Learning together to improve mental health research

Insights and impact from the Three NIHR Research Schools' Mental Health Programme (2021–2025)

www.spcr.nihr.ac.uk/research/three-research-schools-mental-health-programme

NIHR | School for Primary Care Research

NIHR | School for Public Health Research

NIHR | School for Social Care Research

June 2025

The Three NIHR Research Schools for Primary Care Research (SPCR), Public Health Research (SPHR) and Social Care Research (SSCR) have been collaborating since 2021 on a programme of work on mental health, hosted by School for Primary Care Research and funded through the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR). The programme aims to build research capacity and deliver impactful research aligned with national mental health priorities.

Why it matters

Mental health is complex and does not sit neatly within one service, profession or discipline. This programme is uniquely placed to support **cross-sector research** and **shared learning** that **reflects** the reality of people's lives. By working together, the three Schools can address mental health challenges at the **individual, family, community and population levels**, and generate the kind of evidence that practitioners, policymakers and communities need most.

> *This programme has shown the power of collaboration, not just across disciplines, but across experiences."*
>
> **Claire Ashmore,**
> *Programme Manager*

What makes it different

- Tackles mental health problems at **all levels**, using diverse methodologies

- Supports researchers to **work across traditional silos**

- Prioritises **co-produced research** with lived experience at its heart

- Focuses on **underserved areas** and groups who face the greatest disadvantage

Our key aims

- Build **capacity and skills** in mental health research

- Support and develop e**arly and mid-career researchers**

- Enable **co-produced, inclusive research**

- Generate research with **real-world relevance and impact**

What's in this report?

This short report shares headline facts from the Three NIHR Research Schools' Mental Health Programme, alongside case studies that reflect the diversity and depth of work supported.

The Three NIHR Research Schools' Mental Health Programme at a glance

£11.98m total investment from the NIHR since the programme started in 2021

100 awards funded across primary care, public health and social care:

🔍 Research awards

21 Commissioned research

4 Investigator-led awards

3 Research development awards focussed on Mental Health in Different Religious Groups

6 Projects to improve Public and Community Involvement and Engagement

4 Follow-on Funding for Phase 1 award holders

6 Impact Accelerator Awards

7 Development workshops for co-produced research

6 Practitioner evaluation scheme awards

19 Publications

⚙ Capacity awards

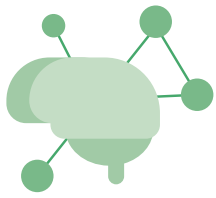**20** Fellowships

11 Career Development Awards

12 Master's scholarships

66 Publications

Over £5.7m leveraged funding secured to date (June 2025)

Exploring the links between mental health, school experience and gang involvement from the perspective of young people

Case study: Dr Rhiannon Barker, Fellowship Award

School exclusions, mental health challenges and involvement in criminal gangs are often treated as separate issues, but young people's lives don't work that way. Dr Rhiannon Barker's research centres the voices of gang-involved young people to explore how they understand their experiences, and what could have helped earlier on.

Through in-depth, qualitative work with young people, Rhiannon explored the **language, symbolism and stories** used to explain their social contexts, identities and behaviours. Many participants described schools as spaces where they felt misunderstood, alienated or punished.

Rhiannon's work suggests that schools could play a more proactive role in promoting mental health and protecting at-risk youth by:

- Shifting emphasis from a narrow focus on academic performance
- Offering more group-based, project-based and vocational learning
- Prioritising the provision of life-skills education and social and emotional learning (SEL)

Rhiannon was inspired to pursue this research following a previous NIHR-funded project exploring school culture and student wellbeing in London schools. After the pandemic, one school flagged an increase in students not returning, with teachers voicing concerns that some of the 'missing' children were involved in County Lines gangs.

> *As the mother of a gang-involved son, I felt a responsibility to strengthen the representation of these young people in research, and to make sure their experiences shape how we respond.*"
>
> — **Dr Rhiannon Barker**

Rhiannon's work is contributing to:

New understanding of the **psychosocial mechanisms** that drive young people toward gang involvement (paper)

Better methods for **engaging hard-to-reach groups** in research

Ethical guidance for working with **vulnerable and marginalised young people**

Actionable recommendations for how schools can evolve to safeguard mental health and prevent harm

Poster depicting findings relating to school exclusion.

This research places *lived experience* and *youth voice* at the heart of policy and education reform. It highlights the power of **listening differently** and designing systems that meet young people where they are.

Watch this video.

Shining a spotlight on inequality in children's access to mental health care

Case study: Julia Mannes, Master's (MPhil) Award

Children living in poverty or with social work involvement have more than twice the odds of being rejected from NHS mental health services. This stark finding, from Julia Mannes' MPhil research, gained national media coverage and caught the attention of the **Secretary of State for Health**, policymakers and campaigners.

- Julia's research, in collaboration with the National Children's Bureau, was spotlighted in the Children at the Table campaign – a campaign led by England's five biggest children's charities calling for mental health access reform.
  » Children at the table report

- Findings helped shape proposals being developed by **MP Josh MacAlister**, author of the Independent Review of Children's Social Care.

