

## NIHR ACF FAQs

The following guidance is for NIHR ACF recruitment into all General Medical Council (GMC) specialties.

### **FAQ 1 - What is the process for applicants to NIHR ACFs that will commence in 2025?**

The ACF recruitment process is summarised in Figure 1 and the timetable for 2025 recruitment is in Table 1. NIHR ACF posts are allocated annually to Integrated Academic Training (IAT) partnerships comprising an NHSE local office, Higher Education Institute (HEI) and NHS organisation.

The recruitment process is managed by the relevant NHSE local office in the IAT partnerships, and advertisements will appear on their websites and Oriel from October 2024. Applicants will need to apply for NIHR ACF posts using the Oriel online application system (<https://www.oriel.nhs.uk/Web/>).

The 2025 NIHR ACF recruitment window runs from October 2024 to 31 March 2026, this is divided into round 1 (October 2024 – January 2025) and re-adverts (February 2025 – 31 March 2026).

#### ACF Application Form

- Applicants will need to complete the ACF application form for the ACF posts advertised in the relevant specialties and levels through Oriel <https://www.oriel.nhs.uk/Web/>

#### Specialty Training Application Form

- ACF applicants who require clinical benchmarking if they were successful at the ACF interview will need to complete the relevant specialty training application, when the national application window opens. Specialty training application form options and a definition of those applicants requiring clinical benchmarking is detailed in FAQ 2 and FAQ 3.

Following assessment of the ACF application forms, shortlisted applicants will be invited for interviews (November 2024 – January 2025). The interviews are organised by the NHSE local office hosting the ACF post.

The ACF interview has several components assessing the clinical–academic potential of the applicant. Appointable applicants will be ranked at the ACF interview, with the top ranked applicant being offered the ACF post when the offer window opens.

A conditional offer will be given to successful ACF applicants that do not already hold a National Training Number (NTN) or Deanery Reference Number (DRN) in the GMC specialty and level to which they are applying. These applicants require clinical

benchmarking (defined in FAQ 2) in the GMC specialty of the ACF post to which they are applying before they can accept the ACF offer. ACF applicants will receive a conditional offer when the offers window opens in January 2025.

An unconditional offer can be made to reserve applicants who pass clinical benchmarking (or to those with an appropriate NTN/DRN) for the advertised ACF should the preferred ACF applicant withdraw or fail clinical benchmarking.

### **FAQ 2 - What is clinical benchmarking?**

Clinical benchmarking relates to ACF applicants reaching the “threshold of appointability” at the national standard clinical interviews/assessments for the GMC specialty and level of the ACF post. ACF applicants that are successful at interview but do not hold an NTN/DRN in the appropriate GMC specialty and ST level for the post need to be clinically benchmarked. Only one attempt at clinical benchmarking per ACF post is permitted.

Applicants who fail to reach the “threshold of appointability” at clinical benchmarking, will be ineligible for appointment to the ACF post in that recruitment round. Under these circumstances the conditional ACF offer will be withdrawn. Withdrawal of a conditional ACF offer does not prevent the affected applicants from reapplying in future recruitment rounds.

### **FAQ 3 - Do ACF applicants need to submit a separate application for standard clinical training in that specialty in order to be able to attend an interview for clinical benchmarking?**

If ACF applicants require clinical benchmarking then they must also complete a separate standard clinical application form. They will be asked on their standard clinical application form whether they wish to be considered for academic recruitment only (i.e. clinical benchmarking only) or whether they wish their standard clinical application to be considered for both academic and clinical appointments. The two options are described below. Once an applicant has made their selection and submitted the standard clinical application form they will not be able to change this decision.

Standard clinical application form options:

#### **1. Academic Recruitment Only**

This option informs the national recruitment office that the applicant wishes their standard clinical application form to only be used for clinical benchmarking for the ACF post they have applied for. They will only be invited to standard clinical interviews if they were appointable at the ACF interviews, and thus invited for clinical benchmarking. This selection informs the national recruitment office that they should be removed from the offers process for the standard clinical training posts. Their score will only be used to

assess whether they have reached the level of appointability, they should be informed of the outcome as soon as possible. Applicants that select academic recruitment only will not receive a rank at the standard clinical assessments/interviews.

## 2. Academic Recruitment and Specialty Training

This option advises the national recruitment office that in addition to using the standard clinical application for clinical benchmarking as part of the ACF recruitment process (Option 1), the ACF applicant would also like to be considered for a standard clinical training post in the related specialty. Their score will be used to assess whether they have reached the level of appointability for the ACF post offer, and they should be informed of the outcome as soon as possible. If their score is also high enough to be appointed to a standard clinical training post then they will receive this offer when the national standard, clinical training offers window opens. Guidance on accepting ACF posts is detailed below. Applicants that select academic recruitment and specialty training will receive a rank at the standard clinical assessments/interviews.

