
HSC R&D Division Enabling Research Awards

Guidance Notes
2025

Closing date for applications: Friday 17th October 2025

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1. Introduction

- 1.1 This document details the process involved in making an application to the Health & Social Care Research & Development Division (HSC R&D Division) **Enabling Research Awards (ERA)** scheme.
- 1.2 The ERA scheme is designed to support researchers in preparation for larger funding awards.
- 1.3 The primary objective of the ERA scheme is to increase the rate and number of successful applications led by Northern Ireland-based researchers to national and international funders, and funding streams in health and social care research.
- 1.4 The aims of the ERA scheme are to:
- support the completion of preliminary work in support of a wider research programme
 - improve the outcomes of larger funding applications to other funders led by NI researchers
 - strengthen applications to other funders for subsequent elements of a wider research programme
 - increase the likelihood of successful applications of higher funding value led by NI researchers
- 1.5 HSC R&D Division invites applications for ERAs to **support researchers in the acquisition of funding through major research programmes** including, but not restricted to:
- NIHR Evaluations, Trials and Studies (NETS) research programmes (excluding NIHR Invention for Innovation; i4i)
 - UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) funding
 - AMRC member charities
 - EU funding programmes
 - Other eligible international opportunities
- 1.6 Both the ERA and the target funding opportunity **must fund research directly applicable to health and social care delivery, and aim to improve the health and wellbeing of the Northern Ireland population.**
- 1.7 ERAs will directly support the completion of **preparatory, refinement or developmental work** which can be shown to strengthen, and therefore potentially improve the outcomes, of a subsequent funding application led by NI researchers. The scheme aims to assist researchers in the development of research ideas and/or interdisciplinary teams that will deliver robust, well-developed and competitive full-scale proposals, through the conduct of feasibility studies, pilot studies and other relevant activities.

- 1.8 Funding will be provided up to a **maximum award of £50,000 direct research costs**.
- 1.9 All inquiries and correspondence relating to applications for ERAs should be addressed to:

Mrs Kathleen Roulston

Strand Administrator

Tel: (028) 9536 3464

Email: kathleen.roulston@hscni.net

Dr Janet Diffin

Senior R&D Programme Manager

Tel: 07721163412

Email: janet.diffin@hscni.net

2. Eligibility

- 2.1 Applications are invited from Northern Ireland-based investigators working in research areas directly relevant to health or social care.
- 2.2 The Chief Investigator (CI) must be employed in a substantive post in Northern Ireland within health or social care services, voluntary/not-for-profit organisations providing health or social care, or within a higher education institution.
- 2.3 The CI should be experienced in the conduct and management of research relevant to health and social care, and be able to demonstrate a track record/expertise in preparing and managing competitively-awarded research grants. Ideally, they should have previously acted as a CI, and be capable of providing evidence of high-quality outputs from previous research.
- 2.4 CIs without a demonstrable track record or expertise may be eligible to apply. Such applicants should ensure that they have constructed a research team with members who can provide suitable mentorship and expertise, and their proposal should include details of how they will be supported in their role by their team.
- 2.5 The CI should be able to demonstrate that they, or another member of the research team based in an institution in Northern Ireland, have clear intentions to submit an application to a major research funding programme as Chief Investigator, and of using the ERA to strengthen specific elements of their planned application to the target funding programme. If it is not intended that the CI of the ERA would lead the target funding application, they should be a member of the research team for the target funding application.
- 2.6 Submissions are also welcome from those who have acted as CI on a previously unsuccessful application to a major funding programme, provided that they meet the eligibility criteria as detailed above. They should also

demonstrate that they plan to reapply and use the ERA to directly address the reasons for rejection in their original application, **or** that they have already addressed the reasons for rejection and wish to complete further preparatory work which meets the criteria for funding.