- Julia briefed **senior officials** at the Department for Education and the **Chief Social Worker for Children and Families**.

- The **Secretary of State for Health** has been directly briefed on her findings.

Julia worked closely with young people, families, practitioners and policy advisors to shape:
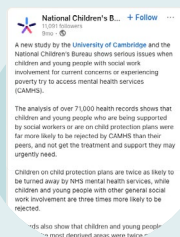
Research questions and analysis
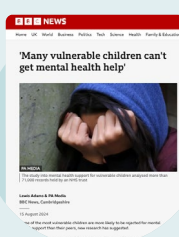
Interpretation of findings

Recommendations aimed at both the public and policymakers

A short video made with Taliah, a lived experience co-investigator, helped amplify the work through national campaign platforms and social media.
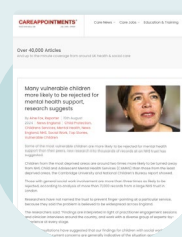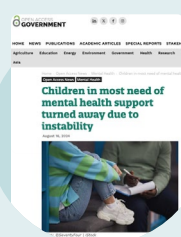
NCB Linkedin post

BBC

National Health Executive

Care appointments

NCB Tweet

CYPNow

Open Access Government

Sky News Radio – interview sent to Sky's 300+ members.

This work shows how research backed by the Three NIHR Research Schools' Mental Health Programme can **surface systemic inequalities, engage those most affected** and **inform national policy at pace.**

Equity in action: Centring Black-led mental health organisations in research

Case study: Dr Steph Ejegi-Memeh, Career Development Award

Research isn't neutral. Dr Steph Ejegi-Memeh broke the mould in terms of what mental health research looks like and how it can benefit communities throughout the research process.

Through her work, Steph set a new standard for equitable and collaborative research practice with Black communities. Her work shows how mental health research can:

Fairly compensate
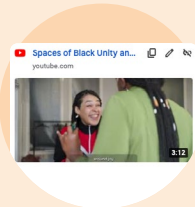Black people and community organisations for their time, expertise and labour

Create benefits
for communities *during* the research process, not just at the end

Shift power by embedding equity and accountability into research design, funding and dissemination

Steph's research process has already created tangible social and structural benefits:

Hosted a national event with 70+ people and 30+ Black-led mental health organisations to build shared understanding and collaboration ([video](#))

Incorporated volunteer hours into funding bids, leading to **£70k of National Lottery Community Fund support** for a partner organisation

[Created a live UK-wide database](#) of Black-led mental health and wellbeing organisations

Secured **£250k in SPHR funding** and a **£150k NIHR Programme Development Grant** to continue this work

Steph's approach to mental health research includes creative, joyful and public-facing outputs:

- **Ensemble performance "Black Joy"** commissioned by Festival of the Mind in 2024 ([video](#))

- **Presented findings internationally**, including a research visit to South Africa

- **Published academic papers and blogs** amplifying lessons learned ([Blog 1](#) I [Blog 2](#))

> " *We need to ask whether our research truly serves marginalised communities, beyond just including them.*"
>
> **Dr Steph Ejegi-Memeh**

Co-producing solutions to tackle perinatal loneliness

Case study: Dr Ruth Naughton-Doe, Fellowship Award

Loneliness in the perinatal period, especially emotional and existential loneliness, can have long-term effects on the mental health of both parents and children. Dr Ruth Naughton-Doe's work is helping practitioners, parents and policymakers better understand, identify and address this often invisible challenge.
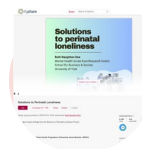
Outputs:

Animated video

Easy-read report

British Medical Journal Open consensus statement

A scoping review of interventions (BMC Public Health)

A dedicated project website and digital campaign

Digital zine of LGBTQ+ parenting stories (funded by ESRC Festival of Social Science funding and Administrative Fairness Lab, University of York)

After engaging with project resources or attending presentations:

- Professionals report increased awareness of perinatal loneliness and at-risk groups.

- Services have adopted inclusive imagery in materials like leaflets and posters.

- Increased engagement in co-production to design support.

- A new perinatal walking group has been established within a peer support service.

- Study materials are being used to train health and social care professionals and students.

Ruth has convened a growing **Perinatal Loneliness Research Group**, bringing together academics, practitioners and community partners. They've:

- Held **two national conferences**

- Launched a **Nature-Based Interventions in the Early Years** network

- Secured **two further NIHR-funded projects**
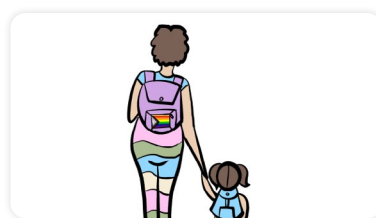
Improving perinatal support for young mothers and birthing parents

Reducing loneliness for perinatal Muslim mothers through a codesigned walking group intervention

The work has reached national audiences through:

- Presentations at events hosted by the **Institute of Health Visiting, Maternal Mental Health Alliance**

- Coverage in:
  - » The Guardian
  - » Nursing in Practice
  - » SWLondoner

> *I felt seen for the first time as a parent. This research helped put language to something I didn't know I was experiencing."*
>
> **Parent participant**

What happens after the programme?

