



## Our experience of the NIHR Doctoral Training Camp

by Kat Frere-Smith, ARC KSS PhD Student,  
University of Kent and Gillian Eaglestone,  
ARC KSS PhD Student, University of Greenwich



### Kat's experience of the camp

The first thing I want to say is, I loved it. It was good fun. I learnt a lot and met some great people. In addition to that, it was held at the very grand and picturesque Dunkenhalgh Spa Hotel in Blackburn, which made it feel more like a retreat than a 'camp'. The topic selected for this year's event, their 15<sup>th</sup> annual training camp, was 'Attracting/applying for further research funding'. The event was open to researchers from a mix of backgrounds including medical, allied health, nursing and midwifery, public health and social care and the purpose was to expose attendees to a range of skills needed when applying for funding. The National Institute of Health and Care Research (NIHR) recognises how important it is for researchers to be able to put together a successful application for funding and this camp was an opportunity for early career researchers to gain some experience and practice this process together.



On day one, we listened to presentations from a range of inspirational speakers on topics such as 'framing your research question', 'the art of selling yourself and your project' and 'patient and public involvement and engagement (PPIE)'.

These talks were intended to help us complete the tasks set over the next few days. We also had a live video call from Lucy Chappell, the Chief Scientific Advisor for the Department for Health and Social Care (DHSC) and Chief Executive Officer of the NIHR. There was a real sense of celebration throughout the event, with the speakers and those running the event encouraging the delegates, praising their achievements on their academic journeys so far and encouraging them to continue to grow and be ambitious as researchers.

The second day was full on and really intense. My team were very lucky to have been allocated 'The Portrait Room', one of the nicest rooms in the hotel, that dates back to 1285 as our base, it was so grand. Together, we had to agree on a proposed research project, write the application, prepare the presentation for the next day and were given strict submission deadlines to work towards.



There were lots of people running down corridors just before 5pm. They sprung a few surprise deadlines on us throughout the day, just to add to the drama. We were encouraged to book appointment slots with a range of qualitative, quantitative and finance experts, throughout the day to run our ideas and plans by them and hear their opinions.

In the evening, we were treated to a fancy, formal dinner. The organisers had even gone to the trouble of making edible NIHR logo wafers for pudding. The pre-dinner speech was a highlight for me, hearing from Yvonne Birks, the Director of the NIHR School for Social Care Research about her academic journey. She was funny, down to earth, and very inspiring.

On the last day, each group presented their proposal to a panel of experts and took questions from the panel.



This was slightly nerve wracking as each group had to present in front of all one hundred delegates, but it was a great way to learn from each applications' strengths and weaknesses.

Although the event was challenging and they made us work hard, it was a great opportunity to network with individuals from different scientific and professional backgrounds and learn from some eminent researchers. I do feel more confident now

regarding the prospect of completing research funding applications, plus I left with a renewed sense of motivation regarding a career in academia. I would recommend applying to attend, for anyone considering it for 2025.

### Gillian's experience of the camp

I really enjoyed getting to know and working with my new project team. We were a multi-disciplinary group, and each person made a real contribution to the finished application. I really enjoyed working collaboratively, especially the challenge of working with, and discussing everyone's ideas for the project and seeing it change and improve as a result.

On the second day, my team even called an early breakfast meeting so that we could get ahead with designing our funding bid. Our funding bid was a fictitious project to improve health of young people through an exercise programme. I mainly worked on the patient and public involvement and engagement (PPIE) within the project and received excellent advice from the experts at the camp on how to improve our activities and our application.

A highlight of the camp for me was the talk from PPIE session by Una Rennard - Public contributor and public involvement officer at the National Institute for Health and Care Research. The camp was very hard work, but I learnt so much and now feel more confident in my ability to work on a funding bid in the future. We were the overall winners of the funding bid which was a complete surprise. I also met some lovely people, and we plan to keep in touch.