- 2.7 It is expected that applications will come from **teams with an appropriate mix of investigators across disciplines and sectors**, and that the role of each co-investigator is fully justified.
- 2.8 Appropriate arrangements in relation to the research sponsor, as defined in the [UK Policy Framework for Health and Social Care Research](#), should be considered by applicants.
- 2.9 A research idea should have already undergone some development and have appropriate evidence to support its application in the proposed setting.
- 2.10 Awardees will be required to inform HSC R&D Division of progress with any subsequent application to a major funding programme.
- 2.11 HSC R&D Division reserves the right to discuss your application with representatives from the target major funding programme.

3. Remit and Scope

- 3.1 ERAs are intended to support the completion of preparatory, development and/or refinement work that may improve the outcomes of a subsequent grant application to a research programme managed by a major health and social care research funder. **Research studies which actively involve patients/public/carers/healthcare staff and/or their data will be prioritised.** The awards are tailored to assist interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral teams to develop robust and competitive full-scale proposals through the conduct of feasibility studies, pilot studies and other activities. Applications for funding may include:

- conduct of feasibility/pilot studies
- exploration of participant recruitment and/or retention issues
- development of modelling methods
- determination of statistical parameters
- late-stage refinement and evaluation of a research instrument
- late-stage refinement and evaluation of an intervention, including consideration of targeted primary outcomes
- adaptation of an intervention to a new population or setting
- collection of preliminary/baseline data
- construct and development of an appropriate research team

This list is not exhaustive and applications will be considered on a case by case basis.

- 3.2 Any proposed feasibility and/or pilot studies should be in line with any definition of the same provided by the funder of the main target funding opportunity.
- 3.3 The scheme will **not** support:
- purely exploratory research¹ (research that is primarily concerned with discovery and with generating or building theory)
 - research involving animals, animal/human tissue or both, or cell lines
 - standalone literature or systematic reviews
 - purchase of equipment
 - publication costs
 - extensions/adaptations to existing funded research projects
 - applications in support of personal awards e.g. Career Development Fellowships
- 3.4 The **award should be used to fund activities involving existing staff** and must not involve an external recruitment process for appointment of staff to work on the award. Staff recruited internally from a redeployment register will be considered.
- 3.5 Research grant applications and research projects are strengthened through the appropriate involvement of patients, carers and the public. Using the [UK Standards for Public Involvement](#), applicants should demonstrate that they have given due consideration to appropriate **Personal and Public Involvement** (PPI) in the development of their application and how patients, carers and/or the general public will be involved in each stage of the research cycle. You should, where possible, include specific details of people, organisations, activities and any changes made to the proposal as a result of PPI to date. Applicants should also include details of their PPI plans for the target funding opportunity in the appropriate section. The level of involvement should be appropriate and fully justified.
- 3.6 For further guidance on PPI, applicants are referred to the following:
- HSC R&D Division's [PPI in research](#) webpage and the [PPI Resource Library for Researchers](#)

¹ Exploratory studies, a type of exploratory research that tends to fall into two categories: those that make a tentative first analysis of a new topic and those that propose new ideas or generate new hypotheses on an old topic.

- The [Engage](#) webpage, the central online resource for involvement in the HSC in Northern Ireland. Please pay particular attention to the [HSC Guidance on Reimbursement of out-of-pocket expenses](#).
- The Health Research Authority's [Public Involvement](#) webpage.
- [NIHR Payment Guidance](#).

For further advice on PPI, please contact Dr Janet Diffin, Senior R&D Programme Manager (Tel: 07721163412, Email: janet.diffin@hscni.net).

3.7 Research grant applications and research projects are also strengthened through due consideration of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion. For further guidance, applicants are referred to the following:

- [NIHR INCLUDE guidance](#)
- [UKRI Guidance for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion](#)
- [AMRC Equity, Diversity and Inclusion](#)

3.8 The **maximum value of an award will be £50,000**. As ERAs are designed to support the acquisition of subsequent funding, 100% Direct Costs will be met. **No Overheads or Indirect Costs will be met through the award.**

3.9 There is no restriction on the duration of ERAs; however, under normal circumstances, it is **not expected that a project would last more than 24 months**.

