



PhD Fellowships applicant guidance

Updated October 2025



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We try to make sure that the information in this guidance is accurate. But changes are possible, and the most up-to-date guidance is available on our website. If you have any questions, you can email us at research@mssociety.org.uk or call us on 020 8438 0822.

We're the largest charitable funder of MS research in the UK. We welcome applications for projects that will increase understanding of the cause of MS. And find new effective treatments or prevention strategies. As well as projects improving care and services for people affected by MS too.

We don't make any decisions on the scientific quality and relevance of applications. These are made by independent peer and lay reviewers. As members of the Association of Medical Research Charities we adhere to the Principles of Peer Review.

- [Read more about our approach to reviewing applications on our website.](#)
- [Read more about The Expert Review Network \(TERN\) on our website.](#)

You should use this guidance document with the "Help" sections in the application forms on our online application system Symplectic Grant Tracker. There's a list of key terms used throughout this guidance and their definitions in the appendix.

- [Log into Grant Tracker.](#)

1. PhD Fellowships purpose and scope

PhD Fellowships are one of our Career Development Awards. They're designed to encourage the best graduates to embark on a research career in MS. These awards provide practical research training leading to a doctorate, under the supervision of an experienced researcher.

These Fellowships are for up to three years in duration. We provide support for:

- PhD stipends in line with UKRI rates
- up to £7,000 a year towards tuition fees
- up to £45,000 in running costs
- up to £3,000 towards conference attendance or travel

The running costs and conference/travel costs can be spread across the three years. But mustn't exceed the maximum amounts stated above. We encourage you to spread these costs evenly where possible, to help us manage our annual budgeting.

1.1. Our Research and Organisational Strategies

Our Research Strategy was developed with people affected by MS and underpins all aspects of our research programme. It's important that the research we fund reflects what matters most to people living with MS. And is relevant to their needs and experiences.

Our overarching strategic priorities are to:

1. **Manage** the impact of MS holistically to improve quality of life
2. Find new treatments to **stop** MS getting worse for everyone
3. Drive towards the possibility of **preventing** MS in future generations

Our 2025-2029 Research Strategy expands on these overarching priorities and outlines research areas we are focusing on for the strategy period. You should read this fully before starting your application. Your application should fit with our Research Strategy. And you must explain how the project helps us to achieve these aims. We also have an Organisational Strategy to guide our work until 2029. You should read and strongly consider these documents when writing your application.

We don't exclusively restrict our funding to these priorities. We continue to support research into the causes of MS, and all aspects of treatment and care for people affected by MS. However, our funding review panels are asked to prioritise applications that specifically address these priorities.

- [Read our 2025-2029 Research Strategy on our website](#)
- [Read our Organisational Strategy on our website.](#)

2. Our award conditions and policies

You should also read our Award Conditions and Policies. This document contains our:

- **Open Access Policy:** We're committed to open and unrestricted access to the results of our funded research. We require any research papers based on our funded research to be published in an open access environment.
- **Research Award Conditions:** The Award Conditions, together with the Award Letter and the Policies, set out the terms and conditions on which we make Awards.
- **Intellectual Property Policy:** This Intellectual Property (IP) Policy document sets out principles that we're guided by when considering questions relating to intellectual property and research matters.
- [Download our Award Conditions and Policies from our website.](#)
- [Read more about how to manage an MS Society Research Award](#)

2.1. Our position on researcher leave

We strongly believe that researchers should be supported to take periods of leave when they need to. And part-time opportunities should be available for early career researchers to give more people the chance to progress their careers. As part of our Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) action plan for MS Society research we're sharing our position on leave for our funded researchers.

We're supportive of our funded researchers taking leave. For example, family leave (maternity, paternity, adoption and shared parental leave) and sick leave. This includes PhD students working on research we fund.

This is our position on researcher leave. It outlines our viewpoint and our expectations, but it's not a policy. Researchers working on our funded projects aren't our employees. So you should check and follow the relevant leave policies at your institution.

- [Read more about our position on researcher leave on our website.](#)
- [Read more about our work to improve EDI in MS research.](#)

2.2. Our position on generative AI in research

Generative AI tools such as ChatGPT could bring benefits to MS research. But there are risks associated with their use, particularly in research funding and application review. We

support the Research Funders Policy Group's joint statement on the use of generative AI in funding applications and assessment.

You should note:

- If using generative AI tools in developing your application, you must use them responsibly. And in line with relevant legal and ethical standards where these exist or as they develop.
- You must acknowledge any outputs from generative AI tools in funding applications.

We're committed to maintaining confidentiality in our research funding processes. As this is essential for safeguarding the sharing of scientific opinions and assessments. It's not clear whether anything put into generative AI tools remains confidential. So, our applicants, reviewers and panel members must not put any part of any application under review into these tools. This includes for the purposes of review assessment, applicant responses or other purposes.

