Research Facilitation Fund 2025 Round 2: Call for applications

Summary

This investment, in partnership with Orthopaedic Research UK and the Kennedy Trust, provides support for patient and public involvement (PPI) activity in musculoskeletal research.

The issues that matter most to people with musculoskeletal conditions should be at the heart of research. We recognise the impacts this can have on research and more widely on people, when delivered well, for both researchers and people living with musculoskeletal conditions. We expect researchers to involve people meaningfully throughout their projects.

Versus Arthritis conducted a multi-element review to understand the needs and challenges of researchers in delivering quality PPI across their research. This funding recognises the importance of involvement in research, our requirements as funders, and the challenges identified by researchers.

This call for applications aims to address the fragmented infrastructure for PPI in musculoskeletal research across the UK. It also seeks to tackle issues of limited pre-award PPI funding and support, as well as insufficient access to patient groups during this initial stage of research. Our goal is to enhance and expand the existing networks and resources, making them available for the broader MSK research community, regardless of researchers' seniority or geographical location within the UK. This is expected to be delivered by:

- Building PPI infrastructure and capacity that is accessible to any researcher in the UK, providing access to people with lived experience where this does not exist.
- Supporting researchers to deliver quality PPI, with a focus on pre-award.
- Build on and facilitate best practice understanding by additive actions and expertise.

Through this initiative, we aim to increase access to meaningful and high-quality involvement in musculoskeletal research, thereby maximising the quality of research, its outputs, and the overall impact.

Applications are invited for up to £650,000 in value for up to 60 months duration.

Applicants must carefully read the application form and guidance documentation before starting an application. Please ensure that the most appropriate language is being used in each section of the form and that the correct sections are completed.

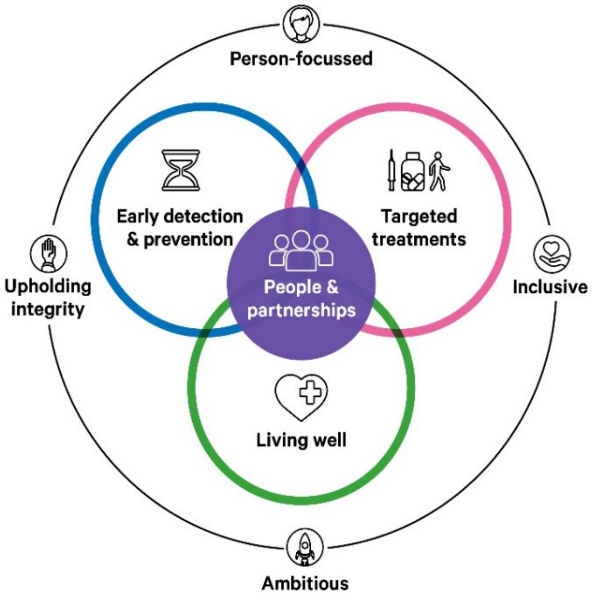
Applicants are invited to submit applications to this one-stage process through Grant Tracker.

The application deadline is **16:00 Wednesday 23 July 2025.**

If you have any questions about this call document or eligibility or would like to discuss your research proposal with the office, please email awards@versusarthritis.org

Context and Purpose

The funders



Versus Arthritis recently calculated that the total annual public research expenditure on arthritis and musculoskeletal conditions in 2022 was approximately £102m. Over 90% of all arthritis research was funded by five funders: Versus Arthritis, National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR), UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), Wellcome and Kennedy Institute. Looking ahead, Versus Arthritis intends to fund around £13m of funding each year.

Versus Arthritis seeks to bring about more precise and faster early detection and diagnoses, more effective and targeted treatments, and more holistic care. These are the key priority areas in their Research Strategy Better Lives Today, Better Lives Tomorrow - Research Strategy, 2022-2026. Their research strategy clearly outlines the intent to ensure people with arthritis are active partners across the whole research cycle and consistently feel valued through a culture of co-design.

Orthopaedic Research UK aims to bring together the whole MSK community to share knowledge and expertise, attract new investment, and act as a unified voice. Their research strategy focuses on delivering benefits to patients and the healthcare system in a relatively short time, either by creating new MSK solutions or improving clinical practices and processes.