4. Application Process

- 4.1 Applications may be submitted at any time until **4pm on Friday 17th October 2025**. Applications will be processed and evaluated in line with the milestones detailed in Annex A. As with all HSC R&D Division schemes, awards will be subject to the availability of funds in any given financial year.
- 4.2 Applicants are advised to contact the HSC R&D Division in advance of making an application to this scheme to discuss their eligibility for funding. Please refer to Section 1.9 for further details.
- 4.3 Applicants are required to complete an Undertaking Section (Declarations, Section 14) indicating that the applicant is committed to submitting a full application for the target funding, and that they will provide HSC R&D Division with copies of their application(s). Failure to submit an application for target research funding without adequate justification may jeopardise future funding support from HSC R&D Division.
- 4.4 To be evaluated in line with the details provided in [Annex A](#), **electronically signed copies of completed applications for ERAs should be submitted**

to Mrs Kathleen Roulston by 4pm on the cut-off date (please see Section 1.9 for contact details). These should include electronic signatures in **all** appropriate sections. When submitting the application by email, **all signatories to the application should be carbon copied**.

- 4.5 An acknowledgement of receipt of application can be provided upon request to the email address provided in the application.
- 4.6 It is not expected that more than one ERA would be submitted in support of the same target funding opportunity.

5. Evaluation

5.1 Applications should be submitted electronically to HSC R&D Division and will be evaluated in line with the cut-off dates in [Annex A](#).

5.2 All applications will undergo an internal validation process. Adherence to the prescribed format and other requirements detailed in this guidance (including eligibility and scope) will be considered as part of this process. An invalid application will not go forward for evaluation, and the CI will be notified in writing if their application is invalid.

5.3 Evaluation of proposals will be on the basis of quality. Each application will be judged on its own merit upon submission, in accordance with the specified criteria ([see Annex B](#)).

5.4 Applications will be evaluated by an external Review Panel convened by HSC R&D Division in accordance with the criteria outlined in [Annex B](#). Further expert opinion may be sought in order to assist with the evaluation process.

5.5 Applications may be evaluated by the Review Panel a maximum of two times. If, following a resubmission, a positive funding decision is not conferred, applicants should not resubmit to the scheme with the same or a similar proposal.

6. Notification

- 6.1 Applicants will be notified in writing of the outcome of their funding application using the correspondence details provided on the application form.
- 6.2 Unsuccessful candidates may request written feedback regarding the outcome of their application, using the contact details provided in Section 1.9.

7. Financial Arrangements and Reporting Requirements

- 7.1 HSC R&D Division works within the financial regulations of the HSC. Budget profiles will be generated on the basis of the supplied information, and will be

updated, if necessary, once the Form of Acceptance and Staff Certificate(s) have been received.

- 7.2 Awards must be accepted by an appropriate designated organisation (the Host Organisation), usually the employing organisation of the CI, which will manage the award on behalf of HSC R&D Division.
- 7.3 No payments under the award will be made before HSC R&D Division has received:
- written acceptance of the award on the terms and conditions offered;
 - completed staff certificate(s);
 - signed agreements as required by Research Governance (confirmation of sponsor).
- 7.4 Funding for studies will be claimed in arrears, followed by a final claim at the end of the study. To facilitate a timely and accurate final claim, HSC R&D Division will issue a claim form to the Host Organisation in each financial year that the study is active, or at the end of the award period. It is essential that this claim is completed and returned to the HSC R&D Division promptly to enable the relevant payments to be made, and to allow effective monitoring of HSC R&D Division budgetary position.
- 7.5 **Applicants must inform HSC R&D Division immediately if funding for this research becomes available from another source.** This will result in withdrawal or termination of the award.
- 7.6 **Applicants must inform HSC R&D Division if their target funding application is unsuccessful.** This may result in termination of the award at this point.
- 7.7 **Applicants must also inform HSC R&D Division if the target funding is agreed or awarded.** This includes start-up funds that may be provided following a positive funding decision but before the official project start date. ERA funding will normally cease once funds in support of the main study are available.
- 7.8 **Reporting and responsibilities** will be detailed in the Letter of Offer, and Terms and Conditions of award, which will need to be formally accepted as per Section 7.3.