- [Read the Research Funders Policy Group's joint statement on the use of generative AI in funding applications and assessment.](#)

3. Submitting your application

Your application should be carefully considered and show a high level of grantsmanship. You should thoroughly review it before submission and ask any co-applicants to do the same.

Your application must be submitted through Grant Tracker. You must complete all sections of the application form. If sections aren't completed adequately, we'll return your application. Or it might not be validated for review.

- [Log into Grant Tracker.](#)
- [Download guidance on how to use Grant Tracker from our website.](#)

3.1. Who's eligible to apply?

PhD Fellowships are awarded to the prospective supervisor of the project (Lead Applicant). **Prospective PhD Fellows shouldn't submit applications to us.** The prospective supervisor/Lead Applicant is responsible for identifying a suitable student. You don't need to name them when making your application.

You're expected to have a contract (fixed-term or tenure) which covers the proposed duration of the grant. You must be based at an UK university or NHS institution and be the Principal Investigator of the project.

As Lead Applicant, you can invite Co-Applicants and Advisers to join the application as Participants. For all applications you must invite a Finance Officer who approves the application from the host institution and acts as the Final Signatory for application submission.

3.2. 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 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 working **in partnership** with people affected by MS to shape, design and oversee a project.

- [Read the NIHR's 'Briefing notes for researchers - public involvement in NHS, health and social care research'](#)
- [Read the NIHR framework for considering who might be involved in research](#)
- [Read the NIHR guidance for applicants on working with people and communities](#)
- [Read the UK Standards for Public Involvement](#)
- [Read 'A practical guide to patient and public involvement in lab-based research' online](#)
- [Find more resources on NIHR's Learning for Involvement website](#)

In your application you need to describe:

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

Pre-application involvement

Before applying, you should involve people affected by MS in the development of your proposal. This ensures:

- Your research questions are relevant to their experiences
- Your lay summary is accessible and understandable to our lay reviewers
- 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 how you'll 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 your project. And advise 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
- Advise on the best approach for recruiting participants
- Work as a peer researcher in your team to be involved throughout the duration of the project (if appropriate)

Budgeting for involvement

Involving people in research requires time and money. It's important to account for the costs of involvement when setting your budget. As without an adequate budget 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:

- 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 (including the cost of carers or personal assistance to also attend face-to-face meetings), childcare costs, broadband and printing for online meetings.

- 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 your PPI contributors to join you at conferences and events.

- Payment

Its 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 depends on several factors. For example, how often they are going to be involved and what level of responsibility they will have.

- [Read the NIHR guidelines for payment and recognition for public involvement on their website.](#)

You should 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 you with people affected by MS and to carry out activities. [Get in touch with us by emailing researchnetwork@mssociety.org.uk](mailto:researchnetwork@mssociety.org.uk)

3.3. Writing your lay summary

You need to write a clear lay summary for your proposal. People affected by MS will review your application alongside experts in your field. Our funding panels also include researchers without direct expertise in your area of research.

If your lay summary is too brief or too complex, it'll be difficult for them to comment on and score your application. And this will affect whether it might be funded.

We encourage you to use Plain English when writing your lay summary. This will make your writing as accessible as possible to all panel members. You can [read about how we use plain English to be more accessible on our website.](#)

- [Read more about Plain English and see some examples on the Plain English Campaign's website.](#)
- [Read our 'Tips for writing a good lay summary'](#)

3.4. Sharing your results with those who've contributed

You need to consider how you'll share your findings with everyone who's contributed to your project. Your dissemination plan should how you'll share what you found with participants, PPI contributors and any community organisations you may have worked with.

You should note that journal publications aren't always accessible to the public even if they include a lay summary section. You should take proactive steps to reach out to those who've contributed to share the results with them in an accessible manner. This can include:

- writing in patient magazines
- holding online and in-person research talks with community organisations
- creating lay executive summaries which can be emailed or posted to all those who contributed.

You can include reasonable costs to support these activities in line with our finance and costs guidance.

- [Read 'Addressing barriers to sharing results with trial participants' on NIHR's website](#)

For all enquiries about involving people affected by MS in any stage of your research, [you can email our Public Involvement team on researchnetwork@mssociety.org.uk.](mailto:researchnetwork@mssociety.org.uk)

3.5. Equity, equality, diversity and inclusion in your research

We're committed to equity, equality, diversity and inclusion (EEDI) in research. We want research findings to be as relevant as possible for everyone with MS in the UK. And to ensure that everyone affected by MS has the opportunity to take part in or engage with MS research. Increasing the diversity of our funded research is one area of focus of our EEDI in research action plan.

