

Appendix 1A – NIHR ACF Applicant and Recruiter Round 1 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 2021?

The ACF recruitment process is summarised in [Figure 1](#) and the timetable for 2021 recruitment is in [Table 1](#).

NIHR ACF posts are allocated annually to Integrated Academic Training (IAT) partnerships comprising an HEE local office, Higher Education Institute (HEI) and NHS organisation.

The recruitment process is managed by the relevant HEE local office in the IAT partnerships, and advertisements will appear on their websites and Oriel from October 2020. Applicants will need to apply for NIHR ACF posts using the Oriel online application system (<https://www.oriel.nhs.uk/Web/>).

The 2021 NIHR ACF recruitment window runs from October 2020 to 31 March 2022, this is divided into round 1 (October 2020 – January 2021) and re-adverts (February 2021 – 31 March 2022).

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 2020 – January 2021). The interviews are organised by the HEE 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 FAQ2) 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 2021.

If the top ranked applicant at the ACF interview requires clinical benchmarking, ACF applicants that were deemed appointable at interview will also be invited for clinical benchmarking, if required.

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. For example:

- Applicants who hold a DRN in a core specialty, who are applying for an ACF at ST3/4 will be required to attend clinical benchmarking at the higher level. The clinical interview that resulted in the award of the DRN will not be acceptable for clinical benchmarking.
- Applicants who hold an NTN at ST3 in Cardiology, who are applying for an ST3 cardiology post do not need to attend clinical benchmarking as they would have already passed the clinical benchmarking for this post.

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.

If applicants require clinical benchmarking at national clinical assessment/interviews then the HEE local office hosting the ACF post will arrange this.

FAQ 3 - Do 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.

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.

FAQ 4 - The ACF applicant currently holds a clinical NTN at the appropriate level in the GMC specialty associated with the ACF; do they need to be clinically benchmarked?

No. They will have already passed the assessment at the national clinical interview for this GMC specialty and therefore will not have to do so again.

FAQ 5 - The ACF applicant currently holds a Deanery Reference Number (DRN) having previously successfully applied for core level training. Will they 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. core trainee in Anaesthetics, Core Medical Training 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 6 - The ACF applicant holds a National Training Number but not in the same GMC specialty that they are applying for academic training. Will they still need to be clinically benchmarked?

Yes. 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 7 - When will ACF offers be released?

Academic Round 1 offers will be released in January 2021. If the ACF applicant already holds an NTN in the relevant GMC specialty and are the preferred applicant following the ACF interview, then they can be offered the post. If they require clinical benchmarking, then the offer will be conditional upon meeting the required standard in the clinical assessment/interview.

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 8 - What is the process of accepting an ACF post after clinical benchmarking?

If, after confirmation of clinical benchmarking, the applicant accepts the ACF post, they must ensure that they withdraw from all other applications that they have submitted. It is their 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 9 - What happens if the applicant does not reach the required standard at clinical benchmarking?

Their NIHR ACF offer will be withdrawn by the relevant HEE local office.

FAQ 10 - Would the ACF applicant receive a rank at the clinical interview when being clinically benchmarked?

It depends on the option selected in the standard clinical application form. ACF applicants who select:

- **Academic recruitment only** will not receive a rank at the standard clinical assessments/interviews.
- **Academic recruitment and specialty training** will receive a rank at the standard clinical assessments/interviews.

FAQ 11 - What will be the likely delay between the round 1 ACF interview and clinical benchmarking?

It depends on the level of the NIHR ACF post that they are applying for. Round 1 NIHR ACF interviews will take place in November/December 2020.

Standard clinical assessments/interviews for ST1 specialties will take place between January and March 2021.

ST3/4 standard clinical assessment/interviews take place between March and April 2021.

FAQ 12 - The ACF applicant is undertaking higher specialty training but the ACF is advertised at a lower ST entry level; will they have to repeat their clinical training when they start the ACF?

Yes. Applicants at e.g. ST5 are eligible to apply for an ACF advertised at ST3 entry; however, if such applicants were to accept the ST3 ACF post, they are required to repeat their ST3 clinical training.

Appendix 1B - Recruiter and Re-advertisement FAQs

These FAQs are specifically for the HEE Recruiters; however, see FAQs 1 – 12 as these are relevant to both applicant and recruiters on the application process.

FAQ 13 - As applicants now attend a separate clinical interview, can the NIHR ACF interview now 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 14 - Do we need to set up separate clinical benchmarking interviews for those that have applied for NIHR ACF posts?

No. It is expected that applicants will attend the specialty-specific national clinical interviews that take place during the NIHR ACF recruitment window 01 October 2020 – 31 March 2022. However, where specialty specific national clinical interviews are not available (for example ST2 ACF posts) then a local clinical benchmarking process may be set up following consultation and agreement with HEE.

