



Social care fellowship spotlight: Lilly Trapp

Lilly Trapp is a Social Care Fellow at the National Institute for Health and Social Care (NIHR) Applied Research Collaboration Kent, Surrey and Sussex (ARC KSS). Alongside her role as Research Facilitator for Adult Social Care at Kent County Council, Lilly has spent the past 18 months leading a research project focused on social care workforce challenges. In this interview, she reflects on her fellowship experience, the impact of her research, and what she's learned about building skills, confidence and connections through applied research.

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

I've been in the ARC KSS Social Care Fellowship role since October 2024, I'm now nearing the end of an 18-month award. The fellowship involves delivering a small research project aligned with the ARC's priorities around social care. It has given me insight into the full research cycle: forming an advisory group, collecting and analysing data, and writing up the findings. I do this two days a week alongside my other role as Research Facilitator for Adult Social Care at Kent County Council (KCC).

What made you apply for the Fellowship award?

At first, I wasn't sure it was for someone like me, I assumed it was aimed more at frontline practitioners like social workers. I had already worked with several people involved in the ARC through the Kent Research Partnership (KRP), and they encouraged me to apply.

It felt like a strong development opportunity to build my skills, which would benefit my main role, and a chance to understand more about how the ARC operates. I also wanted to build connections with people outside my usual networks. Even though my role is more outward-facing than many local authority jobs, it's still hard to know what's going on elsewhere, so the fellowship was a chance to widen those links.

I was also attracted to the idea of having a self-contained project to work on for 18 months, I was also keen to meet others locally who aren't academics but are interested in research. That's already helped me to understand who in different organisations might be potential collaborators in the future.

How did you find the application process?

I didn't find the form itself complicated; it was clear and straightforward. The challenge was that because we were all new to this, we had to think through things like budgeting without much experience. I was mostly estimating how long things would take. My supervisor and others were really helpful, especially around practicalities like transcription services and costings.

The biggest difficulty is that even before you're accepted, you need a strong idea of your project to write the proposal, which is hard if you're completely new to research. Thinking through budgets, timelines, and potential issues can be overwhelming. My project is niche, and there were lots of unknowns, especially around how long it would take to engage participants. Even those advising me couldn't say for sure because no one had tried something similar.

Doing the fellowship only two days a week adds another layer of challenge. I tend to work Mondays and Tuesdays, so if I send something out on a Tuesday, I might not look at it again until the next week. It's easy to lose track and realise something should have been done two weeks earlier. I struggle with procrastination too, so that doesn't help.

I also found it surprisingly difficult to spend the budget. Many conferences turned out to be free, or included travel, and finding relevant events within the project timeline was tricky. Overall, though, the process was accessible and well-supported compared with other applications I've done.

Where did you hear about the award?

I receive various ARC newsletters and spend part of my week at the University of Kent, so I was aware of it through those connections.

What has the award enabled you to do?

So much. Being part of a cohort, locally and nationally, has been one of the best aspects. Many fellows elsewhere have roles that are more similar to my substantive job, such as research facilitator or research champion posts. Together, we set up a national social care research governance group, something I never expected to be part of.

Networking has been incredibly valuable. I now feel more aware of the infrastructure that supports social care research. The award has also allowed me to develop practical skills, including interviewing, data analysis, coding etc. and understanding the level of precision required in research.

The experience has also built my resilience, there were points when I thought no one would respond or join my co-design group, but eventually people did.

Because my project links to my voluntary work supporting asylum seekers, the fellowship has also given me more credibility when speaking about the challenges they face.

Do you think it has had an impact on your work and on those who are the focus of the research?

It's certainly impacted my work by developing my skills and confidence. Interestingly, my original idea for a research topic was closer to my work priorities, but my supervisor encouraged me to choose something I was passionate about and might not have many opportunities to explore. My project is connected to my voluntary work as well as my paid role since I am uniquely placed to look into this topic.

Workforce issues are important to my organisation, and the project has become more relevant with changes like the end of the care worker visa. I've also built relationships with care providers through the project, which is valuable in my job.

The research itself could reach multiple audiences: social care providers, voluntary organisations, refugee support groups, and potentially policymakers. My findings highlight the gap between having the right to work and being able to access employment, particularly for asylum seekers. Many of the people I spoke to were qualified healthcare professionals in their home countries, yet it took some of them 18 months to find a care worker role, despite the workforce crisis.

The project also shows how barriers such as DBS checks, background checks, and fear of employing someone without the right to work can lead to blanket refusals. I hope the research raises awareness, helps organisations make more informed decisions, and sparks conversations across sectors.

What have been the highlights and challenges so far?

Time management has been the biggest challenge. Working only two days a week means deadlines can sneak up quickly, and balancing fellowship commitments with unexpected work meetings is tricky. Sometimes you want everything to be fully inclusive and well-communicated, but by the middle of the project you're just trying to get things done.

Another challenge has been keeping multiple groups engaged, an advisory group, a co-design group, and participants.

A major highlight was the first co-design group session. After struggling to recruit people, I was nervous about how it would go, but the group was incredibly positive. They shared great examples of challenges they'd faced around recruitment, particularly for people from Ukraine, Afghanistan, and other refugee backgrounds. It validated the idea that this topic is relevant and meaningful, even if it doesn't come up every day. They agreed a resource would be helpful for the sector, especially in avoiding unnecessary refusals due to misunderstandings.

What kind of support did you receive?

I received a lot of support from my supervisor, both through regular meetings and quick messages about things I wasn't sure about, like finances. The broader Kent-based team, and the whole KSS team through cohort meetings, were also really supportive. Hearing about other people's experiences was always helpful.

What happens next once you finish the award?

I'm looking forward to having resources to share, but I don't know yet how they will be received or what opportunities they might create. I hope the research will be useful across different sectors, and I plan to continue linking with the wider social care workforce project to encourage people to consider this area as a mainstream workforce issue.

I'd like to stay involved with the ARC, keep aware of upcoming opportunities, and share what I've learned with colleagues across KCC as well as continuing to develop my skills and apply them to other projects.

What qualities do you think you need to be a good researcher?

Organisation is essential, as well as balancing creativity with simply getting things done. Fellowships are unusual because you're responsible for every part of the project, whereas in a team you'd normally be able to delegate tasks based on strengths. I've learned to manage tasks I don't naturally enjoy, like emailing potential participants, sometimes leaning on advisory group members where appropriate.

Relationship-building is a key skill, as is adaptability, especially when things inevitably change. You also need to stay curious and open-minded. Because this topic is close to me personally, I had to make sure I kept enough distance to avoid influencing the research.

It's also important to recognise your strengths. I know I'm stronger in writing and engagement work than in things like managing budgets, but the fellowship has helped me understand processes behind the scenes. That insight will help me with future projects.

Ultimately, being willing to learn, to try things outside your comfort zone, and to manage weaknesses through support or training are all qualities that really help in research.