- [Find out more about our EEDI in research action plan and progress on our website.](#)

We expect you to consider EEDI at all stages of your project. You'll be asked to describe how you've considered EEDI in the following areas in your application:

- Public engagement and outreach activities
- Participant recruitment (if applicable)

We've published blogs highlighting the importance of doing more inclusive research. And showcasing examples of how our funded researchers are putting this at the heart of their projects:

- [Read our blog: 'Meet the researchers who want seldom-heard groups to be at the centre of their research into fatigue'](#)
- [Read our blog: 'Who is MS research missing?'](#)
- [Read our blog: 'Improving MS care for people from minoritised ethnic backgrounds'](#)

You can include costs for EDI activities in your application. These activities can be especially important early in your project. But should be considered for the lifecycle of your research.

3.6. Clinical research in the NHS and the SoECAT

If your proposal includes clinical research on the NHS, you'll need to complete the Schedule of Events Cost Attribution Tool (SoECAT) to estimate Excess Treatment Costs (ETCs). ETCs occur when patient care or treatment costs in a research study are higher than in routine care. For example, a research participant is given a new drug to see how it compares with the standard drug prescribed. If the new drug is more expensive than the one usually prescribed then it is an 'excess treatment cost'. For non-commercial research studies (those not funded by pharmaceutical companies for commercial ends), ETCs are paid by the NHS and the Department of Health and Social Care.

Since 2018, researchers across the UK have used the SoECAT to make sure that site-level costs are appropriately assigned across the UK in line with AcoRD principles. Doing this when applying for funding means that site-level Research Costs can be met through that funding.

Our research awards don't include NHS support and/or treatment costs. NHS support costs are funded through regional Research Delivery Networks (RDNs). NHS treatment costs, including any ETCs and/or savings, are funded by the NHS through normal patient care commissioning arrangements. You shouldn't include these costs in your application's budget.

3.6.1. Do I need to complete a SoECAT?

You must complete a SoECAT if you're applying for research funding to carry out clinical research in the NHS **and** need Health Research Authority (HRA) approval for your study.

If you meet these criteria, you must complete a SoECAT even if you don't think your research will involve ETCs. The SoECAT helps produce a full picture of the site-level study activities to understand the support you need from us, the NIHR RDN and the Department of Health and Social Care, who pay ETCs.

3.6.2. How do I complete the SoECAT?

1. You should contact your local AcoRD specialist as early as possible. They can advise on completing the SoECAT and anything else you might need for your study. There are different ways to contact an AcoRD specialist, depending on where you are in the UK:
 - [If you're in England, find an AcoRD specialist on the NIHR website](#)
 - [If you're in Scotland, find an AcoRD specialist on the NHS Research Scotland website](#)
 - [If you're in Wales, email research.fundingsupport@wales.nhs.uk to find an AcoRD specialist](mailto:research.fundingsupport@wales.nhs.uk)
 - [If you're in Northern Ireland, find an AcoRD specialist on the HSC R&D division website](#)
2. Once you've spoken to your AcoRD specialist, you should complete an online SoECAT using the NIHR Central Portfolio Management System (CPMS).
3. You'll need to add a lead site-based 'Study Representative' who can review the site resources for your study. You can [find more information about managing study team contacts on the NIHR website](#).
4. Once you've completed the SoECAT, you must request authorisation from NIHR.
5. When you have authorisation from NIHR, you need to upload the 'funder export' Excel document from your SoECAT to your application on Grant Tracker.
 - [Log into the NIHR Central Portfolio Management System \(CPMS\) to complete an online SoECAT](#)

- [Read guidance for logging into CPMS on the NIHR website.](#)
- [Find further information on the Online SoECAT Guidance page on the NIHR website.](#)

3.5.2 Applying to us

If you're applying for funding from us to carry out clinical research in the NHS, you'll need a SoECAT. Even if your research doesn't involve ETCs. You'll need to factor in the time to complete it and have an AcoRD Specialist sign it **before the deadline**. You must upload the Funder Export from your approved online SoECAT to your application form.

If your application is successful, you'll need to log back into CPMS and complete the 'Submission' tab of the SoECAT. You should upload your Letter of Award, then submit the SoECAT to NIHR.

3.7 Finances and costs

You should work with finance offices, clinical trials units, local NHS trusts and the local NIHR CRN network to ensure that all costs of research have been identified and appropriately paid for. The sections below outline our list of acceptable and unacceptable costs. You should read it carefully, including the notes column. [You can request the costs guidance table in an alternative format by emailing \[research@mssociety.org.uk\]\(mailto:research@mssociety.org.uk\).](#)

Please note:

- All requested budget items must be fully justified in your application.
- We may reduce or remove ineligible costs.
- If you believe that any of the 'unacceptable costs' should be seen as direct costs for your project, you must provide full and detailed justification for this in your application.
- We won't be responsible for any increase in the costs of research (whether caused by increased consumables costs, increased personnel costs or otherwise). We won't increase the award to reflect increased research costs, including increased salaries due to nationally agreed pay awards or inflation, once the award has been made.

You can apply for:

- PhD stipends in line with UKRI rates
- up to £7,000 a year towards tuition fees
- up to £45,000 in running costs (including consumables, equipment, animals and human tissue)
- up to £3,000 towards conference attendance or travel

The running costs and conference/travel costs can be spread across the three years. But mustn't exceed the maximum amounts stated above.

