle your nerves and boost your confidence.

**Tip:**

*Prepare your final slide so that it has the take-home message you wish the panel to receive from your talk.*

*The panel see this slide for longest.*

**Q&A**

We have given a few example questions. Fellowship panels have asked questions similar to these. Whilst you may not be asked these exact same questions, use them to think through how you might answer and then test out your answers with others.

As with the presentation, try to keep the language you use free from jargon and from very subject specific terms. This is why it is so valuable to have practice sessions with a wide range of people. It will help you realise when you are unclear and how to change your explanations so everyone can understand what it is you want to convey.

*Why is this research important?*

*What do you expect to be doing in 10 years’ time?*

*How will your training plan take you to where you want to be?*
General

The panel understand this is a stressful situation and expect you to be nervous.

You have been shortlisted for an interview because your application reached the standard and the panel are interested in you and your research. Use this to boost your confidence.

During the interview:

- Enter the room with a smile and make eye contact
- Stay calm
- Admit if you do not know something
- Ask for clarification if you do not understand a question
- Try not to be defensive/aggressive/overconfident
- If something has changed, discuss this with the panel
- Listen to suggestions from the panel and interact positively with these
- Think of something positive to tell the panel at the end when they ask if you have any questions/anything to add: e.g. a recent publication/invitation to speak/promotion. This is a great way to end your interview!
8. Dealing with feedback

If you are unsuccessful, do not give up! It is very disappointing to receive a rejection and it can feel personal, although it is not.

Most funding schemes have success rates of around 10-20% so you are not alone in having this experience. All academics have experiences of having their research bids rejected. Whilst difficult, it is a good opportunity to develop key skills of resilience and dealing with feedback positively.

NIHR Fellowship schemes do allow you to resubmit, but check the criteria. You must address feedback clearly and comprehensively, and explain how you have changed your application in response. It is a chance to really improve your application to make it exciting and convincing. Below are examples of areas where reviewers considered applications weak. Think carefully about these, and how you can avoid the same pitfalls.

Common themes in unsuccessful applications

- Not within NIHR remit
- Unclear what the impact will be – the ‘so what?’ question
- Worthy, solid = dull
- Duplicative, unambitious
- No clear hypothesis, or important research question(s)
- Unfocused, overambitious, lack of clear plan, unable to complete within time frame of the award
- Lack of detail in methodology/inappropriate methodology
- Lack of appropriate research track record of researcher and/or supporting team
- Lack of collaborators, supervision and mentorship in chosen area
- Lack of experience of supervisors – e.g. in PhD supervision and/or in the research area
- Generic, vague statements of support from host institutions
- Lack of a clinical academic pathway with the chosen institutions
- Poor training and development plan
- Paying lip-service to patient and public Involvement (PPI)
- Incomplete, incorrect, inappropriate costings.
If you were successful, you will receive feedback also.

Although it can be tempting to ignore this and launch into your Fellowship, do take some time to consider it as it can help you make any future applications even better!

9. Next steps

We hope this overview of NIHR Fellowships and how to apply for them has been helpful. If you are considering an application, we encourage you to think about your next steps.

Some suggestions:

- Talk to your manager about a clinical academic career
- Review your CV
- Contact current/former trainees and learn about their experiences
- Talk to us at RDS SE.

Once you have considered your next steps, commit to them and set yourself a timescale to complete them.

We wish you every success in your future career!

- RDS SE
10. Useful resources

NIHR Training and Career Development website
www.nihr.ac.uk/researchers/apply-for-funding/how-to-apply-for-career-development-support/how-to-apply-for-career-development-support

The NIHR Academy
e: academy@nihr.ac.uk  t: 0113 532 8444

NIHR Research Design Service
www.nihr.ac.uk/explore-nihr/support/research-design-service.htm

Research Design Service South East
www.rds-se.nihr.ac.uk

RDS SE Twitter @NIHR_RDSSE

‘Building a Research Career’ A guide for aspiring clinical academics and their managers.
www.nihr.ac.uk/documents/building-a-research-career/20571

NIHRtv - Videos on the funding programmes by NIHR and successful awardees
search for Clinical Academic Careers, the NIHR Academy or Fellowships
www.youtube.com/user/NIHRtv

Medical Research Council (MRC) Tips for writing good applications
mrc.ukri.org/news/blog/12-top-tips-for-writing-a-grant-application/?redirected-from-wordpress

Kent, Surrey and Sussex Clinical Research Network
www.nihr.ac.uk/nihr-in-your-area/kent-surrey-and-sussex/

Surrey Clinical Trials Unit
University of Surrey, Egerton Road, Guildford, Surrey, GU2 7XP
01483 689797 e: surreyctu@surrey.ac.uk
http://ctu.surrey.ac.uk/

Sussex Clinical Trials Unit
BSMS Teaching Building, University of Sussex, Brighton, East Sussex, BN1 9PX
01273 606 755
Abbreviations

CTU  Clinical Trials Unit
CRN  Clinical Research Network
HEI  Higher Education Institute
IAT  Integrated Academic Training programme (doctors & dentists)
ICA  Integrated Clinical Academic programme (non-medical)
IP   Intellectual property
NICE National Institute for Clinical Excellence
NIHR National Institute for Health Research
PES  Plain English Summary
PIS  Participant Information Sheet
PPI(E) Patient and public involvement (and engagement)
R&D  Research and Development
RDS  Research Design Service

Definitions

Research costs  Costs of the research which finish when the research ends
NHS support costs Additional patient care costs associated with the research
NHS treatment costs Costs of patient care that would be incurred if the intervention became standard care