The Kennedy Trust's mission is to provide support, infrastructure and training in research that enhances understanding of the basic mechanisms and clinical features of the rheumatic disorders and related immune mediated conditions, as well as the application of this research for the benefit of patients.

Why is research involvement important?

The issues that matter most to people with musculoskeletal conditions should be at the heart of research. Funders want people with lived experience to inform research – taking and translating the experience and voice of people with musculoskeletal conditions back to the laboratories and clinics. It is increasingly recognised that the benefits of research are improved if people with lived experience help to design and deliver it. Involving people in this way means that research is more relevant to the challenges and experiences they live with. It is, therefore, more likely to make a difference to the lives of people living with a musculoskeletal condition in the future.

It is also recognised that research involvement has wider impacts on people when delivered well for both researchers and people living with musculoskeletal conditions. It can build knowledge and skills and be fun and motivating - some people have described it as part of their self-management journey.

Our position on Patient and Public Involvement (PPI) in research

We are committed to making sure that people with lived experience are involved at all stages of research. We expect researchers to meaningfully involve people at the application and project development stage and to continue this involvement throughout their projects. We do not view research involvement as a 'tick box' exercise.

This page collates the current PPI standards, recommendations, and guidelines. We support the UK Standards for Public Involvement, the Association of Medical Research Charities (AMRC) position statement, and the EULAR recommendations for involvement in rheumatology research, and we expect that these will be adhered to throughout research projects. Working in partnership with people who have lived experience of MSK conditions, we have developed our Versus Arthritis Good Practice Guidelines for Involvement to share expectations with colleagues, health professionals and researchers.

The current landscape in PPI

We recognise that valuable PPI infrastructure does exist across the country, for example:

- In England, the Biomedical Research Centres support PPI activities, but this is often not condition specific.
- Versus Arthritis Centres of Excellence and other strategic investments have sustained some dedicated PPI groups and networks.
- Your Rheum is a group of 11–24-year-olds across the UK with diagnosed rheumatic conditions who advise, input and shape current adolescent and young adult rheumatology research.
- There are various PPI networks locally supported by individual universities.
- PPI networks and groups also exist within and supported by patient organisations.

Versus Arthritis conducted a multi-element review to better understand the needs and challenges of researchers in delivering quality PPI; it was found that:

- Laboratory-based, 'discovery' research brings different and additional challenges, for example, lack of tailored support and advice and access to patients.
- Diversity and patient-population representation in PPI groups can be lacking, and there is overuse of the same groups.
- There are few opportunities for knowledge sharing and examples of good practice.
- Time and funding for PPI at the pre-award stage is under resourced.
- There is a skills gap in communication and talking about research in lay language.
- There is geographical variation in available administrative support and dedicated coordinators, with no protected time for PPIE administration.

Emerging solutions

In recognition of the importance of involvement in research, our requirements as funders, and the challenges identified by researchers above, Versus Arthritis is implementing a package of activities to support PPI, including:

- A recently launched online PPIE hub to bring together resources and case studies across the landscape for easy reference by researchers
- Webinars for researchers (starting from April 2025) – focussed on topics not sufficiently addressed in current resources, including communication and laboratory-based research.

Another part of this package, delivered in partnership with Orthopaedic Research UK and the Kennedy Trust, is this *Research Facilitation Funding 2025 Round 2* Call.

Scope and key features

This investment aims to address the fragmented infrastructure for PPI in musculoskeletal research across the UK. It also seeks to tackle issues of limited pre-award PPI funding and support, as well as insufficient access to patient groups during this initial stage of research. Our goal is to enhance and expand the existing networks and resources, making them available for the broader MSK research community, regardless of researchers' seniority or geographical location within the UK. Through this initiative, we aim to increase access to meaningful and high-quality involvement in musculoskeletal research, thereby maximising the quality of research, its outputs, and the overall impact.

This is expected to be delivered by:

- Building PPI infrastructure and capacity that is accessible to any researcher in the UK, providing access to people with lived experience where this does not exist.
- Supporting researchers to deliver quality PPI, with a focus on pre-award.
- Build on and facilitate best practice understanding by additive actions and expertise.