### **FAQ 4 - Do ACF applicants that hold a Deanery Reference Number (DRN) having previously successfully applied for core level training still need to be clinically benchmarked?**

It depends on the level of training of the ACF that is being applied for.

If they hold a DRN whilst applying for a post linked to a GMC specialty that has relevant core level training (e.g. Internal Medical Training (IMT), for medical specialties and Core Surgical Training for surgery) then they will have already passed the assessment at the clinical interview previously and therefore will not have to do so again.

However, if they hold a DRN for core training but are applying to academic training at a higher training level (i.e. ST3/4) they will need to attend a national clinical assessment/interview at the appropriate level.

If the core level training they are undertaking is not relevant to the GMC specialty they are applying for in the NIHR ACF round, then they will need to undergo clinical benchmarking.

### **FAQ 5 - Do ACF applicants that hold a National Training Number (NTN) still need to be clinically benchmarked?**

ACF applicants that currently hold a clinical NTN at the appropriate level in the GMC specialty associated with the ACF they are applying to do not need to be clinically benchmarked.

ACF applicants that currently hold an NTN in a different GMC specialty to the one associated with the post they are applying to will need to undergo clinical benchmarking. Although they have met the required standard in a national clinical interview before, it was not in the same GMC specialty. Different specialties assess

different skills and competences at interview and therefore it should not be assumed that success in one clinical interview is appropriate for all specialties. Therefore, to ensure a consistency of approach with all applicants, they will need to undergo clinical benchmarking for this GMC specialty.

#### **FAQ 6 - How is the offers process managed?**

Academic Round 1 offers will be released in January 2025 in line with the published academic recruitment timeline, through Oriol. It is the responsibility of the NHSE local office that has been allocated the ACF post to release applicant offers/conditional offers, not the NHSE local office responsible for clinical benchmarking.

Applicants will be ranked based on the ACF interviews regardless of their ranking in national clinical selection. If the top ranked ACF applicant fails clinical benchmarking, then the 2nd reserve applicant should be given an unconditional/conditional offer, dependent on the requirement for clinical benchmarking, where relevant.

ACF applicants that already hold an NTN in the relevant GMC specialty and are the preferred applicant following the ACF interview, should be offered the post.

A conditional offer should only be given if the top ranked applicant at the ACF interview requires clinical benchmarking. The conditional offer relates to the applicants reaching the required standard at clinical benchmarking. The first attempt at clinical benchmarking will determine the outcome of the conditional offer for the NIHR ACF post. Conditional offers for subsequent NIHR ACF applications would also require clinical benchmarking.

Where possible the change in offer from conditional to unconditional/withdrawn following clinical benchmarking should occur as soon as possible and is not dependent on the national standard, clinical offers window, as it relates to the ACF Round 1 offers process not the national standard clinical timeframes.

Offers, or an indication of interview performance, will not be released to applicants (either officially or unofficially) before the offers date. This ensures that applicants are given a fair opportunity to attend all of the ACF interviews they have applied for without undue pressure to accept a post they interviewed for at the start of the window. This also ensures that IAT partnerships are able to make full use of the interview window.

#### **FAQ 7 - How do applicants accept an ACF post offer after clinical benchmarking?**

After confirmation of clinical benchmarking, applicants offered an ACF post should accept their preferred offer via the appropriate lead recruiter.

Applicants must ensure that they withdraw from all other applications that they have submitted. It is the applicant's responsibility to contact the appropriate lead recruiter(s) and inform them that they would like to withdraw their application. This should be done

within five working days of confirmation of clinical benchmarking. Withdrawal from other applications will not automatically occur through Oriel.

**FAQ 8 - What is the required standard for NIHR ACF applicants undergoing clinical benchmarking?**

Applicants who do not hold an NTN/DRN will need to be assessed and interviewed through the relevant national process for the specialty. The applicant will be required to reach the “threshold of appointability” at national selection assessment/interview. They do not need to have been ranked high enough to have received a specialty training post i.e. “appointed”.

Applicants that do not reach the appointable score threshold at national selection assessment/interview will have their ACF offer (or place on reserve list) withdrawn by the relevant NHSE local office.

All ACF offers to applicants not holding an NTN/DRN must clearly state that this is a conditional offer subject to passing the “threshold of appointability” in the national process and that offers will be withdrawn from applicants that are unsuccessful in that process.

It is important that specialties clearly determine their appointable threshold in a way that is transparent, fair, and equitable to all ACF applicants. It is recommended as best practice that cut-off scores are agreed prior to interviews."

