UKRD



2026 SUMMIT REPORT

A look back at two days of collaboration, learning and connection across the UK health and care research leadership community





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Welcome



Nick McNally, Chair of UKRD Leaders and Managing Director of Research at University College London Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust and UCL

In March 2026, over 150 research leaders from across the clinical and wider health R&D leadership community came together for the UKRD Summit. During the two-day event, held for the second year at Birmingham's Edgbaston Park hotel, we celebrated progress, took part in open discussions about current challenges for the sector, and were motivated by sharing new ideas and opportunities for the future.

The theme for this year's Summit was embedding research in all health and care settings. To truly embed research requires consideration of organisational culture; and to work on research cultures requires conversations with patients and service users, to listen and understand why research is important to them, to allow those insights to infuse into how we lead.

To demonstrate the importance of working with patients, we anchored this year's Summit with our first ever patient panel. Jordan Lees, Estelle Green, Elliot Pfebve and Pauline Cowderoy set the perfect tone, delivering a powerful sense of perspective for us all about why research matters to them. As Jordan told the delegates, "Research offers hope – to know there was an option for me when I felt like I'd tried everything else was so important to me. If I hadn't had that, I wouldn't be here now."

The panel was a clear highlight for many of our delegates, who often reflect on feelings of motivation and positivity after the Summit. As research leaders we hold key roles in elevating UK health and care research and life sciences on the global scale. But these are challenging times. The significant pressure for the UK to regain its international competitiveness in life sciences has shaped the work of a lot of us over the last year. Optimising performance is critical. But the Summit enabled us to reflect on how much we have achieved through innovating and driving improvements. If we keep our work grounded in our true purpose – bringing more research opportunities to patients like Jordan, Estelle, Elliot and Pauline – there will be a lot more to come from our wonderful leadership community.

Every year, thanks to your input, the Summit becomes more inclusive and more representative, and we're determined to continue on that trajectory. Feedback from our delegates survey again tells us that you value the Summit as an important opportunity to network. We believe that by facilitating closer relationships with our colleagues and building our connectivity across our leadership community, we will continue to achieve great things for UK health and care research. We are always stronger working together.

In this review of our 2026 Summit, we've collected the feedback of various people involved in the event to share the impact it has in designing and executing solutions and strategies for progress and growth in research.

Enjoy this review and I look forward to seeing you at the Summit 2027 - UKRD's ten year anniversary!







Keynote speakers

For 2026, we added two new elements to our busy agenda, introducing a patient panel to open the event and a pre-dinner speaker in the evening. These sessions were intended to provide different points of view and were well received by our delegates.

Jordan Lees, Estelle Green, Elliot Pfebve and Pauline Cowderoy opened the Summit with a panel session where they each discussed their individual health challenges and their experiences with research. Each brought a different perspective and the audience was completely silent throughout the session - the speakers' honesty about the impact of research and why it was important was thoughtful and powerful.



This panel provided an inspirational call to action. Elliot said, "I felt lucky to be offered a place on a trial, but research should be routine. It's not my responsibility to be lucky enough to get into a trial, it's your responsibility to make them business as usual so more people can be that lucky."



When asked what she'd like leaders and decision-makers to understand about the impact of research, Pauline offered a challenge. "Put yourself in my shoes," she said. "If this was your family member, what would you do? What would you want for your loved one? We aren't just numbers to be crunched, we're humans."



With excellent feedback from those in the audience, patient-led sessions will be sure to make a return in future events.



Our pre-dinner speakers were Sophie Montagne and Sandy Hennis, two of the first all-female team to ski coast to coast across Antarctica using muscle power alone - covering an impressive 1,000 miles in just 60 days.



The six-strong team was made up of British Army and Army Reserve officers, none with any experience of the Polar regions. Sophie and Sandy gave a frank and entertaining acount of their journey, which despite weather delays and some illness, was completed ahead of schedule.

This session proved to be another highlight with great feedback from delegates, who felt the change in content - with relatable themes of leadership and overcoming challenges as a team - was a great addition to the event.

