

Public involvement in peer reviewing research proposals

Guidelines for commissioners

Introduction

This is one of a series of seven guidelines produced by INVOLVE providing information about public involvement in research commissioning. For a list of the guidelines available, see the back cover.

This guideline is written for commissioners interested in involving the public in peer reviewing research proposals. Other guidelines in this series are for members of the public and researchers.

If you would like to comment on anything included in this guideline or require further information, please get in touch with INVOLVE.

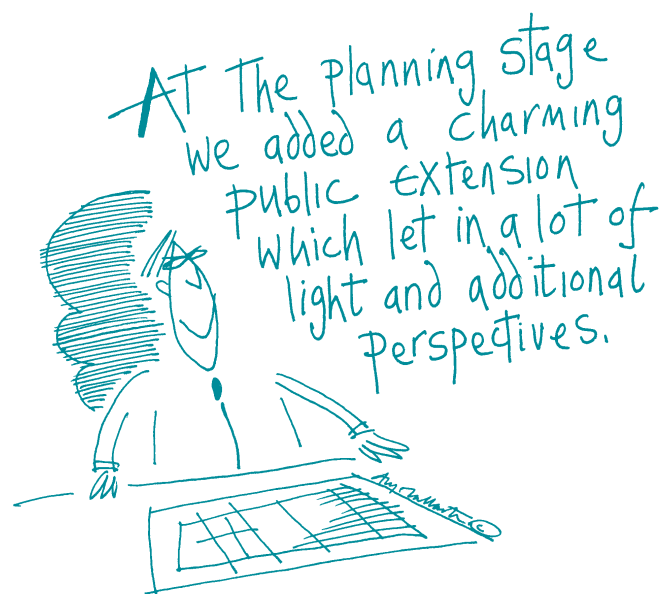
INVOLVE is a national advisory group funded by the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR). We aim to promote public involvement in NHS, public health and social care research.

We produce a range of publications, including all the guidelines in this series, which are free and can be ordered or downloaded from our website www.invo.org.uk. Please contact INVOLVE if you would like any of our publications sent to you - see the back cover for contact details. We also have a research database on our website, with examples of public involvement in research.

If you need a copy of this guideline in another format please contact us.

Contents

	Page
1. What does public involvement in research mean?	3
2. Why involve the public in peer review?	3
3. How to identify members of the public to undertake peer review	4
4. Practical issues to consider	5
Time	
Clarity	
Support	
Accessibility	
Payment	
Feedback	
5. Key references and text notes	10
6. Acknowledgements	11



1. What does public involvement in research mean?

When talking about 'the public' in this context INVOLVE means:

- patients and potential patients
- people who use health and social services
- informal (unpaid) carers
- parents/guardians
- disabled people
- members of the public who are potential recipients of health promotion programmes, public health programmes, and social service interventions
- groups asking for research because they believe they have been exposed to potentially harmful substances or products (e.g. pesticides or asbestos)
- organisations that represent people who use services.

Other organisations have different definitions of this term.

Involvement in research refers to **active** involvement between people who use services, carers and researchers, rather than the use of people as participants in research (or as research 'subjects'). Many people describe involvement as doing research **with** or **by** people who use services rather than **to**, **about** or **for** them [1, 2].

2. Why involve the public in peer review?

INVOLVE believes that involving members of the public can lead to research that is:

- more relevant to people's needs and concerns
- more reliable
- more likely to be used.

Also, if research reflects the needs and views of the public, it is more likely to produce results that can be used to improve health and social care services.

“ We involve the public hopefully to improve the quality of commissioned research. We ask members of the public to consider proposals in the light of their understanding of the perspectives of patients or service users. For example, failure to recruit participants is a common problem for research projects. Having the patients'/service users' insight at an early stage might be able to highlight reasons why a proposed method is unlikely to attract participants. ”
(Research commissioner)

Members of the public may be able to offer the following contribution to the peer review process:

- knowledge and experience of a particular condition or service relevant to the research topic
- a public perspective
- experience of being a research participant
- advice on the appropriateness of the public involvement proposed in research grant applications

- clarifying underlying research questions
- greater insight into the feasibility of the research
- whether the research addresses questions of importance to the public.

The National Forensic Mental Health Research and Development Programme is committed to the involvement of service users in all aspects of the research commissioning process. One of the reasons they give is that they believe users provide a fresh, interested look at the research and may bring new thoughts and ideas to the research process. www.nfmhp.org.uk/user.htm

Members of the public cannot be representative of everyone who uses a particular service, but they can offer their own perspective, and often that of other people.

