

Better Methods Better Research – and what that really means



NIHR Statistics Group Conference 2026

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| Better Methods, Better Research (BMBR)

AIM

Dedicated to advancing and strengthening biomedical, health and social care research. Its goal is to improve research quality, and ensure optimal evidence-based methods are used to inform better policy and delivery across the UK and internationally

EVIDENCE-BASED METHODS: Increasing the rigour, quality and efficiency of research methods used in biomedical, health and care focused research.

ENHANCED RESEARCH CAPACITY: Building capacity in the knowledge and expertise needed to drive methodological innovation.

EFFECTIVE APPLICATION OF APPROACHES: Effective application of evidence-based research methods in different fields and contexts.

Medical Research Council (MRC)

MRC funds world-leading discovery and translational research to accelerate diagnosis, advance treatment and prevent human illness.



Medical
Research
Council

National Institute for Health and Care Research

We fund, enable and deliver world-leading health and social care research that improves people's health and wellbeing, and promotes economic growth.

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NIHR Research Funding Programmes

<u>Better Methods Better Research</u>	✓	<u>Programme Grants for Applied Research</u>	✓
<u>Efficacy and Mechanism Evaluation</u>	✓	<u>Public Health Research</u>	✓
<u>Evidence Synthesis</u>	✓	<u>Policy Research Programme</u>	✓
<u>Health and Social Care Delivery Research</u>	✓	<u>Research for Patient Benefit</u>	✓
<u>Health Technology Assessment</u>	✓	<u>Research Programme for Social Care</u>	✓
<u>Invention for Innovation</u>	✓		
<u>Programme Development Grants</u>	✓		

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SCOPE

- The development of **generalisable methods** that underpin research includes methods within biomedical, health and social care research
- Requirements:
 - addresses a clear need
 - is designed for general learning by others
 - has demonstrable PPI engagement
 - has considered how it will be dissemination and adopted by others

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AREAS OUT OF SCOPE

- Methods not generalisable beyond a single application
- Applications of existing methods
- Exclusively lab-based methods
- Generation or refinement of cellular or animal models
- Platform or resource development
- Technology development
- Biomarker identification and validation

| BMBR Portfolio

- **Annual Spend:** £8m per year
- **Grant value:** £625k (100% FEC), but only fund up to 80% FEC
- **Funding calls:** researcher-led, guidance development, highlight notice
- **Portfolio:** 165 awards (25 awarded since 2025)
- **Stakeholders:** DHSC, MRC, NICE, Government, Devolved Administrations
- **Prioritisation routes:** Guidance development, highlight notices

| BMBR Researcher-led Topics

Common areas of methodological development:

- Clinical trials
- Evidence synthesis
- Genetic epidemiology
- Causal inference
- Health economics
- Machine learning and AI

| Examples of Researcher-led Awards

Verena Zuber, Imperial College London

Bayesian causal learning: a novel framework for drug-target discovery using Mendelian randomization on single-cell transcriptomics

- Aim: to allow causal inference of single-cell RNA sequencing data combined with genotype information
- Output: R package
- Dissemination: include in Mendelian randomization course, user-friendly scripts, step by step guides on GitHub, pre-processed summary-level data

| Examples of Researcher-led Awards

Felicity Boardman, University of Warwick

A realist evaluation of the practical, epistemological and ethical status of remote qualitative data collection in health

- Aim: to understand the impact of remote data collection on qualitative data quality and develop principles and recommendations for future studies.
- Output: framework for remote qualitative data collection
- Dissemination: training module freely available and targeted to NIHR research design service, project website, animated video, executive summary to worldwide funders.

| Developing Guidance for Research Method

- Development of guidance to catalyse the uptake of validated research methods in priority areas of methodological uncertainty
- Setting best practice – multiple methods available, to guide when, where and how each methodology should be best applied
- Engage with broad range of relevant stakeholders
- Guidance needs to be accessible, appropriate and informative to groups involved
- Clear pathways to impact
- £120k over 18 months

Developing guidance for design and conduct of cluster randomised trials

Lead Research Organisation: [University of Birmingham](#)
Department Name: Institute of Applied Health Research

Standards for Rapid Evaluation and Appraisal Methods (STREAM)

Lead Research Organisation: [UNIVERSITY COLLEGE LONDON](#)
Department Name: Targeted Intervention

Developing guidance for analysis and reporting of oral epidemiological studies to inform burden estimation

Lead Research Organisation: [Queen Mary University of London](#)
Department Name: Sch of Medicine & Dentistry

Practical guidance on accessible statistical methods for different estimands in randomised trials

Lead Research Organisation: [UNIVERSITY COLLEGE LONDON](#)
Department Name: MRC Clinical Trials Unit

