

PERSPECTIVE


**ORAL HEALTH
RESEARCH
INCUBATOR**

The NIHR-supported Incubator for Oral Health Research: informing policy across the UK

Zoe Marshman, Incubator co-lead and NIHR Senior Investigator is Professor of Dental Public Health at the University of Sheffield with expertise in child-centred dental research to improve the oral health and treatment experiences of children and their families.

Chris Vernazza, Incubator co-lead and Head of School of Dental Sciences at Newcastle University is Professor of Oral Health Services with a research focus in oral health economics.

Clare Bartlett, Incubator project manager is based at the University of Sheffield, has extensive project management experience and has contributed to significant research and innovation projects in the National Health Service, academia and industry.

Key points

- There is a need to build the research workforce addressing policy-relevant questions in oral health.
- The National Institute of Health and Social Care Research has recognised this need and is supporting an Incubator for Oral Health Research: informing policy across the UK.
- The Incubator will build capacity in oral health research by identifying barriers to careers, developing and training a diverse community and forging links between researchers, policymakers and stakeholders.

Why do we need to build capacity in oral health research?

It is well known within the profession that oral diseases and conditions carry a significant burden for individuals, families, health services and society; prevalence remains high (and in the UK is now increasing); and inequalities by deprivation and ethnicity are large.¹ The UK is experiencing a crisis of access to dental services and while some progress has been made with public health programmes further work is still much needed.² There remains need for significant policy intervention, alongside changes to clinical practice. The most effective policy and clinical interventions will be evidence-based, drawing on underlying fundamental science, clinical research and applied social sciences, including implementation science. The UK has traditionally played a significant role in global oral health research, but there are increasing concerns that the oral health research workforce is declining in number as well as ageing and not representing the profession and society more widely.³ In addition, while the majority of dental care occurs in general dental practice, most research has traditionally been based in and led from university or dental hospital settings and the involvement

of dental care professionals (DCPs) has remained minimal.

What is an NIHR-supported Incubator?

The National Institute of Health and Social Care Research (NIHR) has a mission to improve the health and wealth of the nation through research. It does this through a large variety of activity, including funding research studies, putting in place infrastructure and processes to support research, as well as supporting the development of the health and social care

Vernazza, Newcastle University with a team of co-applicants and a steering group representing many key stakeholders, all supported by our project manager, Dr Clare Bartlett.

What is the Incubator doing to build capacity?

The objectives of the Incubator are to:

- Identify barriers to careers in oral health research
- Develop a diverse community able to co-design solutions to attract and retain oral health researchers
- Upskill this workforce to conduct high quality policy relevant research
- Forge links between researchers, stakeholders and policymakers to identify areas for future research and a sustainable approach to maintain these links.

We are especially keen to encourage primary care-based dentists and DCPs across the four

'The UK is experiencing a crisis of access to dental services and while some progress has been made with public health programmes further work is still much needed'

research workforce. NIHR has established Incubators in areas where a particular health research workforce capacity issue exists.⁴ The NIHR recognised that there was particular need for an Incubator in oral health research relevant to policy and this was launched in July 2025 co-led by Professor Zoe Marshman, University of Sheffield and Professor Chris

UK nations to consider getting involved. The Incubator has already established a community of interested individuals with a website, LinkedIn presence and active mailing list. We have held successful training and networking events including a policy masterclass for early career researchers and a series of webinars for academic dental foundation trainees, ►

« as well as events linked to existing conferences, including the British Society of Oral and Dental Research. We have also established leadership in this area including the creation of a new research committee of Dental Schools Council and by contributing to a forthcoming government report on the oral health clinical research workforce. There are also now highlight notices encouraging oral health-related funding applications to NIHR's research for patient benefit, doctoral fellowship and advanced fellowship schemes.⁵

Looking forward, we are currently conducting interviews with oral healthcare professionals, researchers and policymakers about the barriers and facilitators to research engagement and using research in policy making to inform our future work. We will launch an online directory for individuals interested or engaged in oral health research later this year and further training and networking opportunities in various formats and for different groups. We are working with specialist societies and other research organisations to develop better

mentoring offers and further oral health specific research funding calls.

How do I get involved?

Whether you are already an active researcher or are interested but not sure if it is for you, there is a wealth of information, bespoke support from Incubator members, and many upcoming training opportunities and events. You can find out more and also sign up for our mailing list at our website: <https://sheffield.ac.uk/dentalschool/research/themes/transforming-oral-health/Incubator> or our LinkedIn group (Oral Health Research Incubator) or contact us by email: oralhealthincubator@sheffield.ac.uk.

Ethics declaration

Competing interests

The Incubator is supported by the National Institute for Health and Care Research. The views expressed here are those of the author(s) and not necessarily those of the NIHR or the Department of Health and Social Care. CV is a trustee of the Oral and

Dental Research Trust and Alliance for a Cavity Free Future and his employer receives remuneration for consultancy work for Haleon.

References

1. National Centre for Social Research. Adult Oral Health Survey. A report on the findings of the Adult Oral Health Survey 2023. 2025. Available at <https://natcen.ac.uk/publications/adult-oral-health-survey> (accessed 4 June 2026).
2. UK Parliament. NHS dentistry – Health and Social Care Committee Report. 2023. Available at <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5803/cmselect/cmhealth/964/summary.html> (accessed 5 June 2026).
3. Dental Schools Council. A shrinking oral health clinical academic workforce puts research, education and the NHS at risk. 2026. Available at <https://www.dentalschoolscouncil.ac.uk/news/a-shrinking-oral-health-clinical-academic-workforce-puts-research-education-and-the-nhs-at-risk/> (accessed 5 June 2026).
4. National Institute of Health, Care Research. Incubators to support research capacity. 2026. Available at <https://www.nihr.ac.uk/career-development/research-career-funding-programmes/supporting-career-development/incubators> (accessed 5 June 2026).
5. National Institute of Health, Social Care Research. Highlight notice: oral and dental health. 2026. Available at <https://www.nihr.ac.uk/research-funding/themed-funding-opportunities/oral-dental-health-highlight-notice> (accessed 5 June 2026).

SEMINAR

A day with Francesca Vailati

Understanding occlusal instability
and functional conflicts

IN PERSON | 6 HOURS CPD

Friday 18 September 2026

LONDON



Secure your place from £245

FULL PROGRAMME AND REGISTRATIONS ONLINE



bda.org

★ Trustpilot **★★★★★**

Event sponsor

NSK
Create it

BDA
British Dental Association