Funding Brief: MS Society Doctoral Training Centre in Symptom Management

December 2022

Let's stop MS **together**

Contents

1. Summary of the call for DTC applications

Research must focus on **non-drug approaches to managing and relieving the symptom(s) of MS and their implementation into practice**

The Doctoral Training Centre must build capacity in this area through PhD training with a view to retaining graduates in the field:

- Minimum 3-4 PhDs in cohort,
- additional PhDs from the institute(s) favourably considered in DTC award of up to **£350,000**
- Additional bridging (postdoctoral) funding available **up to £80,000**
- **Full DTC award available: £430,000 (one award)**

Flexibility to use DTC funding to add value over and above individual PhDs to demonstrate the Training Centre will be more than just the sum of its parts.

Involvement of people with MS, diversity and inclusion and wider capacity building (e.g. ECRs in supervisory team, collaboration with smaller institutes) is important.

A short Letter of Intent from all prospective Lead Applicants is required by email to research@mssociety.org.uk with a **deadline of 12:00 on Tuesday 7th February 2023.**

Full applications will open in mid March with a deadline of 27 June. Decisions will be made in November with all PhDs expected to start by 31 December 2024.

Please read this applicant guidance carefully when completing your application. If you have any questions or would like to discuss this funding opportunity further, please contact Dr David Coutts (david.coutts@mssociety.org.uk).

2. Introduction

Our vision is a world free from the effects of MS. Helping people live well through improving MS care and services is one of our key long term organisational goals and is vital to achieving our vision. As the UK's largest charitable funder of MS research, since 1999 we have invested over £14 million into care and services research, including non-drug MS symptom management approaches and their implementation into practice, development and evaluation of MS services, improving quality of life, and enhancing understanding of the social and economic impact of MS. We now want to invest more strategically and flexibly to develop the research workforce in this area and advance solutions in MS care and services.

Outline:
We are calling for applications for an MS Society Doctoral Training Centre (DTC) in the area of care and services research with a focus on symptom management and implementation into practice. We will fund multiple PhD Fellowships with the objective that through linking within a DTC this will maximise the potential to build long-term capacity in the symptom management research workforce, to enable higher-quality, multi-disciplinary research with a greater focus on route to implementation.

The Doctoral Training Centre (DTC) model has been used by the research councils and other organisations to enhance capacity in priority areas and we believe this model will work well in MS. They have many advantages over ad-hoc PhD studentships:

- Enhanced training and mentorship
- Peer support and shared learning across a multidisciplinary cohort
- Better development of transferrable skills
- Building of a critical mass of research/researchers in a specific focus area

We welcome applications from both single research organisations and collaborative applications from more than one institute, particularly those that can leverage our funding and offer additional PhDs to add to the Centre cohort.

An essential requirement will be demonstrating the added value the Centre can bring over individual PhDs. A principle of this call is that we will not be prescriptive about the structure and delivery of the Doctoral Training Centre. This is to permit applicants to be creative with the format of the DTC in order to best meet our objectives. This flexibility in award is an advantage of the DTC approach that could be used in different ways, for example to customise PhD fellowships to align with funded training schemes and infrastructure present at the institute(s). The assessment of the added value elements offered will be a core competitive component with the award made to the application offering the best all around value package.

We intend to fund **one** award of up to **£430,000**. Due to our investment in the DTC, **we encourage those planning an individual symptom management PhD Fellowship application to our 2023 Career Development Awards round to consider applying to the DTC call.** Applications outside the remit or without clear linkage among PhDs will not be considered.

A short **letter of intent** must be received from prospective DTC lead applicants planning to submit a full application. This will not be assessed though you may be provided feedback. It's purpose is to help us plan and deliver the full call.

The letter of intent is due 31st January 2023. Further guidance on the Letter of Intent is below under Application Process. This guidance is subject to change ahead of the call for full applications.

Eligibility:
The Lead Applicant and PhD students must be based in the UK with degrees conferred by a licenced UK Higher Education institute. DTC Applications may come from a single institute or from two or more institutes in collaboration.

Multiple applications can be made from the same institution, though clear differences in scope of applications must be demonstrated. The lead applicant is not eligible to submit more than one application.

Scope:
DTC applications must be in the field of MS symptom management and implementation research. That is: research into non-drug approaches to managing and relieving the symptoms of MS and their implementation into practice. Depending on the person and stage of MS, non-drug approaches may be of greater importance than drug treatments and will remain an important part of helping people live well with MS. We want to fund creative, innovative research that focuses on what matters most to people living with MS and that will provide solutions and deliver outcomes to improve quality of life in the near future.

