NIHR | School for Social Care Research

NIHR SSCR Programme 2024-2029 Career Development Awards (CDA)

Call for Applications June 2026: Guidance for Applicants

The School for Social Care Research (SSCR) is inviting applications for Career Development Awards (CDAs) in social care research.

This funding provides awards of £20k to £75k for individuals to **undertake personalised training activities** and **advance their professional development in social care research.** Awards are open to applicants at any career stage working in social care practice and academia.

Deadline for applications: **5pm Thursday 24th September 2026.**

Background and context

The NIHR School for Social Care Research (SSCR) is dedicated to improving the evidence base of social care practice in England and has been granted £6m to implement and conduct capacity-building activities 2024 to 2029.

Social care is vital for preserving independence, enhancing the quality of life, wellbeing, and end of life care, but it remains under-supported by evidence and the infrastructure to produce and implement that evidence. Building an affordable, high-quality, and sustainable adult social care system that meets people's needs requires a strong evidence base to understand what works best, for whom and when.

We aim to attract and invest in a diverse cohort of early, mid, and senior social care researchers with the skills to develop and lead social care research in academic and practice settings in the future. Individuals who are committed to their continued career development and to improving the evidence base of social care research in England are invited to apply.

This is our **third and final round** of Career Development Awards. We have funded 18 awards in our first two rounds, building a strong cohort of social care researchers and practitioner-researchers across a broad spectrum of interests and career aspirations.

Version 1
Last updated: 05/06/2026

Who is a Career Development Award for?

We encourage you to apply if:

- You are already working in social care research, education or practice at **any** career stage.
- You have research expertise in an aligned sector, topic area or discipline and want to bring your skills and experience into the social care research field.
- You work in social care and have limited research experience and skills that you wish to develop.
- You work in social care research and wish to strengthen your research skills further.

This opportunity is open to a wide range of people because we know that career trajectories in social care research vary from individual to individual. We want to support pathways that develop existing social care researchers, and support moves between practice and academic settings, and moves between disciplines. Applicants are invited to describe and justify the most pertinent pathway for them.

What a Career Development Award offers you

We are committed to equipping practitioners and researchers with the skills and experience to build a strong, sustainable career in social care research. An SSCR Career Development Award is a unique opportunity to support valuable career development activities to assist you to move to the next stage of your career in social care research.

Underpinning every award is support delivered by the SSCR's dedicated research Capacity Building Team, including mentoring, group training and events, and links with a peer support network of Career Development Awardees and alumni. If successful, you may also become a member of NIHR Academy.

The award will fund:

- Salary buy-out.
- Training costs, including Masters fees, including the time required to undertake them.
- Direct costs associated with network building or small-scale project work which have clear links to training and development objectives.

What we're looking for

We want to support applications that show a clear commitment to establishing or consolidating a long-term career in social care-related research or as a practitioner-researcher. We expect that successful applicants will have clearly outlined:

- Their career development objectives.
- The training and activities they plan to complete during their award.
- The anticipated award outcomes.
- How this funding will help them take the next step in their career.

Applicants should also demonstrate fit with the remit of the SSCR Programme and show evidence of engaging with our thematic priorities.

Scope

'Training' can and should be interpreted creatively; applications should consist of a personalised training and development plan which may cover (but is not limited to) some of the following activities:

- A development fund for early career researchers (ECRs) for pump priming of ECR-led collaborative research e.g. pilot data collection, preparing data access agreements, involvement/engagement, stakeholder consultation, focused evidence synthesis, small-scale qualitative research.
- An opportunity for researchers, including ECRs, to gain experience in developing and leading their own small-scale research project, which is linked to a training objective.
- Building networks within social care research and with other stakeholders.
- Dedicated time for development activities (for both the project and the person) to build and support a future NIHR research proposal or fellowship application to a funder of social care-related research.
- Undertaking formal training relevant to social care research, such as Master's study.
- Enhancing research skills to support evidence-informed practice.
- Transitioning from a relevant professional career to develop research skills and experience in social care-related practice over the longer term.
- Adapting expertise in areas outside social care with a view to their future

application in social care research. For example, this may be to explore applying existing methodological expertise in social care research.

- Spending time in different settings, such as academics spending time in policy or practice, or practitioners spending time in academic settings.