BMBR Highlight Topics

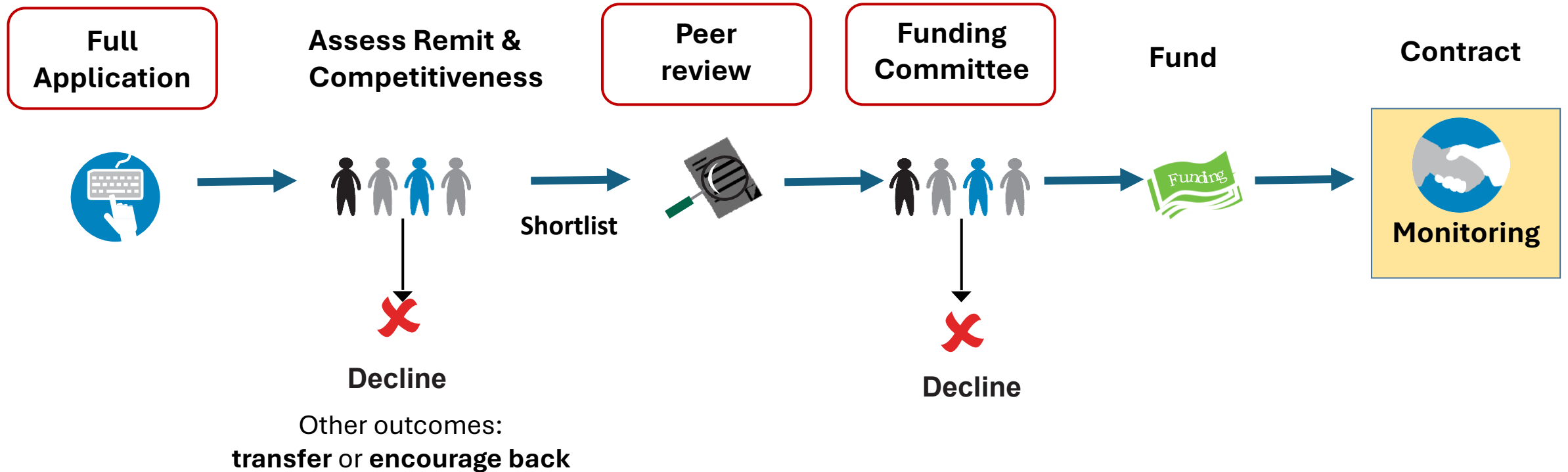
Better Methods Better Research

Research methodology that supports the incorporation of health and environmental impact assessment in research

Research question

This funding opportunity supports research that develops new methodological tools and approaches, such as the development of metrics, modelling techniques, evaluation methodologies, and decision frameworks that support the incorporation of health and environmental impact assessments as part of our climate health and sustainability commitments to help reduce carbon emissions and achieve net zero.

| BMBR Application and Funding Process



| BMBR Wishlist

BMBR *“Methodology research that develops and delivers ways to improve research methods used by others”*

- Closer working with other NIHR and MRC Research Programmes
- Closer working between methods community and funders
- Fund useful and impactful research
- Showcase the value of good quality methods research

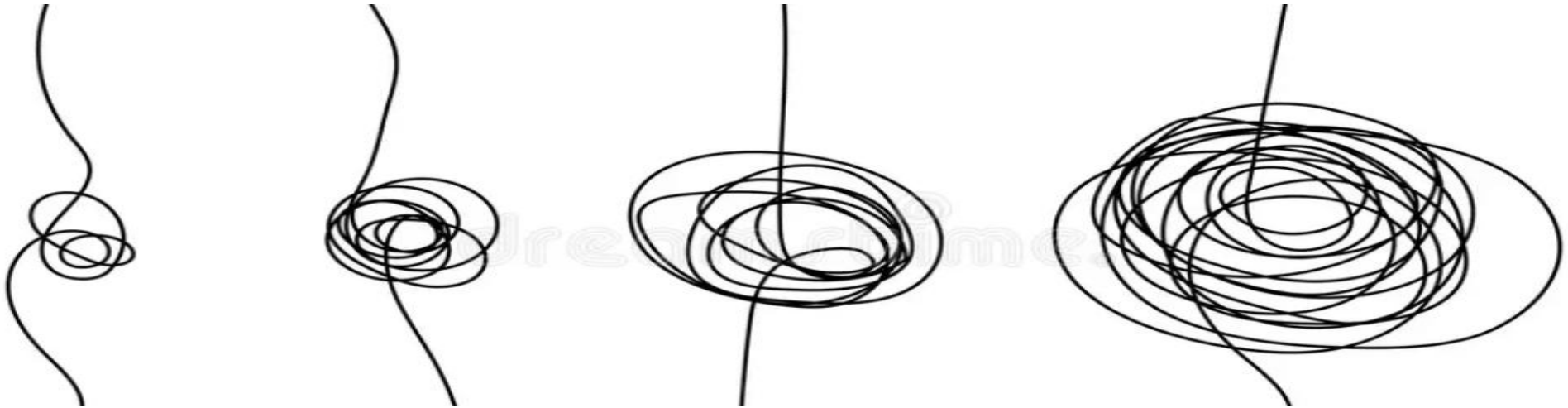


Methods in the Wider NIHR Context



Does complex intervention A work and is it cost-effective from the perspective of the NHS?

