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Researchers awarded NIHR funding to support real world evaluations to improve public health interventions

Researchers from the University of Glasgow and Northumbria University have been awarded £2.5 million from the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) to conduct evaluations of local government public health interventions.

The team led by Professors Peter Craig (Glasgow) and Peter van der Graaf

(Northumbria) join six other academic teams around the UK that make up the NIHR PHIRST scheme 'Public Health Intervention Responsive Studies Teams'. Each team will complete 10 evaluations over the next five years.

Known as 'PHIRST Fusion' the cross university collaboration was first commissioned in 2020 and has now been renewed for a further five years. The PHIRST scheme is part of the NIHR's Public Health Research programme that funds research and generates evidence to improve the health of the public and reduce health inequalities. It is open to any tier or function of local government across the UK, including the devolved nations – Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Professor Craig said: "I'm delighted to be working again with colleagues from the Universities of Edinburgh, Newcastle, Sheffield, Northumbria and Queen's University Belfast, and with our new partners at Glasgow Caledonian University. We believe our approach and way of working with local authority partners has proved its worth over the last five years and with the new funding we've been able to strengthen our team by adding health economic expertise. We're all looking forward to tackling new evaluation challenges."

Professor Van der Graaf said: "I am excited to continue working with local authorities across the UK, not only evaluate the innovative public health interventions they are developing, but also to actively support them to mobilise this knowledge into their decision making, while helping other local authorities to apply the learning in their areas. We will use our successful knowledge exchange model with a dedicated Knowledge Exchange Broker, embedded and peer researchers, and post-evaluation reviews."

Organisations such as local councils apply to the PHIRST scheme for academic support to evaluate a specific public health service or scheme. If successful, PHIRST works with a local government partner to deliver a robust evaluation of the intervention over a 12 to 18 month period. Each PHIRST evaluation is co produced with the local partner, associated stakeholders and members of the public to make sure the research provides answers to locally important questions. Organisations are then able to use the findings and recommendations to inform evidence-based practice and policy decisions about each intervention.

The six funded PHIRSTs are:

- Connect, hosted by University of Hertfordshire
- EMPower, hosted by the University of Exeter University in partnership with the McPin Foundation
- Fusion, hosted by University of Glasgow and Northumbria University
- Insight, hosted by University of Bristol and Cardiff University
- REACH, hosted by University of York
- South Bank, hosted by London South Bank University

Professor Adam Briggs, Programme Director for the NIHR Public Health Research (PHR) Programme, which funds the scheme, said: “The building blocks of health, things like decent housing, secure employment, clean air, and access to healthy food, are crucial to creating healthy places that support health and address inequalities.

“The NIHR’s investment in the PHIRST scheme is key part of how we work with local government to generate high quality evidence on what works to strengthen these building blocks, helping local decision makers maximise their impact on how services and programmes improve population health and tackle inequalities.”

PHIRST Fusion conduct post evaluation reviews after all of their projects which have shown the value they provide to the local governments they work with. For instance the findings from an evaluation of the South Tyneside Social Navigators financial wellbeing service were instrumental in securing recommissioning of the service.

The team use an Embedded Researcher model in all their evaluations. This means seconding a local government colleague to work on each evaluation alongside the Fusion researchers. The Embedded Researcher plays a key role in building relationships with local partners, especially at the beginning of projects. The Embedded Researcher also benefits by developing their own research skills and often go on to champion further research and ways of working within their organisation. This was the case after the evaluation of employability services in Fife, Scotland that took forward the practice of involving people with lived experience in research.

PHIRST Fusion are now undertaking their next evaluation working with Knowsley Council on an evaluation of the Healthy Schools Programme encouraging primary schools in the region to promote healthier eating and

lifestyle choices among pupils.

Details of all evaluations conducted by NIHR PHIRST are available on the project website <https://phirst.nihr.ac.uk/>

Call for new applications

The PHIRST scheme is currently accepting new applications until 1pm on Tuesday 3 February 2026. If you are involved with a public health relevant intervention commissioned by local government (and equivalent organisations in the devolved administrations) that is in need of robust evaluation you can find more information [here](#).

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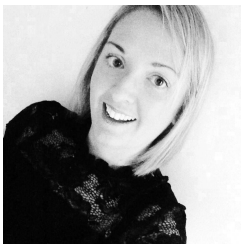
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