Workshops

We held eight workshops over two days, covering a range of topics linked to the UKRD working groups, enabling people from different organisations to challenge ways of working, explore new ideas and learn from colleagues. This year, we continued to develop our Emerging Leaders group with a focused workshop, and we introduced the Research Culture workshop.

Research culture

We shared stories about where we have seen research culture at its best within our organisations. The session was very well received, with the focus on positive conversations seen by many as refreshing and a good way to look at the topic of good research cultures. Gradually, we are building up a cultural web to record the findings from these conversations. The working group will discuss what the web is telling us about good research cultures and what we would like to do next. We are also very interested to pursue the use of appreciative conversations within our teams and organisations.

Neighbourhoods and communities

The 'Strategic approaches to growing commercial research' workshop focused on the different strategies for industry engagement, what 'good' looks like and how organisations can use the commercial income more strategically. The discussion focused on how research teams engage with industry, the various roles involved in this and the successes/challenges to different approaches. The delegates were keen to discuss how the income generated from commercial research is being used strategically to build further capacity and capability. Sharing best approaches and best practices from across the system was deemed very valuable by the participants.

Research finance

The workshop explored how emerging technologies are reshaping the role of research finance from a primarily transactional function to a more strategic, data-driven partner in research delivery. The session examined use of AI in forecasting, costing, and risk modelling, the role of integrated systems (e.g. EPR/Epic) in linking activity to finance, and the growing importance of robust data governance. Delegates responded positively, sharing common challenges around data quality, interoperability, and resource constraints. We will continue to share information on advancing digital capability, exploring AI use cases and strengthening data governance frameworks.

Mental health

The mental health (MH) group had a productive session with Nick Lemoine (NIHR) and Kate Fishlock, where we explored; the funding model and it's impact on MH and learning disability organisations, the opportunities and challenges in commercial research, gaps and opportunities in MH research development and priorities for the year, the priority of rater training and the Translational Research Collaboration for Mental Health (the MH mission), and cross organisational pharmacy challenges, particularly clinical trials using schedule one Investigation Medicinal Products (IMPs).



Workshops

Sustainability in research
The workshop explored how the UKRD community can support the transition to low-carbon healthcare while maintaining quality, safety and equity. Reflecting on progress since the Summit 2025, the session highlighted how sustainability is becoming increasingly embedded within NHS improvement programmes, research funding and delivery. The workshop introduced the Environmental Lessons Learned and Applied (ELLA) methodology for developing greener clinical pathways, the Sustainable Health Systems Hub led by University of Exeter, and the growing relevance of sustainability in health and care R&D. We will continue to share best practice, explore areas for implementation of Get It Right First Time pathways and support R&D teams to engage with trust sustainability teams.

Emerging leaders
The workshop introduced delegates to the UKRD Emerging Leaders initiative and what it is trying to fix: a recognised gap between established senior R&D leaders and the next generation. We discussed a proposed programme of activity (including representation on UKRD working groups, input into surveys and position papers, representation at key national meetings, peer support and mentorship, and ongoing engagement) and used facilitated discussion prompts to test what resonated, what felt unrealistic, and what should be prioritised. Delegate response was strongly positive and engagement-focused, with explicit need for a peer support group. We will focus on converting the proposed initiatives into deliverable actions, measuring success and conducting a 12-month review.

Joint Research Offices (JRO)
The workshop explored four theoretical scenarios for future (JRO) models seeking to gain a strategic perspective from delegates: a centralised 'MegaGroup' structure, a federated model, an ICS based research office, and a future digital JRO for contracts model. Each scenario examined how authority, digital capability, workforce, relationships, scale, and local autonomy shape research operations across organisations. Delegates were highly engaged and many commented that the structured comparison helped them better understand the trade offs in different models and provided valuable insights. Outcomes have been combined with those from the same workshop held at R&D Forum and we will develop guidance and resources to support members in the coming year.

Digital and AI
Our speakers shared examples of research incorporated with digital, data and AI activities. Ameet Bakhai shared how digital strategy needs to interweave with research – the Royal Free has a Trust-wide digital and research workstream, two dedicated roles for digital research innovations and two digital committees for investigators. Chris Kipps (Wessex SDE) discussed partnering for data access, e.g. combining primary, secondary, tertiary and social care datasets for insights into dementia via the Pre-Hospital Research and Audit Network. Kamaraj Karunanithi shared how AI work is enabled at UHNM, working with IT leaders to allow investigators to bring in predictive tools for research such as chatbots and summarising large language models.