3.7.1 PhD stipends and tuition fees

Acceptable costs	Unacceptable costs	Notes
<p>PhD stipends</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outside London <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Year 1: £22,003 ○ Year 2: £22,641 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You can't apply for support towards college fees in excess of the maximum amount for tuition fees. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PhD stipends and tuition fees don't count towards your total running costs • We calculate our stipends in line with UKRI rates.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Year 3: £23,297 ● Inside London <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Year 1: £24,003 ○ Year 2: £24,641 ○ Year 3: £25,297 <p>Tuition fees</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Maximum of £7,000 each year. <p>Note: the 2026/2027 UKRI stipend rates weren't available when this guidance was published. We'll review our stipend rates when the 2026/2027 UKRI rates are published.</p>		<p>Stipends are tax-free and include a 2.9% inflationary increase each year.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Awarded grants will include the host institution's tuition fees at home student rates. ● You should seek advice from your institution when estimating the future level of tuition fees for your application (up to our specified maximum). ● We won't increase the award budget to reflect increased research costs, stipends or tuition fees once an award has been made.
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3.7.2 Consumables

Acceptable costs	Unacceptable costs	Notes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Laboratory chemicals and materials (e.g. reagents, isotopes, peptides, enzymes, antibodies, gases, proteins, cell/tissue/ bacterial culture). ● Data collection materials, if specific to the project. ● Patient and public involvement (PPI) costs, including travel for PPI representatives. ● Dissemination costs specifically for sharing findings with people that have contributed to the project (such as participants, PPI contributors), if these haven't already been factored into your PPI costs ● Equity, equality, diversity and inclusion (EEDI) activity costs ● Consultant costs, such as statisticians. ● Travel for the PhD student to carry out activities essential 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Article publishing or open access charges can't be included. ● Standard per unit IT charges. ● Regulatory licences and fees, such as those associated with ethical approval can't be included. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● A full justification is required for all consumables. ● You should break consumables down as itemised costs rather than giving an overall estimated cost. ● You can read more guidance on PPI costs on the NIHR INVOLVE website. ● Data management and sharing costs must be reasonable and proportional in the context of the overall grant. Data sharing costs don't include open access publication costs. ● Travel costs under consumables have to be directly relevant to carrying out the research (e.g. related to data collection, PPI or EDI activities). Any travel associated with training,

<p>to the project, such as data collection.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Data sharing costs, such as archiving repository fees, data storage costs and data management services. 		<p>visiting collaborators or conferences should be included under the ‘Conferences and travel’ budget.</p>
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3.7.3 Equipment

Acceptable costs	Unacceptable costs	Notes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Equipment that’s specific to this grant and essential to carry out the proposed research Costs may include purchase, delivery and installation of scientific equipment where that equipment is specific to the grant. Equipment use costs where usage of shared/core equipment, services or research facilities is essential to the project. Personal computing costs for the PhD Fellow. Funding for computer equipment or software is only allowed if absolutely essential for the project. And must be fully justified in your application. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Equipment can’t be requested for routine or service use. Annual software licencing fees aren’t eligible for inclusion. Phone/computer accessories (drivers, cases, chargers, batteries). We won’t pay for bench fees or annual access fees for shared facilities, equipment or infrastructure. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Computing equipment costs are capped at £1,500. Each piece of equipment, including computing equipment, must be fully justified. The host institution is responsible for equipment. This includes its accommodation, operating and servicing costs, and any insurance that may be necessary. Equipment access costs: You can’t include Directly Allocated costs. You can include fees relating to the use of core equipment, services or research facilities that are essential to the project. You must state the cost per sample/time period for these or they’ll be removed

3.7.4 Animals

Acceptable costs	Unacceptable costs	Notes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Animal purchase and transportation costs, maintenance (including food) and experimentation costs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Home Office Licences and animal handling training costs aren’t covered. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> You must state the species and number of animals to be used. You must fully justify the use of animals in the Project Details of your application. You can read

		more in the ‘Use of animals’ section of this document.
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3.7.5 Human tissue

Acceptable costs	Unacceptable costs	Notes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cost for the provision of human tissue. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> If you’re planning to use human tissue from the MS Society Tissue Bank, you should estimate the costs based on the tariff found on their website. You can read more in the ‘Use of human tissue’ section of this document.

3.7.6 Conferences and travel

Acceptable costs	Unacceptable costs	Notes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> You can request a maximum of £3,000 towards conference or travel costs for the PhD Fellow. This can be used to cover travel, registration fees and/or accommodation for meetings/conferences. Or travel for other activities, like visiting collaborators, if essential to the project. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> First class travel or accommodation Conference costs for the lead applicant, co-applicants and advisers aren’t eligible for inclusion. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conference and travel costs can only be requested for the named PhD Fellow. Any travel must be directly related to the funded research.