FAQ 15 - How do we manage the offers process?

Offers to NIHR ACF posts should be made in line with the published academic recruitment timeline, through Oriel. Following ACF interviews if the preferred applicant holds an NTN or equivalent in the same GMC specialty, they should be offered the ACF 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.

It is the responsibility of the HEE local office that has been allocated the ACF post to release applicant offers/conditional offers, not the HEE local office responsible for clinical benchmarking.

The applicants will be ranked based on the ACF interviews regardless of their ranking in the national clinical interview. 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.

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.

FAQ 16 - Do applicants receive a rank at clinical interviews when being clinically benchmarked?

It depends on the option selected in the standard clinical application form. ACF applicants who select:

Option 1 - Academic Recruitment only will not receive a rank at the standard clinical assessments/ interviews.

Option 2 - Academic Recruitment and Specialty Training will receive a rank at the standard clinical assessments/interviews.

FAQ 17 - What happens if an applicant, who we make an academic offer to, fails to reach the required standard at clinical benchmarking?

Their conditional academic offer will need to be withdrawn by the HEE local office where the ACF will be based and this will need to be communicated to the applicant.

Under these circumstances, if the second ranked applicant already has the relevant NTN/DRN or has passed clinical benchmarking they may be offered the ACF post. If the post is rejected, then offers should continue through the ranking to the other ACF applicants deemed appointable at the ACF interview and who have been successfully clinically benchmarked (where required).

FAQ 18 - 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.

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 19 - What is the timescale for an applicant accepting an ACF post after clinical benchmarking?

It depends on the ST level of the ACF post that they are applying for. Round 1 NIHR ACF interviews will take place in November/December 2020.

Standard clinical assessments/interviews for ST1 specialties will take place between January and March 2021.

ST3/4 standard clinical assessment/interviews take place between March and April 2021.

FAQ 20 - 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 of recruitment outcomes in Round 1. For example: accepted unconditional offer, conditional offer, or unfilled.

The 2021 NIHR ACF recruitment window runs from October 2020 to 31 March 2022, this is divided into Round 1 (October 2020 – January 2021) and re-adverts (February 2021 – March 2022).

Recruitment outcomes, specialty change requests, and general queries should be sent to 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 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 2021 allocated NIHR ACFs is 31 March 2022. Where possible, recruitment to unfilled posts should continue until the post is filled. If the post is unfilled on 31 March 2022 then the NIHR ACF post will have expired and will be withdrawn from the IAT partnership's allocation.

FAQ 21 - How can applicants for re-advertised ACF posts attend clinical benchmarking?

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](#).

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 2022), assuming the applicants have already been or scheduled to be clinically benchmarked in the current round or already hold an appropriate NTN/DRN.

Successful applicants at the ACF interview should be notified of their offers as soon as possible. If successful applicants at the ACF interviews require clinical benchmarking then this should be coordinated through Health Education England (HEE) local offices and the lead

recruiter for the related specialty as soon as possible to ensure placement at the national clinical training interviews, as per Round 1.

FAQ 22 - What is the process if the ACF applicant has 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 2021 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.

FAQ 23 - If an applicant applied for an ACF in Round 1 and failed clinical benchmarking can they 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.

FAQ 24 - What happens if national clinical training interviews are unavailable for clinical benchmarking?

Where standard clinical training interviews are unavailable then only the following applicants will be eligible for re-advertised ACF posts:

- applicants that hold an appropriate NTN/DRN
- applicants that are scheduled to be clinically benchmarked in the current round
- applicants that have been successfully clinically benchmarked in the current round.

FAQ 25 - When are the national clinical training interview windows for clinical benchmarking?

National clinical interview windows for specialty training and clinical benchmarking:

Round 1 - CT1/ST1 and Run-Through	04 January 2021 - 05 March 2021
Round 1 - CT1/ST1 Re-adverts	06 April 2021 - 23 April 2021
Round 2 - ST3/ST4+ Recruitment	01 March 2021 - 21 April 2021
Round 2 - ST3/ST4+ Re-adverts	31 August 2021 - 08 October 2021

FAQ 26 - 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 2022. 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 2021 NIHR ACF recruitment window

- they have already been successfully clinically benchmarked in the 2021 NIHR ACF recruitment window.

FAQ 27 - 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 2021 ACF recruitment opened) then the applicant will not require further clinical benchmarking. However, HEE 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 HEE local offices will be responsible for ascertaining if they require clinical benchmarking for that specialty. If the applicant has previously been deemed appointable and may even have been offered a post, they must inform the HEE local offices and provide evidence. They will not be required to undertake further clinical benchmarking.