

## My journey as a PhD researcher

Rachel Lawrence, a National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) Applied Research Collaboration Kent, Surrey and Sussex (ARC KSS) PhD student, based at the University of Kent, talks about her journey as a researcher and her plans for the future.



**Name:** Rachel Lawrence

**PhD title:** Social prescribing during and after COVID-19: Mapping changes, impact and opportunities for working with older adults

**Age:** 26

**Where do you live?** Fleet, Hampshire

**Educational background:** BSc Psychology, MSc Clinical Psychology and PhD Psychology

**What inspired you to undertake a PhD? How long did it take you to complete? And, how did you fund your studies?**

I first thought about future studies during my MSc, as I was enjoying studying and being within academia. I did a clinical based MSc but much preferred the research side of things so that was when I started looking into PhD options.

I started my PhD in February 2021 and submitted my thesis in January 2024. I then had my viva in April 2024.

My PhD was funded by the NIHR ARC KSS (Applied Research Collaboration of Kent, Surrey and Sussex).

## **How would you describe your journey as a PhD student? The highs? The challenges?**

I would describe the overall PhD journey as a roller coaster! There were lots of highs and many challenges throughout, all of which I think is normal.

There were many highs, particularly the people I met along the way. I have a great relationship with my supervisors and have done research assistant work with my principal supervisor throughout the journey. They have all been great in supporting me and also helping to me to progress as an early career researcher. During my time at Surrey, I also made the most incredible group of friends. The PhD community I had throughout my PhD literally pulled me through from beginning to end and these are relationships I will cherish for years to come.

Another high for me was working with the ARC KSS and being involved with my research theme, all the events they put on and the opportunities to network. They also ran lots of competitions where I was able to enter my research posters and summaries which was great.

One key part of my PhD was working with two collaborative partners on my project and this for me was a great high but also challenging. I built strong collaborative relationships with my partners but there were also challenges with maintaining these relationships within a PhD budget and timeframe. This was a key reflection in my PhD write up.

A further challenging time was the last part of my PhD, where I found the last two to three months very difficult. I was quite isolated writing up, no longer going onto campus to teach etc and just working as hard as possible to finish. This was difficult and I would definitely say anticipate this will be hard but stay connected with others when you can.

Overall – so many highs with some lows too (an accurate PhD experience I think).

## **Tell us about the research that you did as part of your PhD? What were the highlights of your PhD project?**

My research project explored social prescribing and voluntary/community support for older adults during and following Covid-19. This involved conducting four studies (two of which were specifically working with my collaborative project partners) to explore the changes, impact and future considerations from the perspectives of both staff and older adults.

Particular highlights were the impact the pandemic had on blurred role boundaries, the fragile funding system and how social prescribing is perceived in the wider healthcare system (e.g., as something which can ‘fill a gap’ in mental health services). For older people, the voluntary and community support was valued, particularly how they provided person centred care and enabled them to feel integrated into their communities. Future opportunities, as discussed with

project partners, were centred around the importance of community support remaining available and inclusive post-pandemic, with these services maintaining a personalised approach when working with older adults.

### **What advice / tips would you give someone thinking about taking a PhD?**

- Explore the different opportunities and go for the topics which interest you
- Enable yourself to learn, develop and reflect along the way – this is the point of a PhD as a training programme
- Choose a supervisor who will be your biggest cheerleader
- Build a network of support around you (this helps with the lows!)
- Be prepared for it to be a balanced journey of both positives and negatives
- Work hard and believe in yourself... you are worthy of every success!

### **Now that you have graduated, what's next? What are your plans for the future?**

I really enjoyed the applied side of my PhD, so I am now working in the Rapid Service Evaluation Team (RSET) at University College London, as a Qualitative Research Fellow. In this role I work as part of a collaborative team to evaluate new innovations being rolled out in health and social care services.

This is a job I am really enjoying at the moment, working with a lovely team and I will be in this role until at least the end of 2025. Then I will see where the opportunities take me!

[Read more about Rachel's PhD project here.](#)