3.7.7 Other

Unacceptable costs	Notes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Excess treatment costs Institutional overheads Financial services Personnel services Recruitment costs Public relations General institution libraries Departmental services (administration, secretarial, printing, photocopying) Telephone charges and postage or courier services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The NHS should fund excess treatment costs (ETCs). If you’re applying for a clinical research grant, you’ll need to complete a Schedule of Events Cost Attribution Template (SoECAT). This will allow your grant to be eligible for the NIHR portfolio and the support this provides, including ETCs.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Journal subscriptions • Furniture 	
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Types of costs

Your institution’s finance team should be able to provide further guidance on costings. If you are unsure please get in touch with us. Including ineligible costs may delay application submission or approval of award.

We won’t fund the full economic costs of research (fECs), or a fixed proportion of these. We’ll only pay for the Directly Incurred costs related specifically to the planned research to be undertaken in this grant. As a member of the AMRC we support their position statement on supporting research in universities outlining what charities pay for and why.

- [Read the position statement on charities supporting research in universities on the AMRC website.](#)

Directly incurred	Directly allocated	Indirect
<p>These include the familiar direct costs of research such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff (e.g. research assistant salaries) • Travel and subsistence • Consumables and Equipment (or specific access to equipment) <p>We’ll pay these costs, but you’ll need to justify why they’re needed for the research.</p>	<p>These are shared costs, based on estimates and don’t represent actual costs on a project-by-project basis. As such we will not pay these costs. They were previously included as ‘indirect costs’ heading. They include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The costing of the time spent by the applicant and co-applicants • Estates: the way these are calculated may vary between institutions. Different categories of space will be costed differently, for example laboratory space will be different to office-based costs. • Other Directly Allocated: these include the costs of 	<p>These costs are necessary for underpinning research but can’t be allocated to individual projects. These include things like computing and information support, central services, general maintenance and other infrastructure costs. They’ll be calculated separately by each Higher Education Institution (HEI), according to TRAC methodology. We won’t cover Indirect Costs or any other non-attributable overhead costs in your budget. However, such costs may be eligible under the Charity Research Support Fund.</p>

Directly incurred	Directly allocated	Indirect
	shared resources, such as staff and equipment.	

3.8 Co-funding applications

We're open to co-funding applications with other funders. You should provide full details of the co-funder and amount they would be contributing.

3.9 Use of animals

If your research project uses animals, you must complete the Justification for Animal Use section of the application form.

- [You should review our policy on animal research on our website.](#)
- [Read the AMRC's statement on animal research on their website.](#) We fully support this statement.

We won't support the use of animals in research unless there's no alternative. And our reviewers carefully consider animal use procedures. We'll only support research using animals if:

- All animal use falls within the regulations laid down by Government, including the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 and the Animal Welfare Act 2006.
- All relevant Home Office licences and Ethical Review Body approvals are held for the duration of the intended projects. You and your institution are responsible for these being in place. We may ask to see copies of licences and approvals before activating your award.
- Any research conducted outside of the UK using animals should be conducted to the spirit of UK animal research legislation and to the UK welfare standards. [Read more about these expectations on page 14 of the NC3Rs 'Responsibility in the Use of Animals in Research' guidance document.](#) You're responsible for making sure any international collaborators are following these standards. But we may request additional review by NC3Rs if we have concerns.

The 3Rs of animal research

You must address the 3Rs in the Project Details section of the application. You're required to explain how you've considered each of the following:

- Reducing the number of animals used to the minimum necessary for a valid result
- Refining experiments to minimise any pain, suffering or distress
- Replacing animal experiments with alternatives wherever possible.
- [Explore the NC3Rs library of resources for implementing the 3Rs in your research.](#)
- [Read the NC3Rs 'Responsibility in the use of animals in bioscience research' guidance on their website](#)

Justifications

You must clearly state and justify the following in your application:

- The relevance to humans and why there is no alternative to the use of animals
- The species and number of any animals that could potentially be used
- Any refinement procedures to minimise any pain or distress
- Measures taken to avoid bias (e.g. blinding, randomisation)
- Number of experimental and control groups and sample size per group
- How the sample size was calculated, showing power calculations and including justification of effect size
- Overview of the planned statistical analyses in relation to the primary outcomes to be assessed
- Frequency of measurements/interventions to be used
- If necessary, circumstances in which power calculations aren't appropriate to determine sample size

If these aren't addressed, we'll return your application.

Considerations

You should also consider that we support the AMRC's signing of the Concordat on Openness in Animal Research. This encourages grant holders to be open about their use of animals in research.

- [Read the Concordat on Openness in Animal Research on the Understanding Animal Research website.](#)

The ARRIVE (Animal Research: Reporting In Vivo Experiments) guidelines have been developed by the NC3Rs to improve how *in vivo* studies are reported. They ensure that data from animal experiments can be fully evaluated and used by other researchers. We fully endorse these guidelines. We expect our researchers to comply with them when designing your experiments and reporting your research.