Speakers

Professor Habib Naqvi - inclusion in leadership: “Delivering this talk was a unique opportunity to turn the evidence on diverse leadership in R&D into action. This was helpfully facilitated by the UKRD Summit as it brings together the leaders who set priorities, fund programmes, and shape governance, where change can be made at scale. It was great to engage with the delegates on the critical importance of diverse leadership in R&D, on the importance of quality, relevance, and trustworthiness of research. My ‘take home’ messages for delegates included: treating the lack of diverse leadership as a system sustainability and performance risk, acting now by owning outcomes at senior level, mandating representation in research design and governance and applying the NHS Race and Health Observatory’s practical anti-racism tools.”



Elliot Pfebve - patient participation panel: “I accepted the invitation to share my life experience of the study I’ve gone through. My journey is important to share with this conference of experts so they are able to have feedback from patients. I’m grateful to have been given this opportunity to share my experience, I hope and trust that it has inspired the research and development experts. After talking, I was grateful to have people who gave me some engagement and feedback, I find it fulfilling.”



Professor Lucy Chappell - Chief Scientific Advisor, DHSC and CEO, NIHR: “It was a pleasure to join colleagues from across the system at the UKRD Leaders Summit. There was a real sense of momentum and willingness to make research thrive across our health and care system - I look forward to continuing to work closely with the UKRD community, as critical workforce to bring research to patients and the public.”



The Summit 2026 was supported by our generous sponsors, Florence Healthcare and the National Institute for Health and Care Research.



The Summit happens thanks to our planning team, all volunteers from the research leadership community, who in 2026 were led by Grant Nicholson, Head of Clinical Research Operations at Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children NHS Foundation Trust. If you’d like to be part of our 2027 event, contact website@ukrdleaders.org







Looking ahead

We asked our delegates what they'd like to see at future Summit events and the planning team is working with some great feedback to shape the programme for next year, including:



- more direct engagement with industry representatives,
- making sessions more inclusive of all different organisation sizes and types,
- developing workshops to demonstrate group progress year on year,
- updates on the industry hub and CRDCs,
- continuing representation of all nations, and
- using new session formats.

Plus, we'll be building on the elements that worked well for our delegates, such as:

- more networking opportunities,
- continue including patient representatives and all four UK nations in the agenda,
- discussing progress made throughout the year, by working groups and UKRD as a whole,
- keeping delegates up to date with policy developments and priorities in the national context, and
- encouraging thoughtful discussions and a feeling of camaraderie across the sector.









Your highlights

Being in a psychologically safe space with peers where there is time to discuss issues and compare experiences is so valuable and so important for improving how we work individually and as a community.

It carves out protected time to think, reflect, collaborate.

It is good to see the landscape and understand challenges and opportunities that other partners and colleagues are facing - helps with partnership working.

Praise for the patient panel:

The patient panel was a powerful start and a good way to focus on what it is all about.

Having the patient panel as front and centre was excellent - set the tone for the conference and perspective for discussions,

Really helped ground our attendance at the summit - why we do what we do.

150+ delegates, speakers, sponsors and partners in attendance

Four patients joined us to share their experiences

Keep up the momentum regarding inclusion of all four nations and integrating the devolved nations into UKRD (leadership and working groups).

This was my second year attending in person and I was more involved this year. It was great to meet colleagues in person and discuss challenges and opportunities with them. Also great to take a step back and view the bigger picture.

Hearing how different areas, esp. the devolved nations, work, it gave some interesting ideas.

Highlight was being surrounded by people who understand the challenges and networking as well as getting some new ideas out of each session.

Being in the room and realising the very senior staff don't have the answers either.

I was impressed with the whole event. It was very positive & motivating. Workshops were very useful.

Rated 4.4 stars out of 5

BOOK NOW for the UKRD Summit 2027 - visit www.ukrdleaders.org/ukrd-summit