Applicants are encouraged to propose a model and activities to achieve this; ideas could include:

- Hub and spoke model, bringing together access to existing groups and setting up PPI groups where an existing group does not exist.
- Central administration, management, and academic leadership to deliver the network, ensuring we enhance not just maintain current infrastructure.

Whilst we would expect to see publications on PPI best practices, this funding is not focused on delivering new tools and resources for researchers.

Applicants should consider and justify which of the following elements will be addressed in the delivery model proposed.

- Supporting a UK-wide network with access for all musculoskeletal researchers - facilitating a community of resources.
- Building links to bring together, support, and enable access to existing multicentre PPI structures across the four nations, where possible. For example, Versus Arthritis centres, Biomedical Research Centres and patient organisations supporting people with musculoskeletal conditions.
- Applications must demonstrate careful consideration of appropriate representation and diversity (ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, age, geography) of both researchers and

people with lived experience who work in and with the network. We encourage the use of innovative ways to engage different populations.

- Building on best practices in musculoskeletal PPI whilst bridging the gaps outlined above. Improving the quality and standard of PPI in the UK MSK community. Ensuring that PPI is high-quality and meaningful and adhering to relevant PPI standards.
- Promoting excellence in PPI through a nationally coordinated and internationally recognised network. Publishing open-access papers on the impact of the network and PPI itself on projects/outcomes, people (both researchers and people with lived experience) and organisations.
- Support for people with lived experience involved in the award and in network activities, including compliance with relevant regulations and payment for their time and training.
- Management of a secure database and/or infrastructure to support multi-centred, UK-wide network activity with good data governance.
- Focus and priority should be given to supporting pre-award PPI.
- Delivery of the award, alongside a willingness and mechanism to seek additional funding for distinct projects, for example, increasing the diversity of people with lived experience.
- Flexibility, openness to learning, and ability to adapt to the external environment through the support of an advisory group that consists of key stakeholders. The advisory group will input into decisions and changes, as well as share impact with musculoskeletal researchers and other funders.
- A sustainability model, which moves PPI infrastructure for musculoskeletal research in the UK forward and closer to self-sustainability by the end of the funding period. For example, self-propagation from funding provided from awards, when of sufficient size offered to industry, or building evidence so there's more future funding dedicated to PPI from research institutions and other funders.

Exclusions

This is not a network for national priority setting.

This funding does not aim to replace or continue support for local project-based PPI groups, networks or champions. PPI will still be required and needs to be funded through specific research projects and other sources, while the Research Facilitation Funding aims to help develop UK PPI infrastructure.

Patient and Public Involvement

People with lived experience of musculoskeletal conditions are expected to be involved throughout the application process and during the proposed award, including in oversight and decision-making.

Four Nations (Research Strategy Principle - Inclusive)

We encourage applicants to consider and articulate how the proposal can benefit some/all four UK nations. As relevant to the scope of the work, the use of funding should consider differences in local environments, and particularly, that specific needs of devolved healthcare and research funding contexts can require tailored solutions.

Research Impact

The Versus Arthritis Research Impact framework focuses on seven areas of research impact listed below. We anticipate that, in delivering against the scope set out above, this investment will achieve an impact relevant to patient and public involvement. The other impact areas are of secondary interest for this Call, though examples of how they may be relevant are given below.

- **Patient and Public Involvement:** the benefit that patients bring to the research itself. Indicative indicators of this impact area are set out in the table below, ranging from small-scale outputs, which form the basis of potential impact, to longer-term, large-scale outcomes.