8. Annex A: Submission Deadlines

**Dates are subject to change*

<i>CLOSING DATE: 4pm on Friday 17th October</i>	
<i>Expected review panel date</i>	<i>W/C 26th Jan 2026</i>
<i>Expected decision date</i>	<i>W/C 23rd Feb 2026</i>

***Updates on the submission, panel and notification dates will be available via HSC R&D Division. To receive updates on all news items, please subscribe to our mailing list.**

9. Annex B: Further Information - Evaluation Criteria

Eligibility should be clearly demonstrated within the application form. The following will be considered when evaluating your application:

- **Importance of the question to the HSC and wider NHS**
 - Problem for and burden to the wider NHS and/or HSC.
 - Gaps in the current knowledge base.
- **Relevance and potential impact of the research to the HSC and wider NHS**
 - Contribution to the knowledge base by the study in terms of improvements in health and social care provision, changes in practice etc.
 - Impact on patients, service users and/or people working in healthcare.
- **Attributes of the research team and environment**
 - Knowledge of area and understanding of the key issues.
 - Relevant experience and achievements, appropriate levels of collaboration between sectors and organisations.
 - Suitability of the environment to support the research team and proposed research.
- **Scientific Quality and Research Management**
 - Quality of the study design, methodology, feasibility, deliverability.
 - Quality of overall project management and planning, timelines etc.
- **Value for money**
 - Necessity for the requested resources to complete the project.
 - Appropriateness of costs across all the partner organisations.
 - Proportionality of the requested funding to the importance and potential.
- **Target funding application**
 - Quality of description of how and what the ERA will add to a subsequent funding application.
 - Potential for the ERA to improve the likelihood of success of the named target funding opportunity.
 - Relevance of the target funding opportunity to the HSC and wider NHS.
 - Quality of the proposal for the target funding application.
 - Alignment of target funding opportunity with the HSC R&D strategy [Research for Better Health and Social Care](#).

▪ **Personal and Public Involvement**

- Appropriate and justified involvement of patients, carers and/or the general the public, from appropriate groups, including a partnership role in the research process.
- Demonstration of the understanding of the benefits of PPI.
- Evidence of the impact of PPI on the proposal/plans to date.

It is strongly recommended that you refer to this information throughout the process of application.

Application forms and CVs must be completed in **Arial font size 11 or greater**. Handwritten applications will not be accepted. **Applications that exceed the relevant word limit will be treated as invalid and automatically excluded.**

A template for completion of the CV for the Chief investigator and Co-Investigators can be found at Annex A of the Application Form.

HSC R&D Division will consider incomplete or incorrectly completed application forms as invalid. All applications can be judged only on the information provided in the application form. In order to treat applicants equally, HSC R&D Division must enforce strictly the prescribed format requirements. In addition to this guidance, please read the Section Headings in the application form carefully.

Most sections of the application form refer to the proposed ERA project; however, some sections relate specifically to the **target funding project**. i.e. the resultant piece of work that you intend to deliver through both the target funding opportunity. **Please ensure that you are clear about the activities to be carried out through the ERA, and about those that will form part of the resulting project.**

Section 1: Applicant's Details

- *Name/Title* – please avoid or spell out acronyms
- *Job Title* – please avoid or spell out acronyms
- *Email address* – primary contact email address for the Lead Applicant
- *Primary Employing Organisation* – the name of the institution/organisations of the Lead Applicant's main employing organisation.
- *Host Organisation* – please indicate whether the Primary Employing Organisation of the Lead Applicant will act as the Host Institution i.e. the organisation that will administer the award on behalf of HSC R&D Division. If a different organisation will act as Host Organisation, please provide details.
- *Department/Research Centre* – the name of the primary department or centre within the primary organisation in which the Lead Applicant is based.
- *Address/Postcode* – the address and postcode of the administrative function of the primary organisation of the Lead Applicant.

