Career Co-Pilot

Getting Into UK Clinical Research

Where the Jobs Are, What Employers Ask For and How to Ask for Help

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Why This Guide Exists

Every week we hear from doctors, nurses, pharmacists and scientists who trained overseas and are waiting: for PLAB, for an NMC PIN, for a registration letter. Most want to know whether there is real healthcare work they can do in the meantime. For many of them the answer is clinical research, and almost nobody tells them.

This guide is built on what NHS employers actually publish. We tracked 659 NHS research roles between June 2025 and November 2026 and counted the requirements in 123 job packs. Every number in it comes from real adverts, not from opinion.

ONE THING BEFORE YOU START

If you take only one thing from this guide, take section 3. Most entry research roles ask for Good Clinical Practice training, which is free online, and only about one advert in ten asks for previous research experience. The door is more open than it looks.

SECTION 1

A Real Way Into the NHS

Clinical research is not a side door. It is a large, steady part of NHS hiring, with patients, pay bands and a clear way up.

Every major NHS trust runs research. Drug trials, device studies, observational cohorts and large national studies all need people to screen and recruit patients, take consent, collect samples, manage data and keep studies running to protocol. Those people are employed on Agenda for Change bands like any other NHS staff.

Hiring is steady. Since May 2026 we have seen between 61 and 113 new NHS research roles advertised every month. Most sit at Bands 4 to 6, which on current pay is roughly £28,000 to £48,000 a year.

Why It Suits People Waiting on Registration

Many entry research roles do not require professional registration at all. They value clinical understanding, care with patients and accuracy with data, which is exactly what overseas trained clinicians bring. A year in research also gives you NHS experience, UK referees and a clear account of how the system works, all of which help when your registration comes through.

And for Those Aiming at Industry

Clinical Research Associate roles sit mainly in pharmaceutical companies and contract research organisations. They usually ask for site experience first. Working on the NHS side of a trial is the most common way to get it.

IN PRACTICE

Think of research as a career in its own right, not a holding pen. People who treat it that way tend to move up quickly, and many stay.

SECTION 2

The Roles, Explained

Job titles vary between trusts. The duties and the band tell you more than the label.

ROLE	BAND	WHAT YOU DO	TYPICAL PAY
Clinical Trials Assistant	3 to 4	Study paperwork, data entry, sample handling, supporting screening and visits.	£28,392 to £31,157
Clinical Research Practitioner	4 to 6	Recruiting and consenting patients, running study visits, samples, data.	Band 5: £32,073 to £39,043
Research Officer or Coordinator	5	Coordinating studies, set up, approvals, data quality and reporting.	£32,073 to £39,043
Research Nurse	5 to 6	Clinical care of trial participants, consent, drug trial procedures.	Band 6: £39,959 to £48,117
Clinical Research Fellow	Medical	Doctor led research post, often linked to a higher degree.	£55,355 to £76,582
Clinical Research Associate	Industry	Monitoring trial sites on behalf of a sponsor or contract research organisation.	Not on Agenda for Change

Registration and Recognition

Research Nurse posts require NMC registration. Most Trials Assistant and Practitioner posts do not require any professional registration. For practitioners without one, the Academy for Healthcare Science runs an accredited register for Clinical Research Practitioners, which is a recognised way to show your standing.

Pay figures are Agenda for Change 2025/26 rates as shown on live adverts. The Research Fellow range is from a live Royal Marsden advert.

SECTION 3

What the Adverts Actually Ask For

We counted how often each requirement appears in 123 NHS research job packs at Bands 3 to 6 from the last 12 months. This is what employers write down.