- [Read the ARRIVE guidelines 2.0 on the ARRIVE website.](#)

For further help in planning your experiments you should consider use of the PREPARE Guidelines (Planning Research and Experimental Procedures on Animals: Recommendations for Excellence). These guidelines include checklists which can help with improving reproducibility, reducing waste and promoting alternatives in animal research through better planning and communication.

- [Read the PREPARE guidelines on the Norecopa website.](#)

3.10 Use of human tissue

Donated human tissue is a vital and precious resource, therefore you must justify why human tissue will be used in your research. If your research uses human tissue, you must confirm that you'll comply with the appropriate legislation. And follow the relevant Codes of Practice issued by the Human Tissue Authority (HTA). The type of tissue and quantity must be fully justified in your application.

3.11 Use of the UK MS Register

If you plan to use the UK MS Register in your project, you must contact the Register team as early as possible. **All projects using the MS Register must be reviewed and approved by the UK MS Register’s Scientific Steering Committee (SSC).**

You’re responsible for obtaining SSC approval **before** you submit your application to us. Confirmation of SSC approval must be attached to your application. This allows us to verify that your project is feasible and can be supported by the Register. Getting SSC approval can take time, so make sure you factor this in when working towards our application submission deadline. You can find out more about the SSC approval process, and SSC meeting dates and deadlines, on the MS Register website.

- [Read more about using the MS Register in your research on our website.](#)
- [Learn more about the SSC approvals process, including meeting dates and deadlines, on the MS Register website.](#)

3.12 References

You should cite all essential references relevant to your proposal. We don’t specify a referencing style. But you must include enough information in the reference list for reviewers to find the publication. DOIs alone aren’t sufficient.

Copies of in-press or submitted publications relevant to the proposal should also be included. You can add these in the “Attachments” section.

4. Criteria for review

Your application will be scored on the quality of science and relevance to MS. Applications will be reviewed and scored primarily by members of The Expert Review Network (TERN) with relevant expertise. This includes review by lay members. Our panels are made up of TERN members with different expertise. Not everyone on the panel is an expert in your field. So, it's important to consider this when writing your application. We recommend writing in Plain English throughout your application as this improves accessibility. And means that all panel members can fully engage with and understand your proposal.

- [Read more about TERN on our website.](#)

You can also suggest up to three potential peer reviewers for your application in the “Project Details” section of the online application form. And tell us any reviewers you don't want to review your application, with justification.

- Once you've submitted your application, we validate it to make sure it fits the PhD Fellowships remit. And to check that all sections of the form have been completed adequately.
- If your application is eligible, we send it for independent, external review by members of the research community with relevant expertise and members of our Research Network
- Based on the external review scores, applications go through a shortlisting process:
 - This involves the TERN Review Panel Chair discussing the review scores and comments. It can also include a Vice Chair and a lay panel member, depending on the applications being considered.
 - They'll recommend a shortlist of the highest quality and most relevant applications for further review. These will have the best chances of being fundable in this round.
 - The remaining applications will be rejected (triaged)
 - We'll tell all applicants the triage outcomes around a month before funding outcomes are announced.
- If your application is shortlisted, you're invited to provide a rebuttal to the reviewers' comments. You'll have 14 days to submit this and we'll advise you of the rebuttal dates in advance.
- Shortlisted applications are considered by invited TERN members at the Career Development Awards TERN Review Panel meeting.
- The TERN Review Panel provides a recommendation to us about which applications should be funded.
- Our Board of Trustees then considers their recommendations for funding.
- Following approval by the Board, we'll communicate official funding offers, awards are made and projects start.

The scoring guidance used by our reviewers is found on the next page. [You can request the scoring guidance for reviewers table in an alternative format by emailing \[research@mssociety.org.uk\]\(mailto:research@mssociety.org.uk\).](#)

PhD Fellowship scoring guidance for reviewers

All reviewers are asked to score applications between 1 and 5, corresponding to ratings of highly fundable, potentially fundable and not fundable. We've outlined the criteria used to score applications and their ratings below.

