

Plain English summaries in National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) funded research

By Helen Hayes

INVOLVE has been leading on work with the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) Programmes, the Research Design Service (RDS) and others to review plain English summaries in NIHR funding applications. The final stages of this work are now complete and from 14 May 2014 a good quality plain English summary, submitted as part of the NIHR standard application form, will be a requirement of NIHR funding.

The NIHR is committed to making sure that each funded research study has a clear and concise plain English summary. It is important that this information is easy to read and understand and the NIHR will be encouraging researchers to write better plain English summaries.

What is a good quality plain English summary?

It is a clear, easy to read summary that is as jargon free as possible. It provides an overview of the whole of the research study that readers can understand the first time they read it.

Why is it important?

A plain English summary is used in the following ways:

- reviewers use this summary to inform their review of funding applications

- summaries of funded research will be made publicly available on NIHR and other research websites.

If it is felt that a plain English summary is not clear and of a good quality then the researchers may be required to amend the summary prior to final funding approval.

A good quality summary helps:

- those carrying out the review (reviewers, board and panel members) to have a better understanding of the research proposal
- engage and interest others about the research such as members of the public, health professionals, policy makers and the media
- NIHR Programmes and others to publicise the research
- researchers to have a clear explanation of the research that they can then adapt for different audiences.

What information to include?

When writing a summary consider including the following information where appropriate:

- aim(s) of the research
- background to the research
- design and methods used
- patient and public involvement
- dissemination.

How to write one

There are a few simple rules for writing in plain English:

- avoid wherever possible using jargon, abbreviations and technical terms – if you have to use them provide a clear explanation
- avoid complicated English or uncommon words

- use active not passive phrases, for example say 'we will do it' rather than 'it will be done by us'
- keep sentences short
- think about the order and structure
- break up the text, for example use bullet lists
- ask patients / carers / colleagues to read a draft to find out if anything is unclear.

How is it assessed?

The summary will be assessed by NIHR reviewers and board and panel members who will comment on the summary as part of the review process. If it is not considered to be of a good quality then the researchers will be advised through the current feedback processes.

Where to get further information?

For examples and tips visit the NIHR 'make it clear' web page to find out more: www.involve.nihr.ac.uk/makeitclear

For further support and advice on writing a plain English summary, please contact your local NIHR Research Design Service (RDS) where applicable: www.rds.nihr.ac.uk/

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"If the plain English summary is well written, somehow the whole application seems easier to assess. It should provide a clear idea of what the research is about."

Public reviewer

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