Section 2: ERA Summary

- *Full Scientific Title:* please provide the full title.
- *Plain Language Title:* please provide a plain language title which is informative and understandable to a wide audience.
- *Proposed Start/End Date & Duration:* please ensure that the proposed start date is realistic and takes into consideration the time taken to process your application and set up the award. Please indicate the length of time that you expect the award to run.
- *Total Research Costs requested:* please indicate the total costs of the research requested from HSC R&D Division.
- *Target Funder & Funding Programme/call:* please provide details of the funding organisation and funding programme/scheme that you wish to target for the future funding application.

Section 3: Research Team (with roles and responsibilities)

Please provide details of the Chief Investigator and Co-Applicants, indicating their role and responsibilities in the project team.

Section 4: Previous Applications

Please indicate if you have previously applied to the ERA scheme, or to the target funder, with the same or a similar project. If you have previously applied, please provide details of the changes made to the proposal since the previous application, and refer to the previous feedback where appropriate.

Section 5: Overall Research Idea

Use this section to describe the **overall research idea** that the ERA will be used to support, i.e. the overall project including the ERA and the target funding project.

- Describe the question to be addressed
- State and evidence the importance of the question to the HSC and wider NHS, to include:
 - *The problem for and burden to the wider NHS and/or HSC.*
 - *Background literature and gaps in the current knowledge base.*
 - *Current practice and potential improvements.*
- State the goals of the overall project
 - *Aims and objectives*
 - *Potential impact and outcomes*

Section 6: ERA Proposal Summary

- *Full scientific title:* please repeat the full title of the ERA proposal
- *Scientific abstract:* please provide a scientific abstract for your proposal
- *Research methods:* please list the research methods to be used in delivery of the ERA project e.g. feasibility study, clinical trial, focus groups, grounded theory etc.
- *Key words:* list five terms that help to describe or categorise your study e.g. e-healthcare, respiratory disease; non-pharmacological disease management etc.
- *Public/plain language title:* please provide a lay title which is informative and understandable to wide audience.
- *Plain Language Summary:* please provide a summary which is informative and understandable to a wide audience.

Section 7: ERA Proposal

The ERA proposal should include the following:

- What element(s) of the overall research idea will be addressed by the ERA
- Importance of these elements to the overall research idea
- Description of how and what the ERA will contribute to the larger project
- Project Management of the ERA project
 - *Aims, objectives and key tasks.*
- Research Plan
 - *Hypothesis/question.*
 - *Methodology with a justification for the approach, demonstrating that aspects such as feasibility, deliverability etc have been considered.*
 - *Consideration of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) (See Section 3.7 of the Guidance).*
 - *Ethics considerations.*
 - *Analysis and statistics (for both qualitative and quantitative aspects).*
 - *Project management and planning.*
 - *A study flowchart may be included.*

Section 8: Project Management Plan

Please complete a Project Management Plan (PMP) which should indicate the milestones for key activities, outcome measures and timescales for the award. The PMP will form the basis of a reporting template if the project is funded. A number of example Actions are provided.

Section 9: Supporting Infrastructure

Where possible and appropriate, research infrastructure should be involved or consulted on ERA proposals and plans for the subsequent main funding applications. Letters of support or other evidence of consultation/support should be provided. HSC R&D Division may contact the organisation in question to confirm the level of support indicated.

- *Northern Ireland Clinical Research Network (NICRN)/Northern Ireland Cancer Trials Network (NICTN)/Northern Ireland Public Health Research Network (NIPHRN)* – Please provide details of any discussions with networks and planned involvement in the ERA project. Please confirm that you have identified the required resources and discussed this with the network as appropriate.
- *Northern Ireland Clinical Trials Unit (NICTU)* – Please provide details of any discussions with the NICTU and planned involvement in the ERA project. Please provide details of the activities in which NICTU staff will be involved.
- *Honest Broker Service (HBS)* – Please confirm that discussions have taken place with HBS and that costings associated with access to data required for completion of the project have been obtained (confirmation in writing from HBS should be included with the application form).
- *Other organisations* – please provide details of any discussions with and/or plans to involve other organisations or research networks, e.g. Northern Ireland Clinical Research Facility (NICRF), Northern Ireland Biobank (NIB), Administrative Data Research Northern Ireland (ADR NI), Northern Ireland Hub for Trials Methodology Research.

