

Research Funding at a Glance:

A quick guide for early career researchers (ECRs) from creative health and health humanities



In this short overview of three key research funders, we present a selection of case studies and researchers' top tips.

Creative health and health humanities research is increasingly recognised as an important component of understanding and improving health and wellbeing. Often interdisciplinary and innovative, this work can, at times, be difficult to fund due to the way it spans the remits of various research councils and foundations. This guide brings together three key funding routes and includes reflections and tips from people in the field. It is not intended to replace the guidance of individual funding calls, nor should it be considered an exhaustive list of funders.

Wellcome

Wellcome funds research in any discipline that has the aim to improve human life, health and wellbeing at its core. Although there are [specific priorities](#) Wellcome focuses on (including mental health, climate and health, and infectious disease) these are not required.

Two of the main awards are [Early Career Awards](#) – aimed at researchers from any discipline who are ready to design and deliver their own project and develop their research identity – and [Discovery Awards](#) – aimed at established researchers or a team of researchers.

For those from creative health and health humanities backgrounds, it is worth noting that Wellcome seeks applications that aim to transform understandings of health and wellbeing in their social, cultural, political, economic and historical contexts. These can be from any geographical or chronological focus, using any approach that generates new knowledge, understandings or concepts and methods. For more information, read the *Arts and humanities, and social sciences* section of their [What we do and don't fund in discovery research](#) page.

Example: Dr Fiona Johnstone on the Visual and Material Lab, Durham University

“The Visual and Material Lab explores how visual, material and creative methods can transform research on health, illness and care. Their work spans areas including reproductive loss, mental health, infectious disease, disability and women's health, bringing together researchers, artists, healthcare professionals and people with lived experience to generate new forms of knowledge. Rather than treating visual and material practice simply as a tool for dissemination, we position making, material engagement and visual inquiry as important research methods in their own right. The Lab grew from a longstanding commitment to advancing visual and material approaches within medical humanities. Wellcome's commitment to bold ideas, methodological innovation and the humanities as a vital contributor to health research created space for us to develop projects that may not have fit comfortably within more conventional funding schemes.

My advice would be to start with the problem rather than the method. Wellcome is interested in important questions and the difference your research could make. Be clear about why your project matters, who it matters to, and what new understanding it will generate. Don't be afraid of ambitious or unconventional ideas that cross disciplinary boundaries – but ambition needs to be matched with a credible plan and a clear sense of why you are well placed to deliver the project. Don't underestimate the time that it takes to develop a great application (especially if it involves collaborative partners), and don't be afraid to ask (lots of) other people for feedback at different stages of the process.”

– Dr Fiona Johnstone, Durham University

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National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR)

The NIHR funds applied health and social care research (including creative health) through a broad range of funding opportunities. They are a good funder to consider for independent researchers working with health systems or charities, as both can be funded, in addition to academic institutions. They provide researchers – particularly ECRs – with access to their Research Support Service (RSS), where experienced researchers (typically those who have been funded through NIHR previously and/or who have sat on NIHR selection panels) can provide guidance throughout the process of bid development.

NIHR's [Applied Research Collaborations](#) (ARCs) are regional partnerships across England, which provide vital infrastructure for applied health, public health, and social care research. They provide a vehicle through which to connect to partners and disseminate research findings. Awards typically involve NHS organisations, and in many programmes charities and other non-university partners can be involved too. With a priority around evidence of health impact, bids should be framed around outcomes, evaluation and benefit for patients, communities and services.

The NIHR has also offered access routes to individuals who might be currently working outside of public health, but in a relevant academic field, who want to gain experience and transfer their skills to academic public health research. Through the [NIHR SPHR Transdisciplinary Placements](#) and [Fellowships](#) schemes, individuals are given the opportunity to train in public health methods and apply their own disciplinary background to their projects.

Example: Dr Rachel Marsden on the NIHR SPHR Transdisciplinary Fellowship

In 2024, through a Transdisciplinary Placement, Rachel undertook a small-scale research project mapping creative health assets in Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire: *‘this positive experience led me to apply, successfully, for the NIHR SPHR Transdisciplinary Fellowship,*

which has since become one of the most significant and transformative moments in my professional career.'

A key component in the fellowship's first year was to complete a Master of Public Health (MPH) qualification (2024-25), which gave Rachel the language, frameworks and tools to engage in different conversations, particularly with senior leaders, policymakers, commissioners and public health teams. The fellowship also expanded her networks across regional collaborations and international connections. It enabled her to co-lead the Creative Methods Creative Dissemination (CMCD) Group at Keele University and further connect with researchers, practitioners and artists working across a range of disciplines from across the UK and beyond. *'As someone who works between disciplines, I often feel like an outlier, but that's a good thing. I have come to recognise that my boundary-spanning position across and between disciplines is a strength, as this is where change and innovation happens, in the field of what I increasingly call creative-public health.'*

"My advice? Start small, get creative, build evidence, develop partnerships and learn from every funding application, whether successful or unsuccessful. Some of the most insightful learning can come from funded projects that do not turn out as originally planned. You will face rejection as an inevitable part of the process. We know the funding landscape is competitive (and getting more competitive), so don't see these moments as failure, rather an opportunity to keep developing your research (it just might not be the right funder!).