Within this scope, applications are free to focus on one or multiple areas as long as these can be demonstrably and suitably linked into a cohesive Centre program.
The Doctoral Training Centre Award must have a programmatic theme(s) and within it individual studentships should in some way be linked to a common aim, or utilise similar techniques or resources. Applications with program themes outside of symptom management and implementation research will be ineligible, as will those with disparate studentships with no common aim, theme or clear linkage.

We are seeking a cohesive programme that adds value over and above individual PhDs to demonstrate the Training Centre will be more than just the sum of its parts. Having clear opportunities for students to interact with each other will be expected and multidisciplinary programs will be viewed favourably. We're looking for projects that, if successful, have a clear pathway to be made more widely available to people affected by MS as soon as possible. The proposed plan for the pathway to clinical adoption forms a major part of the assessment process, therefore inclusion of implementation research training will be an advantage. We understand that some projects may be in the early stages of development. Here, it is important that applicants provide a detailed description of the proposed next steps of the project, with the aim of progressing the research to the next stage as soon as possible.

We are also looking for programs that aim to build long term capacity in care and services research through retaining PhD trainees in the field. We will provide limited bridging funds (£80,000) for postdoctoral training as part of the DTC bid. Applicants must demonstrate how they will work to enhance retention including through use of our bridging funding.

Supervision of Students and Training:
The award should be led by an experienced lead applicant, who does NOT need to be a lead supervisor or supervise all students. All supervisors should be named co-applicants and we encourage the naming of early career researchers as co-applicants who will have important supervisory or training roles in the Centre.

Under the DTC's objective to build capacity in symptom management and implementation research we welcome extension of this to the development of supervisors and co-applicants. Therefore we encourage named supervisors from different career stages with differing levels of supervisory experience and from diverse backgrounds.

As part of their full submission, institutions should include information on their approach to a) training for staff who supervise students funded from the Doctoral Training Centre award, and b) how they will recognise and support the role of early career researchers in supporting these students.

Funding available and number of PhDs:
Funding of up to **£430,000** is available for the DTC award. Within this, up to £80,000 is ringfenced for flexible use at postdoctoral level to encourage the graduates to remain in research while they apply for independent funding to continue their career. Therefore there is **£350,000 available for the core PhD fellowship DTC funding**. Any PhDs based within London will be provided an additional London weighting.

Within this amount, flexibility is offered to maximise the value of the award.
Stipends must be no lower than the UKRI standard stipend rates. At expected rates this equates to around £70,000 per 3 year stipend including minimum fees. Therefore we would expect a **minimum of 3-4 PhDs** within the program, with running costs. We will update this guidance with stipend rates for 2023 onwards for full applications.

Applications that leverage this funding to secure additional value to the program, particularly additional PhD fellowships to increase the DTC cohort, will be favourably received.

Remaining funds should be deployed to bring maximum value and will need to at minimum cover PhD running costs of consumables, equipment, consultation fees etc. We will cover up to £1,000 per year per student for travel, conference and dissemination costs in line with our funding policy.

Added Value Elements:
We are looking for creativity to add the most value to the DTC, therefore applicants may want to consider the following options with cost implications. This is not an exhaustive list or in priority order:

- Demonstrable added value of linked PhD Fellowships in terms of: research outputs, training and development experience, network building and mentoring, cost savings of linked activity, etc
- Exposure to diverse, multidisciplinary approaches to symptom management research, potentially including different sectors and industry, and/or multiple organisations or mentors nationally or internationally with different strengths
- Integration with existing PhD training programs to leverage knowledge or exposure to cross condition working
- Leverage resources into the program including additional PhD Fellowship numbers/funding from host institution(s) or other cofunders. This should include a stipend and fees no less than the UKRI minimums/those specified for PhDs funded by this award, and show how PhD project costs will be supported.
- Clear program for translating research into practice to improve impact for people with MS, including ongoing involvement of people affected by MS including those from underserved groups
- Embedding implementation research into training programs

- Involvement of healthcare/allied health professionals (AHPs) as a PhD student or on the supervisory team
- Preparation funding for returning or retraining high-calibre students
- Research methods training or first year rotations in a 3.5/ 4 year PhD program
- Effectively leveraging the up to £80,000 available for postdoctoral bridging funding to prepare graduates for independent funding
- Administrative support for the DTC, with justification of student benefit
- Etc.