Pragmatic (cluster) RCT, data linkage, process evaluation, health economic evaluation



Is drug X more effective than placebo for the treatment of condition Y in adults?

2-arm RCT, single outcome

How do we improve coordinated care for working-age adults with three or more long-term conditions, across primary, secondary and social care, in deprived communities?

Systems thinking – simulation, modelling, natural experiment, synthesis of multiple data sources

Government Priorities

The NIHR supports government priorities for health and social care, including the 3 shifts outlined in the 10 Year Health Plan and the relevant government missions:

Hospital to community

More care available on people's doorsteps and in their homes

Analogue to digital

Technology to liberate staff from admin and allow people to manage their care easily online

Sickness to prevention

Reaching patients earlier and making the healthy choice the easy choice

Build an NHS fit for the future

Kickstart economic growth

| NIHR 4Is

The NIHR drives life-changing research for the health and wealth of our society across 4 areas:



IMPACT



INCLUSION



INNOVATION



INVESTMENT

Health Technology Assessment

HTA Researcher-led: primary research

We welcome innovative methods that offer substantial benefits. If you plan to use a complex methodology, for example, Bayesian and model-based designs, you should justify this over a more standard approach. Benefits could include showing that the statistical properties are superior, or that the resources required are lower. You should also demonstrate that you have appropriate expertise within the research team to implement the approach.



Groundbreaking £50m MRC centre will overhaul clinical trials

18 December 2025

A new initiative aims to accelerate the transition to improved patient care.

The Medical Research Council (MRC) Centre of Regenerative Trial Innovation in partnership with the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) will receive up to £50 million.

The funding will last over 14 years with the ambition to transform the clinical research landscape.

The centre plans to shake-up approaches to clinical research by developing pioneering new ways to speed up the pace of treatment and recovery.

Multiple testing

One key area of focus will be to move away from the current approach of testing a single intervention in a single disease one at a time.

Developing new efficient ways to test multiple drugs in multiple diseases simultaneously could be a game changer both for industry and the academic community.

Improving efficiency

Another significant area of focus is using clinical trials to identify the minimum 'intensity' such as duration, frequency, or dose required for a drug to be effective.

For instance, finding the lowest effective dose of a chemotherapy drug could help make cancer treatment gentler for patients by reducing side effects.

Health Technology Assessment

Target trial emulation: utilising routine data to answer key health and care questions

Overview

Opportunity status:	Open
Type:	Programme
Opening date:	27 March 2026 at 1:00 pm
Closing date:	2 September 2026 at 1:00 pm
Reference ID:	2026/384

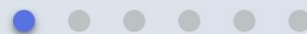
Research priority

We are inviting proposals for Target Trial Emulation (TTE) studies to assess the comparative effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of health and social care interventions. This opportunity targets specific areas where Randomised Controlled Trials (RCTs) are not feasible, ethical, or sufficiently agile to inform fast-moving technologies.

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NICE real-world evidence framework

Corporate document
Published: 23 June 2022

www.nice.org.uk/corporate/ecd9

The target trial approach

Non-randomised studies should be designed to mimic the randomised trial that would ideally have been performed unconstrained by ethical or feasibility challenges ([Hernán and Robins 2016](#), [Gomes et al. 2022](#)). This process, known as the target trial approach (or trial emulation), requires developers to clearly articulate the study design and helps avoid selection bias because of poor design ([Bykov et al. 2022](#)). Usually, the target trial would be a pragmatic randomised trial representing the target population of interest and reflecting routine care. This approach forms the basis of the Cochrane ROBINS-I risk of bias tool for non-randomised studies ([Sterne et al. 2016](#)).

"We like the target trial approach — it fits well with the kinds of comparative treatment effect studies that we tend to see at NICE, and it is highly intuitive. To convince NICE decision-making committees, you have to speak their language, and the TTE framework does that."

NICE Associate Director for Real World Evidence Methods



Research Programme for Social Care

RPSC Commissioned Call - June 2026

[← Back to all funding opportunities](#)

Overview

[Application guidance](#)

[Research specification](#)

[Application process](#)

[Contact Details](#)

Evaluative Research in Social Care: Methods Development, Adaptation and Implementation

The Research Programme for Social Care (RPSC) is inviting applications for research proposals that address methods development, adaptation and implementation of evaluative research. This initiative is part of a suite of NIHR activity aimed to support and invest in methods development and adaptation in social care.

By **evaluative research** we mean applied research conducted to determine the value or impact of an intervention, practice, policy or service, through the use of any appropriate research design. The ultimate aim is to improve the lives of people who draw on social care support and their carers. Evaluation should provide robust knowledge to improve decision-making and may be formative or summative.

Barriers to Overcome

- Methods cannot fix poor questions
- Capacity strengthening and training
- Cost to implementing innovative methods
- Data infrastructure



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Better methods expand the question we formulate

Expanded questions produce more decision-relevant evidence

More decision-relevant evidence change practice and lead to genuine impact