



# Social care fellowship spotlight: Sophie Jones

Sophie Jones is a Social Care Fellow at the National Institute for Health and Social Care (NIHR) Applied Research Collaboration Kent, Surrey and Sussex (ARC KSS) working in adult social care in East Sussex. In this interview, Sophie reflects on her journey from practice into research, what motivated her to apply for the Fellowship, and how the award has helped her build research skills while strengthening the connection between frontline social care and evidence-based practice.

## How long have you been in the role, and what does it involve?

I've worked in adult social care since 2008, originally starting as an administrator and later becoming a resource officer at East Sussex County Council. In that role, I worked closely with social workers and completed casework, although I wasn't yet a qualified social worker. After several years, I completed a social work apprenticeship, which involved attending university for part of the week and practising for the rest. I qualified in 2022 and rejoined the same team I had been working with previously. Not long afterwards, I had the opportunity to take on the Social Care Fellowship, an 18-month award that I've now been part of for just over a year. It finishes this March.

## What made you apply for the Social Care Fellowship award?

During my social work degree, I found myself increasingly interested in research. Returning to the basics at university, literature reviews, research methods, really caught my attention and made me curious to explore more.

After qualifying, I spoke to our social work education team about wanting to get involved in research opportunities. I took part in a small research project, attended events, and enjoyed the process. Those experiences made me realise that research didn't have to feel out of reach or overly academic. At first, I definitely felt some imposter syndrome about applying, but seeing practising social workers involved in research helped me recognise that people like me could do it too.

What really drew me in was the Fellowship's emphasis on valuing practitioner experience and bridging the gap between practice and research. As social care practitioners, we're incredibly busy, so research that feels relevant and grounded in real-world practice is especially meaningful. I felt I could contribute to that.

### **How easy did you find the application process?**

Our local authority advertised the award internally, so I went along to an introductory workshop. It became clear quite quickly that there was good support available throughout the application process.

The application form itself was daunting at first, I'd never created a Gantt chart, budget, or detailed research timeline before. I was encouraged to choose a topic that genuinely interested me and would benefit the team, given the 18-month commitment. My supervisors helped me brainstorm ideas, and I received support from people like Erica and Stacey, who guided me through the practical parts of the application.

I drafted sections, received feedback, and reworked them. It took time and it definitely stretched a different part of my brain compared to day-to-day practice, but it was all achievable with the right support. The application experience itself was a valuable learning process.

### **Where did you find out about the award?**

I came across it through our internal local authority communications. I discussed it with a few colleagues before deciding to pursue it.

### **What has the award enabled you to do?**

The Fellowship has opened up the world of research to me in a way I'd never experienced before. I've accessed specialised training and developed a wide range of practical research skills, planning a project, conducting a literature review, using academic journal search tools, designing a questionnaire, recording interviews, and learning how to code and analyse data.

Beyond the practicalities, I've had opportunities to attend events, network with researchers from different disciplines, and meet others working on their own projects. I've engaged with the wider research community through reading, discussions, and drafting a journal article – something I never imagined myself doing.

Working closely with the Applied Research Collaboration (ARC) and the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) has been incredibly valuable and has expanded my understanding of research within social care. There's been something new to learn almost every month.

## Has it made an impact on your work, and who ultimately benefits from the research?

Absolutely. I practised for many years as an unqualified resource officer before becoming a social worker, and I think the Fellowship has helped me solidify my professional identity. It's also shown me how practice connects to wider teams, departments, and the broader social work profession,

My project focuses on social care practitioners' experiences of community DoLS. While the research centres on practitioners, the ultimate beneficiaries are the adults subject to community DoLS, along with their families, carers, and professionals involved in their care. Anything that supports practitioners ultimately supports the people we work with.

I hope the findings will be useful not only within my team and local authority, but also for other authorities and other professions, occupational therapists, nurses, GPs, and resource officers. I've also been able to encourage colleagues to get involved in research, whether through interviews, working groups, or simply sharing advice with new social workers considering research themselves. Social care is still catching up with health in terms of research culture, so keeping these conversations going feels important.

## What have been the highlights of the award so far?

There have been many. The support from my supervisors has been phenomenal, they're approachable, encouraging, and always willing to listen to ideas. I've never felt embarrassed to ask questions, even when they felt simple.

The ARC events have been great too, they have been a chance to step back from the busyness of practice, meet other researchers and award holders, and reflect on the value of research. Meeting regularly with other Fellows has also been a huge source of support. Of course, the project itself has been a highlight. Conducting interviews, learning new skills, and seeing the work take shape has been incredibly rewarding. I've recommended the Fellowship to many people and will continue to do so.

## Have there been any challenges?

The biggest challenge has been balancing research with a busy caseload. Protecting dedicated research days requires clear boundaries, but my team has been very respectful and supportive of that. Occasionally, urgent casework takes priority, but that's part of the job.

Time management is essential, switching between "research mode" and "practice mode" can feel like wearing two hats. I've had to accept that I can't control everything and that some delays are inevitable.

The writing stage has been challenging too, as it requires a different style of writing than I'm used to. But I'm receiving support, and although it's taking longer than expected, it's manageable.

There have also been some logistical challenges, like ordering equipment through council processes or navigating IT restrictions. These things take more headspace than you expect. More broadly, I hope research becomes more embedded within local authorities. It's still early days, and releasing staff two days a week has an impact on teams. Research is so important, especially as resources tighten and social care faces increasing complexity.

### **What kind of support did you receive?**

The support has been both practical and emotional. I've had guidance on skills, reflective space, and detailed feedback on anything I've produced. I've also had personal encouragement — supervisors checking in on how I am, not just what I'm doing. They've been friendly, approachable, and genuinely invested. It's been a really positive experience.

### **What happens next?**

I'm hoping to pursue further awards. I don't want this to be a one-off, I've learned so much that it would feel like a missed opportunity not to continue. I've had support from my head of service to explore future options.

In the short term, I'm aiming for dual practice-and-research opportunities. Longer term, I'd love to move more into research and support other social workers to get involved. I've even allowed myself to think about applying for PhD in the future, something I'd never have imagined saying two years ago.

### **What advice would you give someone looking to take part in research?**

Go to events, learn about the ARC, and see what opportunities exist. If you're newly qualified, you could even build research into your longer-term goals. Speak to your social work education team. Get involved as a research participant if you can, it gives you a taste of what research feels like.

If you're interested, just go for it. I used to think research was out of reach, but it isn't. Many of the skills needed, time management, communication, organisation, curiosity, are already part of social work practice. You just apply them differently.

Research aligns so closely with social work values: human rights, social justice, understanding power imbalances, improving outcomes for people, ensuring their voices are heard. It strengthens your identity as a practitioner and extends your impact beyond your own caseload.

## What qualities do you think make a good researcher?

Many qualities overlap with social work. Curiosity, or “professional curiosity” is essential. Research is about asking questions, wanting to understand why things are the way they are, and exploring how they can be improved.

Time management, organisation, and strong people skills are crucial too. Social workers regularly handle sensitive conversations, trauma-informed practice, managing expectations, and navigating complex situations, all of which are equally valuable in research. The two roles complement each other very well.