3. How to identify members of the public to undertake peer review

This is not straightforward and requires time and adequate resources.

You may need to consider contacting and developing relationships with one or more of the following:

- voluntary organisations relevant to the research topic(s) under consideration
- organisations that represent or are controlled and run by people who use services
- individuals with a specific experience or from a particular group.

Some potential ways of finding people to get involved include:

- Asking colleagues with experience of public involvement.
- Via the internet which has a wide range of sites set up to provide support and information links for service users and carers [3].
- Making direct approaches to other organisations (relevant to the research topic), for example community groups, carer support groups, GP surgeries and pharmacies.

“ We found members of the public mostly through direct contact with people or organisations already known to our programme or through contacting relevant organisations representing service users found via searching the web. ”
(Research commissioner)

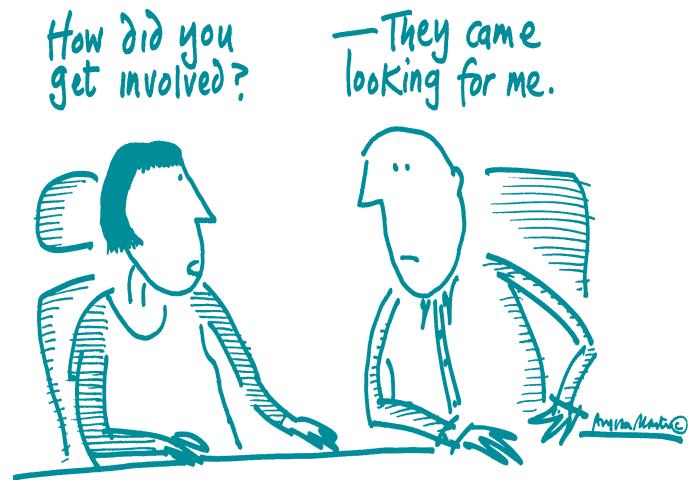
- Advertising - for example using local media, local businesses, consumer or community groups. See also INVOLVE's website notice board. www.invo.org.uk/Noticeboard.asp

“ We found our service users by a variety of means - word of mouth, by contacting relevant charities and organisations - sometimes people just contact you and it is hard to know how they found out about possible involvement. ”
(Research commissioner)

You will also have to think about the different sections of the public who might have an interest in peer reviewing the research proposal(s).

For example:

- older people
- young people
- black and minority ethnic groups
- people with learning difficulties
- people from different types of communities (for example rural or urban) or from different parts of the country [4].



4. Practical issues to consider

To support public involvement in the peer review process the following are some practical issues to consider.

Time

It is important to recognise that achieving public involvement in peer review may take additional time.

- The time needed to both plan and implement a public involvement strategy for the peer review process.
- Allow time to get to know people and organisations, in order to understand the issues that are important to them and to talk through the process so members of the public understand what is needed.
- The amount of time you will need to allow for finding members of the public. This may involve time to make the initial contact with a number of organisations and then the time for those organisations to identify potential peer reviewers.
- Consider whether the timescale allowed for the peer review is realistic for members of the public.
- Provide reviewers with an indication of the time it might take them to peer review.

“ Sometimes we fail to get public peer review comments because the organisations we approach decline the invitation to participate. This can be for a variety of reasons. For example: people are too busy and our priority is not their priority; they do not feel able to comment on research proposals; our deadlines are too short; they are going on holiday during the crucial period; they get too many requests like this to feel able to help anymore. ”
(Research commissioner)

Clarity

When involving members of the public it is important to explain why and when you use peer review in the commissioning process.

- Provide a definition of peer review.

INVOLVE's definition of peer review is: Peer reviewing is where a research proposal or a report of research is read and commented on by people with similar interests and expertise to those who wrote the proposal or report. Peer reviewers might be members of the public, researchers, or other professionals. Peer review helps to check the quality of a report or research proposal.

Members of the public who act as peer reviewers may choose to comment on:

- whether the research addresses an important and relevant question
- the methods used by researchers
- the quality of public involvement in the research.

- Explain that you ask a range of peer reviewers to review research proposals. For example economists, researchers, clinicians and statisticians.
- Explain why you are asking members of the public to peer review, the benefits of their involvement and their possible influence on the process.
- Provide explanations of specialist or technical language that might be used in the research proposals.
- Provide information on the nature of the task and the experience and skills you are looking for e.g. in a description of the role and person specification in lay language.

