Commissioned research funding brief: studying those at risk of MS

May 2025

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1. Background and context

Our organisational and research strategies highlight preventing MS as a key long-term goal. We're currently updating our research and organisational strategies for 2025-2029. And prevention of MS will continue to be an important focus. We'll share our strategies for 2025 onwards later in the year. Until then you can find out more about our commitment to preventing MS in our 2020-2024 Organisational Strategy and 2023-2024 Research Strategy Extension.

- Download our 2023-2024 Research Strategy Extension from our website.
- Read our 2020-2024 Organisational Strategy on our website.

Recent advances in MS research have highlighted that prevention could be a realistic goal. But it will take time to achieve.

It's recognised that MS has prodromal and pre-clinical stages before the onset of clinical symptoms. These present a window of opportunity for preventive interventions. For example, recent studies of immunotherapies in people with radiologically isolated syndrome (a defined pre-clinical MS state) have shown it's possible to delay the development of MS. We also now have strong evidence linking symptomatic infection with the Epstein-Barr virus (EBV) to the development of MS. This has increased optimism around the potential to develop interventions to prevent MS in the first place.

In December 2023, we established the UK MS Prevention Taskforce to boost MS prevention research. This brings together a small group of researchers from MS and related disease areas and people affected by MS to discuss the role of research in accelerating progress towards preventing MS. The work of the Taskforce will form a key priority in our new Research Strategy 2025-2029 (to be launched later in 2025).

Cohort studies of people at higher risk of developing disease have been carried out in other autoimmune conditions, such as type 1 diabetes. These studies have played an important role in supporting progress towards preventive intervention trials. They've helped to define biological changes that come before the disease. And identify specific and predictive biomarkers of future diabetes. The Taskforce have identified cohort studies of people at risk of MS as a high priority area of focus.

2. Summary of the call

To prevent MS, future studies will need to test whether interventions can stop or delay its development. Even if we can enrich studies with people at higher risk of developing MS, they'll still need to be large, long and expensive. So, we're seeking to fund smaller-scale feasibility studies that can build the foundations for these larger intervention studies.

We're calling for applications for a feasibility study to develop a prospective natural history cohort of people at higher risk of developing MS. Applications should clearly state how they'll contribute to the efforts of the UK MS Prevention Taskforce to make preventing MS a realistic future goal.

Your proposal should address the following:

- Outline a strategy for identifying people at high-risk. And test the feasibility of recruiting and retaining these individuals in a cohort study.

- Investigate factors influencing successful recruitment and retention of high-risk individuals from diverse backgrounds into prevention research.
- Explore the biological series of events that occurs before the onset of clinical MS to identify possible predictive biomarkers. For example (but not limited to): MRI scans, blood biomarkers, ocular tests, cognitive tests and features in electronic health records.

Your application should also outline how you would plan for the following:

- Scaling up the cohort to be sufficiently powered to identify robust predictive biomarkers and support the delivery of preventive intervention trials. This is likely to require plans for international collaboration. Please consider the sustainability of the cohort for the future.

Budget and timescale

Up to £500,000 over a maximum of 5 years duration. You should aim to keep your costs under £150,000 per year to help us manage our annual budgeting. Annual costs over this amount may be considered if strong justification can be provided.

Who's eligible to apply?

This is an open call, so any eligible UK-based researcher can apply.

You must be based at a UK university or NHS institution and be the Principal Investigator (PI) of the project. Your application must include an applicant with a tenured position for the duration of the Award. This doesn't have to be the lead applicant.

The project team must include somebody with MS research experience and/or an MS clinician. And inclusion of people affected by MS as co-applicants or advisers is strongly encouraged.

3. Application process

Stage 1: Letter of Intent

- Deadline for Letter of Intent: **12 noon on Wednesday 30 July 2025**

Prospective lead applicants **must** submit an initial Letter of Intent. Only applicants who've submitted a Letter of Intent will be eligible to submit a full application.

The purpose of this stage is to enable better planning for the call. And to make sure that only proposals relevant to the commissioned call progress to the full application stage. We'll review your Letter of Intent internally, with input from the Chair of the UK MS Prevention Taskforce if required. There aren't any formal assessment criteria for this stage. But you may receive comments on your plans and advice for progressing to a full application. If your proposal isn't suitable for this call, we may direct you to another of our funding schemes that would be more appropriate.

Letters of Intent must be submitted by the lead applicant. And must be a **maximum of two sides of A4 using font size 12.** We'll accept Word (.doc, doc.x) or PDF formats. If your letter doesn't meet these criteria it won't be accepted.

Your Letter of Intent must include:

- The names and institutions of the proposed research team (lead applicant, co-applicants and advisers).
- The study duration and estimated total cost (note: we don't expect you to have full costings at this stage. This can just be an approximate figure).
- A project abstract, including:
    - Study aim(s) and objectives
    - Plan of investigation/methods
    - Impact: how your study will contribute to making prevention of MS a realistic future goal.
- A brief outline of your patient and public involvement plans (PPI) plans. You should indicate whether you'd like our PPI support to develop your proposal and application.

You must submit your Letter of Intent by email to research@mssociety.org.uk by 12 noon on Wednesday 30 July 2025.

Stage 2: full applications

- Applications open: To be confirmed – likely to be early September 2025
- Deadline for applications: **12 noon on Tuesday 28 October 2025**

You'll only be able to access the application form if you've submitted a Letter of Intent (stage 1). And we've confirmed that your proposal is suitable for a full application.

Applications must be submitted through Symplectic Grant Tracker. You must read our commissioned research applicant guidance document before completing your application. This'll be shared with you by email just before we open for applications on Grant Tracker.

3.1. Patient and public involvement in your research

Patient and public involvement (PPI) in research is when people with personal experience of health conditions work in active partnership with researchers. Or with 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. For this commissioned call, we also expect to see people at risk of developing MS, for example, relatives of people with MS, included in PPI plans.

We expect applications to this funding call to have strong PPI plans. And in your application you'll be asked to describe:

- How people affected by MS and those at risk of developing MS have been involved in the development of your proposal (pre-application involvement)
- How you plan to involve people affected by MS and at risk of developing MS in your ongoing study, if funded.

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

4. Review process for full applications

Your application will be assessed on the quality of science. And the suitability and relevance to this call. The feasibility of completing the project within the proposed timeframe and budget will also be a key consideration. Applications will be reviewed and scored by researchers with relevant expertise. And by people affected by and at risk of MS (lay review).

We recommend writing in Plain English throughout your application as this improves accessibility. And means that all reviewers can fully engage with and understand your proposal.

5. Contact us

Please let us know if you have any questions or need help. You can email us at research@mssociety.org.uk or call us on 020 8438 0822.

Thank you for your interest in our research funding.

We're the MS Society.
Our community is here for you through the highs, lows and everything in between. We understand what life's like with MS.

Together, we are strong enough to stop MS.
mssociety.org.uk

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