REQUIREMENT	PACKS	SHARE
A degree, or equivalent	89 of 123	72%
GCP (Good Clinical Practice)	76 of 123	62%
Excel or spreadsheet skills	53 of 123	43%
ICH guidelines	47 of 123	38%
Professional registration, any	34 of 123	28%
Informed consent	33 of 123	27%
Audit	33 of 123	27%
Data entry	27 of 123	22%
NMC registration	24 of 123	20%
Phlebotomy	23 of 123	19%
Venepuncture	18 of 123	15%
EDGE research database	16 of 123	13%
Previous research experience	13 of 123	11%
Patient recruitment	9 of 123	7%
GMC registration	0 of 123	0%

What This Tells You

- **GCP is the single most useful certificate.** It appears in most packs, and the NIHR offers it free online. Do it first.
- **Research experience is rarely required.** About one pack in ten asks for it. Most entry roles expect you to learn on the job.
- **Data skills matter more than people expect.** Excel and data entry appear far more often than most applicants prepare for.
- **Patient facing skills set clinicians apart.** Consent, phlebotomy and venepuncture are where a clinical background counts.
- **GMC registration is not asked for at these bands.** Doctors waiting on the GMC can compete on GCP, data and clinical skills.

SECTION 4

Where the Jobs Are

Research hiring is concentrated. A small group of large teaching and specialist trusts posts most of the adverts.

Busiest Research Employers

TRUST	RESEARCH ADVERTS TRACKED
The Royal Marsden	33
Guy's and St Thomas'	27
The Christie	23
University College London Hospitals	22
Manchester University	19
Imperial College Healthcare	19
Barts Health	17

Where Entry Roles Make Up Most of the Hiring

These trusts post a high share of their research roles at Bands 3 to 5, the usual entry point.

TRUST	ENTRY LEVEL ROLES	SHARE
Central and North West London	6 of 6	100%
Manchester University	17 of 19	89%
Midlands Partnership	6 of 7	86%
Imperial College Healthcare	15 of 19	79%
University College London Hospitals	17 of 22	77%
Leeds Teaching Hospitals	9 of 12	75%
The Christie	14 of 23	61%
The Royal Marsden	19 of 33	58%

ROLES THAT COME BACK

Some roles are advertised again and again. Manchester University advertised a Clinical Research Practitioner role five times, and Guy's and St Thomas' advertised a Clinical Research Nurse role five times. If you miss one, set an alert. It is likely to return.

How Much Research These Trusts Run

Adverts tell you who is hiring now. NIHR funding tells you how much research a trust leads, and so how likely it is to keep hiring. The figures below are NIHR awards held by each trust, from NIHR's own open data.

TRUST	NIHR AWARDS ACTIVE NOW	VALUE OF ACTIVE AWARDS	FELLOWSHIP AND TRAINING AWARDS SINCE 2011
Guy's and St Thomas'	63	£34.4m	104
Leeds Teaching Hospitals	26	£11.9m	47
Manchester University	22	£19.7m	34
The Royal Marsden	20	£30.6m	34
University College London Hospitals	19	£15.0m	50
Barts Health	18	£17.8m	29
Imperial College Healthcare	16	£3.5m	30
Midlands Partnership	14	£11.7m	4
The Christie	7	£6.6m	8
Central and North West London	6	£6.5m	3

Reading These Numbers

- **Active awards point to steady hiring.** Each funded study needs people to recruit, consent and follow up patients for years, not months.
- **Fellowship and training awards show where research careers are grown.** Guy's and St Thomas', UCLH and Leeds stand out, which matters if you want to move on to a funded fellowship later.
- **These figures are a floor, not the whole picture.** They count awards where the trust holds the NIHR contract. Specialist trusts such as The Royal Marsden and The Christie run large amounts of research funded through partner universities, charities and industry, which does not appear here.

Source: NIHR Open Data, funded research and training awards, edition of 21 October 2026. Values are the total value of awards active now, rounded to the nearest £0.1 million.

SECTION 5

If You Need Sponsorship

Sponsorship is decided vacancy by vacancy. Two research roles at the same trust can give different answers.

- **What does the advert say.** Many adverts state plainly whether the post is open to applicants who need sponsorship. That is the strongest evidence you will get.
- **Does the employer hold a sponsor licence.** The Home Office publishes a register of licensed sponsors. Being on it means an employer is able to sponsor, not that it will for this post.
- **Ask the employer.** The only authoritative answer for a specific vacancy comes from them.