It is also important to note that these awards are **not** suitable for funding:

- Substantive research projects with no clear career development remit. If funding for a small project is requested it needs to be clear why this is essential for career development, and that this can be demonstrated.
- Salary costs of researchers who would be employed to carry out award activities (i.e. as research assistants) without sufficient rationale. If these costs are requested, it should be clear how this makes an active contribution to the **awardee's** career development.
- Time buy-out solely to write grant applications and/or disseminate previous research.
- Activity that you would be expected to carry out in your day job.
- PhD fees or stipends (either in full or topping-up)
- Activities with a substantive focus on other UK countries. Elements of comparative work and career development with other UK countries may be considered, but the focus of the SSCR is on England.
- Current or previous CDA awardees without strong rationale detailing how and why an additional award is distinct from their first award. This opportunity cannot be used to top-up or extend ongoing CDAs.

Expectations

Successful award holders will be required to:

- Complete a detailed training and development plan within four months of the award start date.
- Contribute to the School's Programme of career development (i.e. writing a blog, speaking at an event, mentoring an SSCR PhD student).
- Attend the annual SSCR Conference and present, at minimum, a poster of their work.
- Attend the annual SSCR Trainee Conference, which brings together current and past career development award holders, SSCR-funded PhD students and Research Trainees.

- Engage with the School's cohort of award holders and alumni.

The costs for attending both the SSCR trainee and annual conferences should be included in the costings in your proposal. The location of these events varies but applicants should plan to attend two in-person events at an SSCR member city during their award; estimates for travel and accommodation are sufficient.

Other deliverables outlined in proposals will be reflected in individual Award Letters and may incorporate recommendations from the funding panel. Awards will be monitored annually at minimum, but monitoring will be adapted to award aims and length.

Funding and eligible costs

Applicants can apply for awards between £20,000 - £75,000.

All applications will be expected to demonstrate value for money, be fully justified and the requested value of the award should be proportional to the planned activity. On review of applications, the SSCR Review Panel may query or reject costs that are insufficiently justified. Applications should therefore include thorough, realistic and accurate costing of proposed activities, which is supported by a narrative justification.

Staff and non-staff costs will be funded at 100%, with an overhead rate of 30% applied to staff costs at Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). The 30% overhead cost should not be applied to salary costs where the applicant is based in a practice setting (i.e. local authorities or service organisations). For applicants who are not based in HEIs, the overall salary figure should include any relevant costs which would normally be paid by the employer, such as pension or National Insurance.

Eligible costs include funding for the applicant's salary, training (formal or short) courses and events, and direct costs linked to the Career Development Award (i.e. travel and subsistence to relevant UK conferences or network building visits).

The SSCR Programme expects to commission a range of applications. The Programme does not fund supervision costs. The Programme will also not fund international travel or international conference attendance, except in very exceptional circumstances and accompanied by a sufficiently robust rationale.

Please cost your application using the costing template provided.

Award duration and timeframes

Applicants may start their award at any point between **1st February and 30th April 2027**. Awards may run from 12 to 24 months, but it is very important to note that all awards must be completed by **31st January 2029**. Applicants who wish to undertake a CDA for 24 months should factor this final date into their planned start date and overall timelines.

Applicants should aim to complete their awards within the timeframes given, but the SSCR will accept proposals that are shorter than 12 months with strong rationale to support this. The length of time for each award should reflect the nature of the applicant's career development plans and be fully justified.

Eligibility criteria

A contract of employment

All applicants must have a contract of employment with an organisation which is able to act as host for the award for the duration of the award. Pre- doctoral applications are welcome. PhD students are eligible to apply if they have submitted their thesis and have an employment contract with the host organisation for the duration of the CDA.

Strong academic support

Applicants are required to name a career development supporter who will support them during their award. This supporter must be identified and named in the application.

It is expected that the Career Development Supporter will have a strong and reputable academic background in social care research; a supporter may or may not have existing links with the SSCR, however we encourage all applicants to explore future relationships within the SSCR core membership within their award if they do not have current links. Applications without named academic support will not be progressed to panel.

Existing links with SSCR or CDA funding

Applications from individuals already closely aligned with the SSCR (i.e. in a member organisation and working in social care research) will need to clearly identify which internal funding routes they have already explored for their proposed activity and why a CDA is the most appropriate opportunity.

Similarly, applicants who have previously received CDA funding will need to include sufficient rationale for a further award. A strong justification for accessing SSCR resources is required and will be factored into decision making during the review of applications.

How to apply

Please send your completed documents to sscr-training@york.ac.uk before the deadline of **5pm, Thursday 24th September 2026**, and include 'SSCR Career Development Award 2026' in the subject line.