Outputs	Preliminary Outcomes	Small-scale outcomes	Large-scale outcomes
Number and diversity of people with lived experience involved across various stages of research	People with lived experience contribute to decision-making and influence change Learning about MSK conditions, research & PPI Skills development, motivation, self-confidence, and new connections	Better research design, results and acceptability Fewer challenges experienced by researchers Greater dissemination and visibility of MSK research Increased funding in MSK research and associated PPI activities Increased institutional resources and focus on involvement Community relationships built	PPI practice adopted by others MSK research makes real-world change

- **New Knowledge**: our research has changed what we know about arthritis. Such as increasing the quality of research outputs as a result of better PPI.
- **Intellectual Property, Products, and Services:** innovations, treatments or tools which improve patients' lives. Such as an increase in quality and impact as a result of better PPI.
- **Policy and Practice:** our research is influencing how arthritis is treated or managed. Such as increasing the likelihood of research outputs translating into practice as a result of better PPI.
- **Partnerships:** new networks, partners and collaborations which extend research. Such as the development/broadening of diverse and embedded PPI networks within research.

- **Leveraged Funding:** new funding that has been awarded to continue the research we funded. Such as growth in the success of musculoskeletal research applications through improved PPI.
- **Capacity Building:** our investments are increasing the human or technical capacity to conduct research. Such as the knowledge, skills and confidence of researchers to work alongside patients.

Who can apply

The lead applicant must be based at an eligible UK institution, for further information, see the guidance document. At least one applicant (principal or co-applicant) must have a permanent position within the lead institute.

People with lived experience may be included as co-applicants.

What you can apply for

We expect to award up to a total of £650,000 across 1-2 awards.

Each application should be for a minimum of £250,000 in value and up to 60 months in duration.

We expect this funding to be highly competitive. A realistic projection of activity should be made for the use of funds and the nature of the existing resources, demonstrating the facilitatory value and intent.

Costs for salaries, expenses and small items of essential equipment can be requested. For details on what you can apply for, please see the application form and guidance document.

How to apply

There is a one-stage application process.

Application submission through GrantTracker

Applicants should submit applications through Grant Tracker, where the form will be available.

Applicants must carefully read the application form and guidance document before starting an application.

Please ensure that the most appropriate language is being used in each section of the form and that the correct sections are completed.

The deadline for the receipt of applications is **16:00 on Wednesday 23 July 2025. Submissions after 16:00 will not be accepted.**

Please allow time for the management of appropriate reviewers and signatories to access the GrantTracker system and provide their approvals.

How will applications be assessed?

Assessment panel members will review applications and make funding recommendations.

Assessment by people with arthritis forms a key part of the review process. Further information and guidance can be found on our website and in the guidance document.

All eligible applications will be reviewed by the assessment panel members. If the volume of applications makes it necessary, the panel may triage applications ahead of the rebuttal stage and invitation to attend a formal assessment panel interview online.

Applications will be reviewed by an assembled panel of scientific, clinical, and other relevant experts and people with arthritis and will be assessed on:

- Importance and potential impact
- Relevance and scope
- Feasibility
- Value for Money
- Leadership and Management
- Patient and Public involvement

There will be a panel interview, which will be held online, this will be in November or early December. It is expected that between five and eight applicants may join the interview. Limited written feedback will be provided to applicants prior to the interview to rebut prior to the interview stage to support more in depth discussion at interview.

Award management

There will be an annual review of finances and progress. It is expected that all awards will report annually via Grant Tracker. We are interested in understanding how PPI is used, at what stage of research and which institutions the researchers who access the network are from.

All original peer-reviewed articles published as a result of this research must comply with our open-access policies. You should also tell us directly about all articles in peer-reviewed literature or disseminated publicly (for example, press releases), at the latest, as soon as the article has been accepted for publication or dissemination.

Versus Arthritis must be notified of any information relating to intellectual property and commercial activity arising from this award.

The funders are dependent on funds raised from public donations and receives no funding from the Government. Therefore, it is important that you join us in raising awareness of our charity. Our logo, along with those of Orthopaedic Research UK and The Kennedy Trust, should be used on all documents/presentations relating to this award.

Award holders may be invited to meetings with the funders to discuss their research and/or asked to contribute written summaries.

Timelines

Deadline for applications	16:00 Wednesday 23 July 2025
Invitation to provide a rebuttal to the panel review	October / November 2025
Deadline for rebuttal of panel review	Mid-November 2025
Online panel interview	November / December 2025
Notification of award	January 2026
Project start	From March 2026

Contact details

For all enquiries, please get in touch with awards@versusarthritis.org