Crafting compelling NIHR case studies: a guide

*Based on notes from* [*Nat Owens slides presented to ARC senior managers in November 2024*](https://unioxfordnexus.sharepoint.com/%3Ab%3A/s/PrimaryCareHealthSciences-CLAHRC/EdctLMZavwNGkJazNQqSCBUB-8410hFbClB9v6mYjyxJQQ?e=nFrPwg) *and comms priorities shared at the national NIHR communications leads meeting March 2025.*

# The policy perspective

The NIHR aims to demonstrate its value through four key narrative areas: **Investment**, **Impact**, **Innovation**, and **Inclusion**.

Effective case studies should align with and reinforce these strategic themes, helping to tell the broader story of how NIHR research benefits society, the economy, and the healthcare system.

# The four key narrative areas

## Investment

NIHR research drives economic returns, inward investment, improved productivity, and a healthier workforce. When writing case studies, consider:

* How does your research demonstrate value for money?
* Can you quantify the economic return (e.g., "For every £1 invested, society receives £13 of benefits")?
* Does your work contribute to inward investment or UK economic growth?
* Have you included figures on cost savings to the NHS or wider economy?

## Impact

NIHR research saves lives and improves quality of life, enhancing resilience and productivity. Your case study should show:

* The tangible difference your research makes to patients and the public
* How your work contributes to prevention, early intervention, or improved treatments
* Specific outcomes such as reduced mortality, improved quality of life, or enhanced care pathways
* Real-world implementation and adoption of your findings

## Innovation

Health and care research powers the UK's life science sector and technical advantage. Highlight:

* New ideas, technologies, or approaches developed through your research
* How innovations translate to real-world benefits for patients and the UK economy
* Collaborations with industry partners or commercialisation outcomes
* Novel solutions to persistent health and care challenges

## Inclusion

NIHR research addresses health inequalities and ensures diverse representation. Demonstrate:

* How your research identifies or addresses areas of under-representation
* Efforts to involve diverse communities in research design and delivery
* Impact on reducing health disparities or improving access to care
* Collaborative approaches that engage patients and the public

# Telling the research story

With these four narrative areas in mind, structure your case study to tell a compelling story:

## Begin with the challenge

Start by establishing why your research matters in the context of current health and care challenges:

Frame the problem in terms that resonate with policy priorities, using statistics to demonstrate scale and urgency. For example, "Diabetic foot ulcers affect 25% of the 4.9 million people with diabetes in the UK, with over 50% not healing within a year."

Connect your research question to broader health system challenges or national priorities where possible.

## Reveal the solution

Describe your research findings or intervention clearly, highlighting aspects that demonstrate Investment, Impact, Innovation, or Inclusion:

Explain your approach in straightforward terms, emphasising novel aspects that show innovation without delving into methodological details.

If your work involves new technologies, treatments, or care pathways, describe these in accessible language that non-specialists can understand.

## Demonstrate real-world value

This is where you explicitly link your research to NIHR's key narrative areas:

For Investment: Include clear financial figures where possible – cost savings, return on investment, or economic benefits. For example: "Implementation across the NHS could save £10 million over five years, providing a positive return on investment within 12 months."

For Impact: Quantify benefits in human terms – lives saved, improved outcomes, enhanced quality of life. "This approach reduced waiting lists by 75% and improved early diagnosis rates by 10-fold compared to usual care."

For Innovation: Highlight novel aspects of your approach and how they advance practice. "This non-endoscopic capsule sponge device represents the first primary care screening tool for this condition."

For Inclusion: Show how your research addresses health inequalities or involves diverse communities. "The intervention particularly benefited previously underserved communities, reducing treatment disparities by 40%."

# Practical writing guidance

## Focus and clarity

* Keep your case study concise (300-500 words) – each word should earn its place
* Use plain English and avoid technical jargon
* Focus on England specifically unless your work has UK-wide application
* Structure your narrative logically, leading the reader from problem to solution to impact

## Style principles

* Lead with your strongest, most policy-relevant points
* Use subheadings to enhance readability
* Include relevant statistics but don't overwhelm with numbers
* Focus on outcomes rather than processes
* Use the active voice to create a more engaging narrative

## Do's and Don'ts

### Do:

* Show alignment with national priorities and NIHR's strategic aims
* Include concrete examples of implementation and adoption
* Highlight collaboration with industry, NHS, or other partners
* Demonstrate progression from research to practice change
* Use British English throughout

### Don't:

* Structure your case study like an academic paper
* Focus on individual researchers or specific facilities
* Include journal citations or specific publication dates
* Use regional examples when national figures are available
* Hide your most impressive impacts within detailed text

## Before you submit

Review your case study to ensure it effectively communicates across the four key narrative areas. Ask yourself:

* **Investment**: Have I clearly demonstrated economic value and return on investment?
* **Impact**: Is the difference this research makes to patients and the NHS evident?
* **Innovation**: Have I highlighted what's novel about this work and its contribution to the UK's technical advantage?
* **Inclusion**: Does this show how the research addresses health inequalities or involves diverse communities?

Remember that each case study doesn't need to address all four areas equally – focus on the strengths of your particular research while being authentic about its contributions.

A compelling case study should make it clear why this research matters to patients, the public, the NHS, and the UK economy, aligning your specific work with NIHR's broader mission to deliver investment, impact, innovation, and inclusion.