Application documents **must** include:

- Application form
- Completed costings template
- CV (no longer than 4 pages)
- Gantt chart

The application must be endorsed and signed by the applicant, line manager, career development supporter and an administrative/financial authority for the host organisation. Applications that do not include all the supporting documents will be considered incomplete.

We expect to receive more applications than we can fund. Following the review panel, unsuccessful applicants will receive constructive feedback on their proposals within four weeks of the decision, and, where appropriate, information on other sources of funding may be provided.

Review criteria

Applications will be reviewed using the following criteria in **bold**. We strongly recommend that applicants read the assessment criteria below in full:

- **A strong applicant research and/or practice profile, with clear proposed alignment to the remit of the NIHR SSCR Programme.** The application should demonstrate:
    - Evidence of a strong professional or academic career in social care or a related field.
    - Good understanding of the mission of the SSCR and commitment to its primary goal of developing the evidence base of social care research in England.
    - Strong consideration of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) and public and practice involvement in the context of their award.
- **A well-rounded case for personal and professional development.** This should encompass:

    - **A strong case for personal development through the award.**
    - **A proposal clearly in line with the applicant's current career stage.**
    - **A clear training/development plan that is integral to the award.**
    - **A clear endpoint and objectives for the research career development award.**
- **A longer-term commitment to a research career in social care or related field.**
- **Strong support and commitment to the applicant's career development, from both the host organisation and named career development supporter.** This should include:
    - An academic career supporter who is well-situated in the field of social care research and demonstrates commitment to helping the applicant expand their skills and network further.
    - A tangible package of support that is well-thought out and linked to the applicant's award plans.
- **Value for money**. This should include:
    - Accurate and well-thought-out costs.
    - A proportionate award value that is clearly linked to the plan of activity and duration of award.

Timeline and commissioning process

- **Step 1:** Applicants work collaboratively with supervisors/mentors in social care research, practice and public partners to develop and complete the application form.
- **Step 2**: Applications and supporting documents are cross-referenced against the call guidance before a shortlisting panel meets. and those out of scope will not be passed to the panel.
- **Step 3:** Shortlisted Completed proposal applications are reviewed, ranked and prioritized by the SSCR review panel. A small number of awards will be selected for funding, and successful applicants will be informed. Unsuccessful applications will receive feedback.
- **Step 4:** Award letters will be issued, and contract arrangements begin. Successful SSCR Career Development Awards to start before 30 April 2027.

June 2026	Call launches.
July 2026	Informational webinar and RSS workshop run.
5pm Thursday 24th September 2026	Deadline for applications.
October-November 2026	Initial shortlisting followed by final panel review of applications. Expert panel to rank and prioritise for funding.
December 2026	Outcomes communicated with applicants. Feedback shared with unsuccessful applicants and successful applicants will be notified of next steps, including timelines for incorporating panel recommendations.
January-February 2027	Contracting with host institutions; research agreements will be between the NIHR School for Social Care Research and the host organisation. NIHR SSCR terms and conditions will apply.
February-April 2027	Successful Career Development Awards begin.
January 2029	Final date by which awards need to be completed.

Applicant support:

We are committed to supporting prospective applicants in several ways:

- We will be running an informational webinar to share details about this opportunity and host a live Q&A. The Research Support Service (RSS) will also be hosting a workshop to go through the application form in further detail, exploring the key considerations and decisions that contribute to a successful application. Registration links can be found below:
    - Informational webinar and Q&A: Thursday 2 July, 1-2pm
    - Research Support Service workshop: Thursday 16 July, 11am-12pm
- Prospective applicants who are based in practice, are new to research or are researchers from universities that do not have a substantial track-

record of NIHR funding are encouraged to contact the Research Support Service Specialist Centre for Social Care (RSS) for advice and guidance about their application and plans. The RSS can provide specialist social care research support for applicants considering applying for a CDA. Prospective applicants are encouraged to contact the RSS in as much advance as possible to be linked with an appropriate advisor.

- Applicants who wish to explore links with the SSCR research network can view our full membership via the SSCR website. Applicants are also welcome to sscr-training@york.ac.uk with a brief outline of your proposed award and we will do our best to link you up with an appropriate member from the School.

A full list of our frequently asked questions can be also found on our website. If your query is not answered here, please email sscr-training@york.ac.uk and we will be happy to help.