Partnership funding and co-funding of research:
Although not a requirement for application, in the spirit of building capacity we will view favourably applications that include financial or other commitments of support from potential other partners or the host institute(s). This might include additional studentships, co-funding of studentships or funding of materials and resources from other funds. We would consider research experience with an industry partner, please get in contact to discuss industry involvement further.

Full Applications should include letters of support from cofunding partners. We recognise that other funders may have their own review or selection processes, and shall seek to take a facilitative approach to this. Please contact us in confidence if you would like to discuss further.

Commencement of award and duration:
Individual fellowships within the DTC may commence at different times starting between 1st January 2024 and 31st Dec 2024.

To promote the inclusion of healthcare/allied health professionals and/or mature students, etc, with justification PhD Fellowships may be undertaken part-time at a minimum of 50% FTE.

3. Application Process

Letter of Intent:
Applicants must submit a short Letter of Intent to be eligible to submit a full application. Applicants are encouraged to get in touch with us as soon as possible after launch to ensure that the proposed DTC fits within the scope of the call. We will be happy to advise on and assist with patient and public involvement in co-production of the proposal.

While the Letter of Intent will not be assessed, you may receive comments on your plans and advice for progressing to a full application. It's purpose is to enable better planning for the call and deliver award decisions in later 2023.

The letter of intent should be no longer than 2 sides of A4, including:

- Names and institutions of the lead applicant, primary supervisor(s) and wider project team (where possible)
- Number of PhD Fellowships being applied for including any matched PhDs
- An outline of the overarching theme(s) within care, services and implementation research and any PPI to date
- An outline of the added value elements of the DTC over multiple unlinked PhD Fellowships.

Letters of Intent must be submitted by email to research@mssociety.org.uk with a **deadline of 12:00 on Tuesday 7th February 2023.**

Full Application and Timings:
A full application must be submitted via the MS Society electronic Grant Tracker system https://research.mssociety.org.uk

Application forms, along with updated Applicant Guidance will be made available to Applicants named in the Letter of Intent. In the application form you will be required to expand on your outlines of the theme(s) and added value package, and provide budget information for the main DTC (up to £350,000) and the postdoctoral bridging funds (up to £80,000).

All PhD Fellowships should be outlined with a prospective supervisor(s) and their connection to the overarching theme made clear. At least ONE PhD Fellowship must be described in depth.

Full applications will need to demonstrate how people affected by MS have been involved in developing the application. Further information is provided later in this document. Please contact with us if you would like help with PPI. Applicants have the opportunity to apply for Lay summary development. This offers the chance to receive input from the MS Society's Research Network **before** you submit your application to our grant round. Download a Lay Summary development form from our website to find out how to access this.

Applications will undergo expert peer and lay review and be considered by a review panel sourced from The Expert Review Network (TERN).

Key activity timings	Date
Letter of Intent Call open	Dec 2022
Letter of intent deadline	12 noon Tuesday 7th February 2023
Full Applications open*	Mid-March 2023
Lay summary development deadline	12 noon Monday 17th April 2023
Deadline for applications	27 June 2023
Review and applicant response	July – September 2023
Review panel meeting	Mid November 2023
Applicants advised of outcome	November 2023
Earliest Award start date	Jan 2024
PhD Start date	Jan – Dec 2024

*Applicants who submitted Letters of Intent will be invited to submit a full application

If you have any questions or would like to discuss this funding opportunity further, please contact Dr David Coutts David.Coutts@mssociety.org.uk

4. Application Review Criteria

Relevance & Importance

- Relevance to the needs of people with MS, including underserved groups?
- Does the proposal address an unmet need?
- How original is the proposal and will it take us forward in MS symptom management and implementation knowledge and expertise?

Design and methodology

- Is there a clear overall theme/aim for the DTC?
- Are the aims and research questions of the individual studentships proposed clear and linked to the overall theme/aim of the DTC?
- Does the proposal have meaningful, well-supported involvement of people affected by MS? Have people affected by MS been involved in development of proposal? How will people affected by MS be involved in the delivery?
- Will the individual projects meet objectives within the timescale and budget?
- Are the requested costs and support adequately justified?
- Has EDI been adequately considered in design of the research?
- Are there any ethical issues/concerns with the proposal?

Research/Training Culture and Environment

- Do the applicants/supervisors have a proven track record in this area? Does the team contain all relevant disciplines?
- Is the research environment and proposed training programme appropriate and high quality?
- How well do the applicants and institution(s) demonstrate a good research culture? For example promoting EDI, student recruitment strategies, development of the supervisory team, etc?