Rating	Generic criteria	PhD Fellowship specific
<p>Highly fundable</p> <p>Scores of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 5 • 4.5 • 4 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research questions are strongly relevant to our 2025-2029 Research Strategy, and/or • Research question(s) are likely to result in significant benefit for people affected by MS. And advancement in our scientific understanding of MS • Research team is very strong, containing all relevant disciplines to deliver project outcomes • Very good value for money • Proposal is clear and well written • People affected by MS are actively involved and influencing project at all relevant stages (PPI) • Proposal has a clear and realistic pathway to impact. Potential impact is highly significant and appropriate to award type. • Research design is excellent, appropriate and highly feasible for the Award type. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Excellent training and educational environment, with clear plans to help the Fellow develop ECR competencies (see Appendix 1). The supervisory team are well placed to support student in their career development. • The proposed design, methods and analyses are well developed. • The work is highly appropriate for a PhD project and achievable within the timeframe.
<p>Potentially fundable</p> <p>Scores of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3.5 • 3 • 2.5 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research questions have relevance to our 2025-2029 Research Strategy, and/or • Research question(s) are likely to result in benefit for people affected by MS. And some advancement in the scientific understanding of MS • Research team has relevant experience and contains most of the relevant disciplines to deliver project outcomes • Acceptable value for money • Some elements of involving people affected by MS, where appropriate, but not well integrated or well supported • Elements of the application are unclear 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acceptable training and educational environment, with some plans to help the Fellow develop ECR competencies. The supervisory team are able to support student in their career development. • The proposed design, methods and analyses are acceptable but require some further explanation. • The work is reasonably appropriate for a PhD and probably achievable within the timeframe. If successful, has some potential for further development.

Rating	Generic criteria	PhD Fellowship specific
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Project would only be fundable with some changes • Proposal has a reasonable pathway to impact. Potential impact is significant and mostly appropriate to grant type. • Research design is acceptable for the Award type 	
<p style="text-align: center;">Not fundable</p> <p>Scores of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2 • 1.5 • 1 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research questions have no relevance to our 2025-2029 Research Strategy, and/or • Research question(s) are irrelevant with no tangible benefit to people affected by MS. • Key skills missing from the research team • Poor value for money • Unclear application • Involvement of people affected by MS inappropriate or limited/ lacking • Pathway to impact is unclear and/or unrealistic. Little or no potential impact or poorly described/not appropriate to grant type. • Research design is unsuitable for the Award type. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor training environment and educational environment, with no plans to help the Fellow develop ECR competencies. The supervisory team can't support the student's career development • There are serious scientific concerns about the proposed research (it is poor/ flawed/ duplicative) • The proposed research design, methods and analyses are not well developed. • The work is not appropriate or achievable within the timeframe of a PhD.

5. Resubmission policy

Unless you're explicitly invited, we only allow one resubmission of any previously unsuccessful application. If you are resubmitting an application, you should indicate this in the 'Other Support' section of the application form. And complete the text box according to the guidance.

Why do we only allow one resubmission?

Over the past five years, less than 10% of resubmissions have been successful.

Our resubmission policy aims to promote a culture of high-quality submissions and high-quality reviews that will benefit you, our reviewers and us alike. And the MS community by helping us select and fund high quality and relevant research that has an impact on people affected by MS.

What do we consider as a resubmission?

A resubmission is any application that was previously submitted to any of our Award Rounds within the past six years. This includes if you submit the same application under a different name. Or if you submit the same application under a different funding stream (e.g. changing a PhD Fellowship to a Catalyst Award).

Exceptions to our resubmission rule

We may invite a small number of further resubmissions if there is compelling evidence from peer review. And if advised by the TERN Review Panels.

Preparing a resubmission

If you're preparing a resubmission, you must:

- Indicate this in the 'Other Support' section of the application form.
- Make sure that previous comments or considerations have been adequately responded to. This includes written review comments and/or panel feedback. Reviewers will have access to your previous application and review comments.
- Include a summary of any substantial changes to the application

If you don't include these, your application won't be eligible for re-review. And we'll automatically reject it.

What constitutes sufficient change to qualify as a new submission?

We'll only qualify applications as a new submission if they contain major changes. It's not sufficient to include only minor changes or considering reviewer comments as a new submission.

Consequences of an Uninvited Resubmission:

If we feel that a new application is a resubmission, or if you submit an uninvited resubmission that has already been submitted twice, then we'll automatically reject it.

6. Contact us

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

Thank you for your interest in our research funding.

Appendix 1: Early Career Researcher Assessment Framework

This Assessment Framework outlines the competencies we believe early career researchers need to develop to support their careers. You should consider how these competencies will be developed by the PhD Fellow when assessing the research environment and training plans.

This Assessment Framework outlines the competencies Early Career Fellowship applicants are expected to demonstrate in their application and interview.

The Framework assesses six competencies:

- Research vision
- Research experience and potential
- Personal development
- Leadership
- Communication and engagement skills
- Profile and influence

Research vision

You should:

- Demonstrate a high commitment to MS research with a clear understanding of how your research contributes to our Research Strategy.
- Demonstrate independent research ideas that are likely to result in significant benefits for people affected by MS. These could include, but aren't limited to:
 - addressing fundamental gaps in our knowledge of MS pathophysiology
 - development and implementation of new treatments
 - risk factors and prevention
 - improved care and services for people affected by MS.
- Be able to describe the long term plans for your research. This includes a route to implement your findings for the benefit for people affected by MS.
- Have an awareness of research in other fields and embrace opportunities for collaborative and interdisciplinary working.