**FAQ 9 - What are the timescales between Round 1 ACF interviews and clinical benchmarking?**

It depends on the ST level of the NIHR ACF post the applicant has applied to. Round 1 NIHR ACF interviews will take place between November 2024 and January 2025. Please refer to the MDRS website for details of national recruitment and selection.

**FAQ 10 – As applicants attend a separate clinical interview, will the NIHR ACF interview cover academic topics only?**

This is at the interview panel’s discretion. The ACF interview should cover clinical-academic and academic elements. The addition of clinical specific questions is at the interviewing panel’s discretion.

**FAQ 11 – Are there separate clinical benchmarking interviews for ACF applicants?**

No. It is expected that applicants will attend the specialty-specific national clinical interviews that take place during the NIHR ACF recruitment window 03 October 2024 – 31 March 2025.

**FAQ 12 – What is the process for re-advertising and recruiting to unfilled NIHR ACF posts from academic Round 1?**

In order to re-advertise ACF posts, NIHR needs to be made aware by the relevant NHSE local office, of recruitment outcomes in Round 1. For example: accepted unconditional offer, conditional offer, or unfilled.

The 2025 NIHR ACF recruitment window runs from October 2024 to 31 March 2026, this is divided into Round 1 (October 2024 – January 2025) and re-adverts (February 2025 – March 2026).

Recruitment outcomes, specialty change requests, and general queries should be sent to [iat@nihr.ac.uk](mailto:iat@nihr.ac.uk) to provide information regarding the current recruitment status of posts. An update on recruitment status should be provided to NIHR Academy by the relevant NHSE local office as requested, or until all posts are unconditionally filled.

Re-advertising of unfilled posts should commence as soon possible after the posts have been confirmed as unfilled and NIHR has been notified. The NIHR Academy needs to be made aware of unfilled ACF posts as soon as possible. The deadline for successful applicants to be in post for 2025 allocated NIHR ACFs is 31 March 2026. Where possible, recruitment to unfilled posts should continue until the post is filled. If the post is unfilled on 31 March 2026 then the NIHR ACF post will have expired and will be withdrawn from the IAT partnership's allocation.

Following the optional timetable is advised to maximise the availability of clinical benchmarking interviews. However, it is not mandatory and recruitment to unfilled posts should continue until the post is filled (up to 31 March 2026), assuming the applicants have already been or scheduled to be clinically benchmarked in the current round or already hold an appropriate NTN/DRN.

### **FAQ 13 – What is the process if applicants have not applied for standard clinical training in addition to the ACF?**

Where national clinical recruitment at the appropriate level and specialty as the re-advertised ACF post is available in the 2025 NIHR recruitment window, applicants must also complete the clinical application form. If the clinical application is not completed, then the ACF application may be withdrawn by the lead recruiters. Please refer to the MDRS website for details of national recruitment and selection.

To facilitate successful ACF applicants attending clinical benchmarking, where possible, re-advertised ACF posts should follow the optional timetable for re-adverts in Table 1.

### **FAQ 14 – Can applicants for an ACF in Round 1 that have failed clinical benchmarking apply to re-advertised ACFs and another attempt at clinical benchmarking?**

Yes, applicants can apply for re-advertised ACF posts and if available clinical benchmarking, but they are only permitted one attempt at clinical benchmarking per ACF application.

**FAQ 15 - What if the ACF post is unfilled following the optional re-advertisement timetable?**

Re-advertising unfilled NIHR ACF posts should continue beyond the optional re-advert timetable, where necessary to ensure the posts are filled by 31 March 2026. However, the NIHR ACF adverts should state that applicants must meet the following eligibility criteria:

- they hold an appropriate NTN/DRN
- they are scheduled to be clinically benchmarked in the 2025 NIHR ACF recruitment window
- they have already been successfully clinically benchmarked in the 2025 NIHR ACF recruitment window.

**FAQ 16 - Do successful ACF applicants, for re-advertised posts, who have passed clinical benchmarking in academic Round 1 have to be clinically benchmarked again?**

If the ACF applicant has been clinically benchmarked in the same GMC specialty and level as their NIHR ACF application (since 2025 ACF recruitment opened) then the applicant will not require further clinical benchmarking. However, NHSE local office recruitment teams will need evidence to confirm clinical benchmarking from the relevant national recruiter.

When applicants are invited to the ACF interview, the NHSE local offices will be responsible for ascertaining if they have been clinically benchmarked for that specialty. If the applicant has previously been deemed appointable and may even have been offered a post, the applicant must inform the NHSE local offices and provide evidence.