What We Saw in Live Research Adverts

STATED SPONSORSHIP OFFERED

- UCLH Clinical Trials Assistant, Band 4
- King's College Hospital Clinical Research Practitioner, Band 6
- Cwm Taf Morgannwg R&D Officer, Band 5
- The Royal Marsden Clinical Research Doctor

STATED NOT ELIGIBLE

- Some Clinical Research Officer adverts
- Some Senior Trial Administrator adverts, stating the role is not eligible for Skilled Worker sponsorship

An advert that says nothing about sponsorship is not an advert saying no. Across the NHS, 1,481 live adverts stated they sponsor and 802 said nothing either way when we last checked. Silence is silence.

> **WHAT WE SHOW, AND WHAT WE DO NOT**
>
> This section reports what adverts and the Home Office register say. It is information, not immigration advice. For your own circumstances, an immigration adviser regulated by the IAA is the right source.

SECTION 6

Routes by Background

There is no single way in. Your best first role depends on what you already have.

YOUR BACKGROUND	REALISTIC FIRST ROLE	WHAT HELPS MOST
Doctor, not yet GMC registered	Clinical Trials Assistant or Research Practitioner, Band 4 to 5	GCP, consent, sample handling, a clear account of your clinical work
Doctor, GMC registered	Clinical Research Fellow or Research Doctor	Specialty interest, audit or publication, GCP
Nurse with NMC PIN	Research Nurse, Band 5 to 6	Venepuncture, consent, ward experience, GCP
Nurse awaiting NMC PIN	Clinical Trials Assistant or Research Practitioner	Patient facing experience, GCP, data skills
Pharmacist or allied health professional	Research Practitioner, trials pharmacy or therapy research post	GPhC or HCPC registration where held, protocol knowledge
Science or health graduate	Trials Assistant, Research Administrator or Data Coordinator, Band 3 to 4	Excel, attention to detail, GCP

Moving Up Once You Are In

The step up is about independence. Real NHS role profiles show the pattern clearly.

- **Band 4 to Band 5.** From supporting screening, consent and samples under supervision to managing participants and protocols on your own.
- **Band 5 to Band 6.** From running individual studies to coordinating a portfolio, taking consent for drug trials and supervising others.

Into Industry

If your goal is a Clinical Research Associate role, treat NHS research as the training ground. Monitoring visits, source data verification and query resolution are the daily work of a CRA, and you see every one of them from the site side.

SECTION 7

Asking for Help Well

Most people in research are glad to help. What they cannot do is answer a message that asks for everything at once.

A message that says "can you help me get a job" is honest, and almost impossible to answer. The reader does not know who you are, what you have done or what kind of help you need, so they do the easy thing and say nothing. A good message makes it easy to say yes.

The Shape of a Good Message

- **Who you are, in one line.** Your background and where you are now.
- **Why them.** Their role, their trust or something they wrote. It shows you chose them on purpose.
- **One small, clear ask.** A question they can answer in a few minutes, or a short call at a time that suits them.
- **An easy way out.** People reply more when they do not feel cornered.

TO A RESEARCH NURSE AT A TRUST YOU WANT TO JOIN

Hi Amaka, I am a nurse from Ghana with four years of oncology ward experience, now waiting on my NMC PIN. I saw that your team is recruiting for early phase trials. While I wait, would a Clinical Trials Assistant role be a sensible way in, or would you suggest something else? Thank you, and no worries if you are busy.

TO A CLINICAL RESEARCH ASSOCIATE IN INDUSTRY

Hi Daniel, I am a doctor from India, currently a Clinical Research Practitioner in London. I read your post about moving from NHS research into a contract research organisation. How long were you on the site side before you felt ready to apply? Any pointer would really help.

WORTH DOING

- Read their profile before you write.
- Ask one question, not five.
- Follow up once, after a week.
- Tell them later what happened next.

NOT WORTH DOING

- Sending your CV before anyone asks for it.
- Asking for a referral to a role you have not applied for.
- Copying the same message to 50 people. It shows.
- Chasing more than once.