Below is an example of the experience and skills that the National Institute for Health Research Health Technology Assessment programme has identified in their person specification for a member of the public reviewing research proposals.

Factor	Essential attributes	Desirable attributes
Experience	Special understanding of particular aspects of health. Representing rights and interests of members of the public or a willingness to learn.	Having good links through public/ service user networks/associations/ organisations/societies/groups.
Special skills	Willingness to familiarise yourself with medical and research language.	To keep up to date with current public involvement issues via public/service user networks/media.

- Provide specific information on what you are asking members of the public to do, ensuring that you make it clear that the main reason you are inviting them to peer review is to provide a public perspective. The information may include:
 - i) which aspects of the research you are inviting them to comment on
 - ii) specific issues that you might want them to focus their comments on. For example:
 - how relevant or important the research is to them
 - whether the research is likely to contribute something new or significant
 - whether the research offers value for money
 - any ethical issues
 - the quality of the research
 - whether the methods would be appropriate and acceptable to the participants
 - the skills and experience of the researchers
 - how the research could be improved
 - whether there is active public involvement in the research
 - judgements on the quality and appropriateness of the plans for public involvement
 - the resources to be provided to support those involved in the project
 - iii) relative merits of individual applications within a batch.
- Think about the different ways you could involve members of the public in peer review. Below is an example of how a commissioner has asked members of the public to peer review.

The National Forensic Mental Health Research and Development Programme has facilitated groups of service users to peer review research proposals in a group. Users have come up with positive ideas about how research projects might be improved.

- Provide and clarify details about the peer review process, including:
 - i) the format required to carry out the peer review. For example:
 - will people be required to give written or verbal feedback on the proposals?
 - will members of the public be required to rank or score the proposals?

- ii) confidentiality
 - explaining what this means and whether the proposals can be discussed with other people; you may want to encourage members of the public to discuss their views with others
 - whether their identities will be available to researchers
 - iii) the outcome of the process.
- Explain to other stakeholders why you are involving the public in the peer review process.

“ We included a section on the assessment form specifically aimed at public reviewers rather than the clinical or methodological referees; we produced written guidelines for public reviewers (though they are themselves quite lengthy and potentially off-putting so we do need to review them and the assessment form itself); we advise public reviewers that we will accept their feedback in any format they feel comfortable with if they do not wish to use our standard assessment form.”
(Research commissioner)

Support

The following are some ways that you might consider providing support.

- Providing training or information on where training and support is available.
 - i) The Cochrane Consumer Network provides training on critical appraisal skills for consumers and a checklist for assessing Cochrane protocols
www.cochrane.org/consumers/homepage.htm
 - ii) The Health Technology Assessment programme provides detailed guidance for members of the public interested in peer review and ideas on how to proceed [5, 6].
- Providing a glossary of terms and a ‘plain English’ summary of the research.
- Providing a mentor e.g. a member of the public who has experience of peer reviewing research proposals and who would be prepared to answer questions and help a person new to peer reviewing.
- Providing a contact name, telephone number, email and address of the person who can help with any queries about the peer review process.

Accessibility

It is important that the information provided to members of the public is clear and accessible. This includes both verbal explanations and written information.

- Request grant applicants submit a ‘plain English’ summary of the proposed research. It should be written in lay terms, avoid the use of jargon and explain any technical terms that have to be included.

- Ask how best to meet people's specific accessibility needs. For example, people with visual impairments, physical disabilities, learning difficulties, chronic illness.

Payment

It is important that the public know whether or not they will be paid for their involvement prior to becoming involved.

Guidance that has been agreed with the Department of Health for the National Institute for Health Research Programmes on payment to the public for peer review is as follows [7]:



£50 - for reviews of short documents such as research briefs and vignettes or lay summaries of reports

£100 - for reviews of larger amounts of information. For example reviewing several grant applications, or medium length reports (50 - 200 pages)

£200 - for reviews of large reports or documents. For example reviewing long reports (over 200 pages).

It is good practice to make payments easy and quick to claim, however payment to members of the public for public involvement in research is a complex issue. The potential impact payments may have on a person's Social Security benefits or tax position can be confusing. It is important that members of the public involved need to be fully informed and know where to get further advice on this [8, 9, 10].

Feedback

It is good practice to provide feedback on peer reviewers' comments.

- Members of the public often like to know the following:
 - whether or not their comments were helpful
 - what will happen to their comments
 - whether their comments had any influence on the research process
 - whether there were differences between the peer reviewers' comments
 - if there were differences, what the differences were between their comments and the other reviewers
 - whether you will feedback the outcome of the process.

