

Budgeting for involvement

By Thomas Kabir and Lucy Simons

“There are some things money can’t buy... for everything else there’s [...]” This is an advertising slogan for a well-known credit card company.

Involving the public in research costs money. But there isn’t much guidance available about how to budget for the costs of involving people in research.

Please note that benefits guidance and tax legislation been subject to considerable change/reinterpretation since 2019. Any INVOLVE documents referring to the payment of involvement fees may now be out of date and are pending a review during 2020. INVOLVE’s guidance should not be substituted for professional advice, and INVOLVE accepts no liability for decisions or actions taken as a result of its guidance. You are always recommended to take your own tax, finance or legal advice.

Both INVOLVE and the Mental Health Research Network (MHRN) have seen what happens when involvement hasn’t been properly budgeted for:

- there’s a risk the involvement doesn’t happen at all
- the involvement goes ahead but financial support is needed from someone else (refer back to the first sentence of this article ...)
- the involvement goes ahead but people are left out of pocket.

The third outcome can be particularly problematic. A carer involved in the MHRN recently said: “[I] would love to be part of the ... group, but the cost of the travel was equivalent to a bag of food shopping and for someone on benefits or low income

the decision was a no brainer.”

INVOLVE and the MHRN have teamed up to produce a new resource that will help researchers, finance managers or anyone else who needs to budget for the costs of involving the public in research studies. It can be used for everything from putting together an involvement budget for an entire study, to working out how much it will cost to run a one-off focus group. This resource is available online at www.invo.org.uk/resource-centre/involvement-cost-calculator

The first part of the resource is a written guide entitled “Budgeting for involvement: practical advice on budgeting for actively involving the public in research studies”.

The guide:

- provides practical guidance on **what costs** are associated with involvement in research
- includes a step-by-step process for **planning** involvement, identifying the **associated costs** and considering **where** in the research cycle involvement costs might occur
- presents several **examples** of research projects with well-developed budgets for involvement work
- contains tips, and links to useful websites and references.

The second part of the resource is an online ‘involvement cost calculator’. This calculator can be used to work out a budget for involvement work. Costs are grouped into five categories:

- payment and reward
- expenses
- involvement activity costs (that is costs associated with a specific activity such as running a focus group)
- involvement staffing (that is costs of staff who carry out involvement work)
- other costs.

The results can be downloaded so that you can easily 'cut and paste' into a document such as a funding application.

So who helped us do this? We asked Julia Cartwright, co-author of the "Public Involvement Toolkit" to write the guide to budgeting for involvement.

We established a project advisory group made up of colleagues from research funders, Involving People, the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) Research Design Services, the NIHR Clinical Research Networks (of which the MHRN is one), members of the public, and of course researchers to help us with this work. The group provided us with an outstanding level of support and advice throughout. We are deeply thankful to them.

The budgeting resource is just that: **a resource**. The resource won't give researchers everything that they need to know in order to put together an involvement budget. It can't as most research studies are unique and hence so are its budgets. But it is a start. And perhaps it will help people to be able to put away their credit cards for good. This has to be good news for everyone.