Start by seeking out smaller funding opportunities that allow you to experiment with creative methods and practices, initiate projects, build partnerships and develop an evidence base. These early projects can provide the credibility, data and frameworks needed to strengthen applications to larger grants, awards and/or fellowships that follow. Don't be afraid to ask questions, seek advice and discuss budgets openly. Equally, I encourage you to advocate for the value and sustainability of your work, and the contributions of others involved: fair pay rates published by Artists' Union England provide a good benchmark when costing projects.

Partnership working is key. Collaborating with voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise (VCFSE) organisations, arts organisations, local authorities, lived experience groups, healthcare partners and more can give access to funding streams that may not be available through academic routes. For independent researchers, the Independent Social Research Foundation (ISRF) can be a valuable source of support, alongside public health consultancy organisations such as Kohlrabi and WeLReN-PHAST.

Most importantly, undertake research and projects that matter to you and be your authentic self. Funders are not just investing in projects, they are investing in people, YOU. Share windows into you, your values and motivations in your applications and don't be afraid to let them see this."

- Dr Rachel Marsden, University of Birmingham

UK Research and Innovation (UKRI)

UKRI offers many funding routes for creative health and health humanities researchers. It is made up of a number of research councils, including councils specialising in arts and humanities, biological sciences, natural environment, technology, social sciences, economics

and more. Its [2026-2031 strategy](#) identifies the ‘cross-cutting functions and activities’ of these councils as: ‘advance knowledge, improve lives, drive growth’.

Cross-disciplinary teams are welcomed at UKRI, but picking the right lead council is still important. The [Arts and Humanities Research Council](#) ‘fund world-class, independent research in subjects from philosophy and the creative industries, to art conservation and product design.’ The focus of the [Economic and Social Research Council](#) is ‘economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life’. If the work is more clinical, biomedical or population-health-focused, the [Medical Research Council](#) may be more appropriate, and has reopened a [curiosity-driven research approach](#). No matter which lead council you apply to, make sure to focus on building the right team – whether that is health partners, NHS or public sector partners, arts organisations, or local authorities.

“A good place to start is by understanding the strategic priorities of the funder you’re applying to. For example, UKRI’s mission is to address major government and societal priorities, so funding is often directed towards research that advances sustainable economic growth, improves health and wellbeing, protects the natural environment, and strengthens national security and resilience. Thinking about how your research can contribute to tackling these national and global, so-called ‘wicked’, challenges will not only help make your proposal more compelling, but can also shape your research questions, methodologies, and the partnerships and collaborations you develop. I would also encourage early career researchers to seek out a mentor or Co-Investigator with experience of the specific funding scheme, and to learn from successful applications wherever possible by reviewing examples of funded proposals.”

– Professor Helen Chatterjee, University College London

Other funders

The funders covered in this resource are some of the largest, with all three offering some level of funding to researchers/partners across the UK’s four nations (NIHR restricts some programmes to England only). There are many other funders who support creative health and health humanities research across the UK.

UK-wide, the [British Academy](#) offers Small Research Grants for humanities and social science projects, including for independent scholars. The [Leverhulme Trust](#) funds Early Career Fellowships in most subjects, although not medical research. The [Nuffield Foundation](#) supports research aimed at improving lives in the UK, and the [Vivensa Foundation](#) (formerly the Dunhill Medical Trust) funds work on the health and wellbeing of older people.

In Scotland, routes include the [Chief Scientist Office](#), the [Royal Society of Edinburgh’s Research Awards](#) and the [Carnegie Trust’s Research Incentive Grants](#) for early career researchers. In Wales, [Health and Care Research Wales](#) offers fellowships and grants, and the [Learned Society of Wales](#) runs smaller grants for early career researchers. In Northern Ireland, the [HSC R&D](#)

[Division](#) funds health and social care research, and the [Royal Irish Academy's Charlemont Grants](#) are open to early career researchers based in Northern Ireland. It is also worth checking what your own institution offers, from internal seed funding to support with external bids.

This resource has been prepared by **Dr Jade Elizabeth French**, Leverhulme Early Career Fellow, Loughborough University, as part of a collaboration with **Dr Jane Hearst**, Research and Policy Manager, National Centre for Creative Health, and Honorary Research Fellow, Mobilising Community Assets to Tackle Health Inequalities, University College London.

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