The Three NIHR Research Schools' Mental Health Programme has been a vital launchpad for researchers and practitioners. These examples show how initial funding can unlock further fellowships, innovation awards, and high-profile recognition. They highlight how investing in people creates lasting impact.

Dr Emma Adams

NIHR Award: Fellowship

£24.7k

Follow-on: NIHR Doctoral Fellowship (2023–26)

£322k

Emma is exploring the impact of trauma on mental health in people experiencing homelessness, supported by a major follow-on fellowship building on her NIHR-funded research.

Ruth Ambrose

NIHR Award: Career Development Award

£25.7k

Follow-on: NIHR Pre-Doctoral Clinical and Practitioner Academic Fellowship

£73k

Ruth's research highlighted critical gaps in support for people with serious mental illness who are no longer under specialist care. Her follow-on fellowship focuses on designing new pathways in primary care.

Dr Yu Fu

NIHR Award: Fellowship

£172k

Follow-on: NIHR Advanced Fellowship (2025–30)

£1.1m

Through the EVOLVE project, Yu addressed mental health care gaps for ethnic minorities in the North East and Greater Manchester. Her NIHR Advanced Fellowship investigates cardiovascular disease risks in patients on antipsychotic medication.

Dr Clarissa Giebel

NIHR Award: Fellowship

£24.6k

Follow-on: NIHR SSCR Leadership Fellowship

£50k

Through open competition in the Development Research Leaders Awards, Clarrisa was awarded a NIHR SSCR Leadership Fellowship to lead research on tackling inequalities in dementia care. She is part of a national leadership network strengthening the adult social care evidence base.

What happens after the programme?

Professor Catherine Robinson

NIHR Award: Research Award

£406k

Follow-on: for NIHR-funded
Mental Health Social Care Incubator

£90k

Professor Catherine Robinson co-led the Catalyst project to build research capacity in the mental health social care (MHSC) sector, engaging local authorities, community organisations, and people with lived experience. This work helped secure NIHR Incubator status and funding to lead the Mental Health Social Care Incubator, in partnership with Michael Clark. The team have developed a national network and have hosted two MHSC summits to date. They've also launched the *Stepping into Research* (STiR) programme, supporting participants to develop fundable research proposals.

Dr Richard Pione

NIHR Award: Career Development Award

£25k

Follow-on: National recognition, HSJ Award

Richard led the award-winning Inclusion Thurrock: Psychological Therapy Service, expanding (PTS) access to evidence-based care for underserved patients experiencing recurring episodes of depression, psychosis bipolar, personality disorders and eating disorders.

PTS won Primary Care Initiative of the Year at the HSJ Patient Safety Awards for addressing gaps between primary and secondary mental health services.

Dr Ruth Plackett

NIHR Award: Fellowship

£174k

Follow-on: NIHR & Zinc Innovation Fellowship (Sep 2023–Sep 2024)

£50k

Ruth's research on youth mental health and social media has influenced policy, generated nine peer-reviewed papers, and reached wide public audiences through media coverage in Nature, The Times, The Telegraph and over 200 outlets. Ruth completed a NIHR Zinc Innovation Fellowship which gave her the opportunity to work with, and learn from, industry partners in order to make her future research have much more impact for patients and the public.

Dr Sarah Sowden

NIHR Award: Practitioner Evaluation Scheme Award

£151k

Follow-on: National recognition

Sarah's project, MINDED, was selected as the flagship example of research from the North East and North Cumbria region in the national #ARCimpacts 2022 campaign.

MINDED saw clinical psychologists employed within general practices serving disadvantaged communities in the North East and North Cumbria region, in order to improve care.

Looking ahead:
Investing in meaningful mental health research

The Three NIHR Research Schools' Mental Health Programme has shown what's possible when research is **cross-disciplinary, collaborative** and **co-produced with people who live with mental health challenges every day**.

" *The programme helped me grow from having no Principal Investigator experience to leading over £500k of NIHR-funded research. It supported award-winning work on perinatal loneliness, flexible working and collaboration across sectors, all grounded in co-production and inclusion."*

– Dr Ruth Naughton-Doe

Funders

This programme has made smart, strategic use of funding to deliver real change — from local authority uptake to researcher career progression and tool development. Continued support will unlock further impact at scale.

Academic institutions

Our researchers are driving forward work that is both scientifically rigorous and socially grounded. These case studies offer evidence of tangible outcomes and career development for early and mid-career academics.

The public

We believe that mental health research should reflect the realities of people's lives. This work shows that better outcomes are possible when research includes diverse voices, especially those with lived experience.

If you are a **funder, policymaker** or **practitioner** interested in hearing more about this work, get in touch.

www.spcr.nihr.ac.uk/research/three-research-schools-mental-health-programme