“ We circulate all peer reviewer comments to fellow peer reviewers so that they can see what others have said. Hopefully this is helpful as a learning experience and interesting to know how one's comments compare; we let all reviewers know the commissioning decisions. ”
(Research commissioner)

- You may also find it helpful to have feedback from members of the public on their experience of carrying out the peer review. They may help identify areas where positive changes could be made to the process.

5. Key references and text notes

All INVOLVE publications are available on our website www.invo.org.uk.

Key references

INVOLVE. (2003) Report of commissioning workshop. INVOLVE.

Hanley B et al. (2004) Involving the public in NHS, public health, and social care research: Briefing notes for researchers. (second edition) INVOLVE.

Royle J, Steel R, Hanley B, Bradburn J. (2001) Getting involved in research: a guide for consumers. INVOLVE. (**Note:** this is being rewritten and will be replaced by an information pack in January 2007.)

The information for this guideline has also been drawn from the following:

- Hanley B for the Toronto Seminar Group. (2005) Research as empowerment? Report of a series of seminars organised by the Toronto Group. Seminar 2: Involving service users in peer review. Joseph Rowntree Foundation. www.jrf.org.uk - see Bookshop.
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Text notes

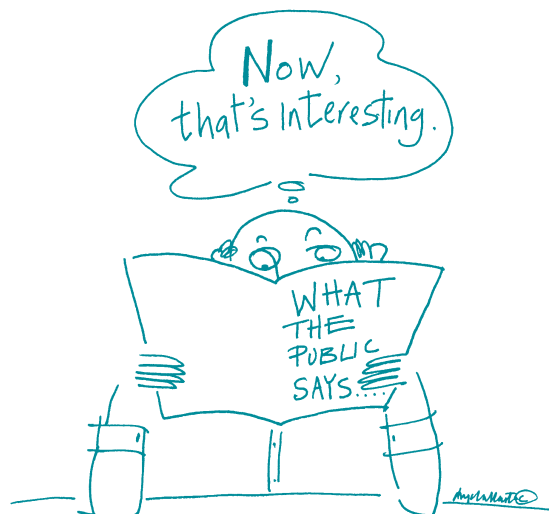
1. SURGE (Service Users Research Group England) (2005) Guidance for good practice: service user involvement in the UK mental health research network, UK Mental Health Research Network www.mhrn.info - see Service User Involvement.
2. Hanley B et al. (2004) Involving the public in NHS, public health, and social care research: Briefing notes for researchers. (second edition) INVOLVE.

3. Internet sites try: www.patient.co.uk www.findsupport.co.uk www.ukself-help.org.uk
www.mywavelength.com www.synergy-health.co.uk www.volresource.org.uk
4. Steel R. (2004) Involving marginalised and vulnerable people in research: a consultation document. (2nd revision) INVOLVE.
5. Guidelines for consumers interested in peer-reviewing research - 1
An introduction to peer-reviewing Health Technology Assessment (HTA) research proposals and reports. www.hta.ac.uk - see Involving the Public.
6. Guidelines for consumers peer-reviewing research - 2
Ideas to help consumers peer-reviewing Health Technology Assessment (HTA) programme research proposals and reports. www.hta.ac.uk - see Involving the Public.
7. INVOLVE. (2006) Guidance that has been agreed with the Department of Health on payments rates to members of the public for attendance at committee meetings and carrying out peer review. INVOLVE.
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10. Turner M and Beresford P. (2005) Contributing on equal terms: service user involvement and the benefits system. Social Care Institute for Excellence www.scie.org.uk - see SCIE's Resources and Publications.

6. Acknowledgements

This guideline is an INVOLVE publication written by Jane Royle and Maryrose Tarpey at the INVOLVE Support Unit. Special thanks to Sarah Buckland and to the members of the public, researchers and commissioners who helped in writing this guideline.

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The guidelines in this series are:

P1 Getting involved in research grant applications: Guidelines for members of the public

P2 Peer reviewing research proposals: Guidelines for members of the public

P3 Being a member of a commissioning board: Guidelines for members of the public

C1 Public involvement in research grant applications: Guidelines for commissioners

C2 Public involvement in peer reviewing research proposals: Guidelines for commissioners

C3 Public involvement on commissioning boards: Guidelines for commissioners

R1 Public involvement in research grant applications: Guidelines for researchers

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