Impact

- Will this proposal lead to a significant impact for people affected by MS?
- What significance will the outputs have on the route to patient benefit and stated clinical need?
- Is the pathway to achieving that impact clearly and realistically described?
- Will the DTC help to build capacity in MS research?
- Are the plans for post-doctoral bridging funding well justified and appropriate?
- Will outcomes be relevant to everyone affected by MS (e.g. including those in hard-to-reach geopgraphical areas, underrepresented groups)

Added Value Elements

- Are the additional activities that will be included to build and maintain a cohort of students well justified?
- Are the benefits of funding this as a DTC award rather than individual PhD Fellowships clear?
- If more than one institute is included in the DTC application, is the benefit of this collaboration/partnership clear?
- Is there additional funding or commitment from host institute or other partners and is this well integrated into the proposal?

Dissemination and Implementation?

- Are dissemination plans appropriate and ambitious?
- Have people affected by MS been involved in dissemination planning?
- Have the costs of dissemination been included and fully justified?

5. Patient and public involvement (PPI)

Patient and public involvement (PPI) in research is when people with personal experience of health conditions work in active partnership with researchers or research funders like us.

Involvement isn't the same as recruiting participants to your study or sharing information with people through public engagement events. Involvement is about working in partnership with people affected by MS to shape, design and oversee a project.

1. In your application you need to describe: How people affected by MS have been involved in the development of your proposal (pre-application involvement)
2. How you plan to involve people affected in your ongoing study, if funded

Pre-application involvement

Before applying, we encourage you to involve people affected by MS in the development of your proposal. This helps to ensure:

- your research questions are relevant to their experiences
- you can demonstrate the relevance of your work to people affected by MS
- your study design considers the needs of people affected by MS

Involvement in your ongoing study

As well as working with people to develop your application, you should also plan for how you will continue to involve people affected by MS throughout the project. For example, people affected by MS could:

- Join an advisory group to provide their perspective throughout the course of a project - advising on challenges as they arise
- Review participant information materials such as leaflets, posters, webpages, questionnaires (for clinical projects)
- Advise on the best ways to communicate and disseminate your findings

Budgeting for involvement

Involving people in research requires time and money. It's important to account for the costs of involvement as without them, you'll struggle to involve people effectively.

You should include the costs for any planned PPI activities in your application. For example, you should consider:

1. Expenses

   You must cover any expenses that people will incur by getting involved in PPI activities. People should never be out-of-pocket. This may include, for example, travel, subsistence and carer costs for face-to-face meetings, broadband and childcare costs for online meetings.

2. Training and support

   Training and induction sessions may be required so that people affected by MS are supported to carry out their role well. There are many free resources available online, but you should consider whether any paid training is required. You may also wish for Research Network members to join you at conferences and events.

3. Payment

It is best practice to offer payment for members of the public who get involved in your work, in recognition of their time, skills and expertise. How much to budget will depend on a number of factors, for example how often they are going to be involved and what level of responsibility they will have.

We recommend you read and work through the NIHR's payment guidance for researchers. This includes information on budgeting and example payment rates for different activities.

We can support you to plan and budget for your public involvement, connect with people affected by MS and carry out activities. Get in touch with us at researchnetwork@mssociety.org.uk

You should consider the following resources to plan effective involvement:
- NIHR – guide to public involvement in funding applications
- NIHR INVOLVE – payment and recognition for public involvement
- A practical guide to patient and public involvement in lab-based research

Lay Summary development

You need to write a clear lay summary for your proposal. People affected by MS will review your application alongside experts in your field. If your lay summary is too brief or too complex, it will be difficult for them to comment and score your application. And this will have an impact on whether it might be funded.

Our Lay Summary Development scheme can help you. People affected by MS from our Research Network can provide feedback on your application before you submit, focusing on how well you have communicated your research proposal and the importance of the topic to people affected by MS. This isn't part of our review process, but is intended to help you to improve your lay summary before you submit.

If you'd like to go through Lay Summary Development, you'll need to submit a completed Lay Summary Development request form to researchnetwork@mssociety.org.uk.

You must submit your completed form by the Lay Summary Development deadline of 12 noon, Monday 17th April 2023. You will receive the feedback on your summary approximately four weeks before the deadline for submitting your grant application.

You can find the guidance notes and the request form on our Funding page.

You can also find 'Tips for writing a good lay summary' to download from the sidebar of this page.

For all enquiries about involving people affected by MS in any stage of your research, please contact the Public Involvement Manager: researchnetwork@mssociety.org.uk