Section 10: Personal and Public Involvement

Using the [UK Standards for Public Involvement](#), please use this section under the appropriate headings to describe the ways in which patients, service users, carers and/or the general public have been and will be involved during the ERA application, the main study and beyond. Where possible and appropriate, provide the names of individuals and/or groups that you have already confirmed will be involved, along with the details of any training and support that will be provided. Please ensure that the level of involvement detailed is both appropriate and justified. [Click here to view a list of useful PPI resources](#)

Section 11: Target Funding Opportunity

You should use this section to demonstrate how you have considered the **remit** information for the funder, programme and/or funding call in question. If you have received advice from the target funder regarding remit, you should state this, and include these details where appropriate.

- *Target funder*: this cell will auto populate with the details provided in Section 2.
- *Target research programme*: this cell will auto populate with the details provided in Section 2.
- *Anticipated value of the target funding opportunity*: please provide an indication of the total value of the project to be submitted to the target funding opportunity.
- *Justification of target funding opportunity*: please provide reasons why you have selected the target research programme/call. You should describe how your research idea, stage of development, methodology etc aligns with the remit of the target funding programme/call.
- *Call details*: if available, please provide any available details of the closing date and number of stages to the call to which you plan to submit your overall research idea. For example, if you plan to submit to a themed or commissioned call, please state this, and provide the call reference, topic and deadline(s). Any other available details should be included where indicated.
- *Scientific abstract*
- *Plain Language Summary*
- *Short Research Plan*: you should have described your overall research idea in terms of the background, problem, goals etc Section 3. Use this section to provide additional detail specifically about the main project:
 - *Hypothesis/question.*
 - *Methodology with a justification for the approach, demonstrating that aspects such as feasibility, deliverability etc have been considered.*
 - *Ethics considerations.*
 - *Analysis and statistics (for both qualitative and quantitative aspects).*
 - *Project management and planning.*
- *Planned collaborations and other groups/sites involved in the main research project*: please provide details of the collaborations and involvement of other research groups. If you have initiated and/or progressed meetings or activities in relation to the research idea, please provide details. It is expected that collaborators external to Northern Ireland be part of the team to be assembled for the target funding opportunity.

Section 12: Finance

- *(a) Summary of Costs*: the full cost of support required from HSC R&D Division should be identified showing the breakdown, by organisation and year. Costs should be given on a full year basis irrespective of the proposed starting date.
- *(b) University, (c) HSC and (d) Voluntary Sector Costs*: the costs relating to individual organisations should be recorded on separate sheets by cost category and year for each organisation. If it is proposed that an individual or organisation will contribute time or resources at no cost, this should be recorded

as a nil return. Appropriate authorisation from each organisation will be required in the declarations section.

- (e) *Justification of Research Costs*: justification of the cost of items of expenditure should be provided.

Section 13: Organisation Details

The [UK Policy Framework for Health and Social Care Research](#) identifies key stakeholders involved in health and social services research. These stakeholders are allocated specific responsibilities. HSC R&D Division will act as funder for these awards but cannot act as sponsor. Agreement on which organisation will act as sponsor or as co-sponsor will be determined post award. The care organisations (i.e. organisations that are responsible for service-users participating in the research) which will be involved in the research must also be identified. Applicants are also requested to identify the employing organisations for the Chief Investigator, Co-Investigators and researchers for the duration of the research.

Section 14: Declarations

As approval declarations may be required from more than one organisation, applicants should duplicate the standard university, HSC body and voluntary sector body declaration sections as required. (i.e. for all Co-Is not employed by the CI's organisation i.e. the Host Institution).