Research experience and potential

You should:

- Have prior experience in MS research or personal motivation to work in MS. Or you should have evidence of work in a related and relevant research field.
- Hold a PhD if you're a non-clinical researcher, or be able to demonstrate equivalent research experience.
- Have delivered previous research project(s) and show evidence of impactful outputs.
 - These could include first author publications or critical contributions to multi-author publications, conference presentations or policy outputs.
 - They could also include but aren't limited to: preprints, contribution to consortia, patents, key datasets, software, novel assays and reagents and publications.
 - When considering research publications, our reviewers will recognise that the content of a scientific paper and its influence in the field holds more significance than publication metrics or where it was published.
- Actively be adding to your "tool-box" of skills. These'll serve as a strong basis for future independent research activity. And allow you to be recognised for your specialist expertise.

- Be establishing and able to demonstrate your own network(s) of research contacts independent of your group leader/supervisor (e.g. through multicentre collaborations)

Personal development

You should:

- Describe how you've designed your proposal to include research and credible plans for a training and educational programme. This should support your further career development and networking with peers and superiors.
- Demonstrate appropriate selection of supervisor(s) and project team that will enable you to gain the specific skills needed to deliver your current and future research plans.
- Have identified and be pursuing opportunities to access career development support, such as:
 - Mentoring
 - Learning new skills
 - Spending time in or collaborating closely with other research groups or settings, either within the UK or overseas.
- These opportunities can either be within the research institution the Fellow has worked in, or through multicentre collaborations.

Leadership

You should:

- Show evidence of leading and inspiring. For example:
 - Through organisation of peer activities, workshops, journal clubs.
 - Supporting individuals at earlier career stages such as Masters and PhD level students or clinical trainees.

Communication and engagement skills

You should:

- Have excellent communication and interpersonal skills across different audiences, including academic and public. These could be demonstrated, for example, through presentations at scientific conferences and involvement at public meetings (for example, those organised by us or one of our local groups).
- Demonstrate enthusiasm for active involvement (PPI) of people with MS in the development of your specific project and wider research plans.
- Show how your research outcomes will be communicated and disseminated within and outside the research community
- Be prepared to demonstrate how your research aligns with our mission and our promise to people with MS.

Profile and influence

You should:

- Have a strong, practical sense of how you'll develop your career to become a leading independent researcher.
- Be supportive of the wider research agenda through, for example, peer review activity, providing lectures/seminars, teaching/clinical duties and participation in internal committees.

Appendix 2: Key terms and definitions

Term	Definition
Lead applicant	<p>The named lead applicant is the project leader. As lead applicant, you:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are the contact person for all correspondence relating to the application. • Have overall responsibility for the award and must actively engage in its direction.
Adviser	<p>Advisers don't need to be actively involved in the delivery of the project. But you must define their contribution (expertise, advice etc.) to the project team.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They can view and edit the application, and provide comments. • Advisers' CVs are included in the application PDF and seen by reviewers. • They need to confirm their participation. But don't need to approve the application. • You can't request salary costs for advisers.
Co-applicant	<p>A co-applicant is a researcher who'll be actively involved in the delivery of the project should the funding application be successful. You can't include them simply for supervisory purposes.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Co-applicants can view and edit applications. • Co-applicants have to approve applications before they can be submitted.
Finance officer	<p>This is a member of your institution who's responsible for confirming and approving financial details of applications.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They act as final signatory for application submission. Your application won't be accepted if it's not approved by the Finance Officer before the funding deadline. • They'll be responsible for administering the grant if it is awarded.
Public engagement	<p>Where information and knowledge about research is provided and disseminated. Examples of engagement are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • science festivals open to the public • open days at a research centre • raising awareness in the media <p>Read more about public engagement on the National Centre for Co-ordinating Public Engagement's website.</p>
Public involvement (PPI)	<p>Public involvement (PPI)</p> <p>Where members of the public are actively involved in research projects and in research organisations. Examples of involvement include when people affected by MS:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • are involved in identifying research priorities • are members of a project steering group • comment on patient information materials <p>Read more about involvement on the NIHR website.</p>
Public participation	<p>Where people take part in a research study. Examples of participation include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • people being recruited to a clinical trial or other study • people completing a questionnaire as part of a study. <p>Read more about participation in trials on the NHS website.</p>
Research Network	<p>The Research Network are a passionate group of people living with MS or caring for someone with MS. They're not required to have specialist scientific knowledge, but are trained to use their personal experiences of MS to review applications, ensuring that the research we fund is of the highest importance to people affected by MS.</p>

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

Contact us

MS National Centre 020 8438 0700

info@mssociety.org.uk

MS Helpline Freephone 0808 800 8000
(weekdays 9am-9pm)

helpline@mssociety.org.uk

Online

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facebook.com/MSSociety

twitter.com/mssocietyuk

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Multiple Sclerosis Society

Registered charity nos. 1139257 / SCO41990

Registered as a limited company in England and Wales 07451571

Registered office: Carriage House, 8 City North Place, London, N4 3FU