Where to Find People

Search LinkedIn for Clinical Research Practitioner or Research Nurse plus a trust name, go to NIHR regional research open days and webinars, and ask in professional communities for international clinicians.

SECTION 8

Your First 30 Days

A plan that fits around a busy life. Four weeks, one focus each.

WEEK	FOCUS	ACTIONS
Week 1	Get the Basics	Complete NIHR Good Clinical Practice training online, free. Pick two target roles from section 6.
Week 2	Read Real Adverts	Save five live research adverts and their job packs. Mark every requirement you already meet and every gap.
Week 3	Reach Out	Send three short, specific messages using the shape in section 7. Attend one research open day or webinar.
Week 4	Apply	Write each supporting statement against the person specification, in its own order and words. Submit at least two applications and set alerts for repeat adverts.

Translate Your Experience

Shortlisters look for familiar words. Describe overseas work in NHS terms, name the procedures you have done, and use the advert's own language for GCP, consent and data. A clear example of a time you followed a protocol exactly, or caught an error in records, is worth more than a paragraph about your strengths.

IF YOU ARE A CAREER CO-PILOT MEMBER

The Clinical Research and Trials domain shows live research roles, the skills employers ask for in their job packs, and which employers hold a sponsor licence. Set an alert there and the repeat adverts in section 4 come to you.

SECTION 9

The Checklist

Everything in this guide, on one page. If you are short of time, this is the guide.

- ☐ NIHR Good Clinical Practice training completed.
- ☐ Two target roles chosen to match my background.
- ☐ Five live adverts and job packs saved, named for the role.
- ☐ Every essential criterion matched to one specific thing I have done.
- ☐ Excel and data entry examples ready, not just clinical ones.
- ☐ Busiest research trusts near me identified, and alerts set.
- ☐ Sponsorship position checked in the advert, on the register and with the employer, if it applies to me.
- ☐ Three short, specific messages sent, each with one clear question.
- ☐ One research open day or webinar attended.
- ☐ Overseas experience described in NHS terms.
- ☐ Supporting statements written in the order of the person specification.
- ☐ At least two applications submitted with days to spare.
- ☐ Everyone who helped me thanked, and told what happened next.

About Career Co-Pilot

Career Co-Pilot is a career intelligence platform for healthcare professionals. We read NHS job adverts at scale and turn them into something you can act on: live roles by band and domain, what employers are actually asking for, which organisations hold sponsor licences, trust level intelligence, and tools for building an application from your own real experience.

We were built by a doctor working in the NHS, for people making the moves the system does not help you make: into digital and data, from clinical into management, from overseas into an NHS career, or simply from one band to the next.

You are welcome to share this guide with anyone it would help.

careercopilot.academy

Sources

Every figure in this guide comes from published NHS adverts or a named public source. Nothing here is our opinion presented as a rule.

Career Co-Pilot Data

- Analysis of NHS research and clinical trials adverts, June 2025 to November 2026: 659 roles tracked, employer and band counts, repeat adverts.
- NIHR funded research and training awards by trust, NIHR Open Data, edition of 21 October 2026.
- Requirement counts from 123 job packs at Bands 3 to 6 published in the 12 months to October 2026.
- Sponsorship statements read from live adverts, October 2026.

Public Sources

- NIHR Learn, Good Clinical Practice training, learn.nihr.ac.uk.
- Academy for Healthcare Science, Clinical Research Practitioner accredited register, ahcs.ac.uk.
- Home Office, Register of licensed sponsors: workers, gov.uk.
- NHS Employers, Agenda for Change pay scales 2025/26.

What This Guide Does Not Cover

Industry Clinical Research Associate recruitment in detail, which varies by company. Anything specific to one employer, since local practice varies. And individual immigration advice, which must come from an adviser regulated by the Immigration Advice Authority.

Career Co-Pilot, Getting Into UK Clinical Research. First edition, October 2026. Figures change as adverts do. Where this guide and an employer's own instructions differ, follow the employer.