

Training case study eight

INVOLVE shared learning groups for public involvement

Summary

The number of people who are involved with promoting and supporting public involvement in research organisations has grown in recent years. As this is often one or two people within an organisation, sometimes working part-time, they can benefit from having specific opportunities to share experiences with others in similar roles and from structured approaches to learn from each other.

INVOLVE facilitates three shared learning groups to bring people together across different parts of the National Institute of Health Research. Each shared learning group has a particular focus – public involvement in (i) research commissioning, (ii) research design and (iii) translating research evidence into practice.

What is the purpose of this support approach?

A shared learning group is a way to enable people to share experiences, knowledge and ideas, learn about public involvement and provide a peer support network.

The aims (see [sample terms of reference](#)) of the INVOLVE shared learning groups are to:

- facilitate a shared understanding of public involvement in research
- discuss and address issues of common concern
- exchange ideas, strengthen skills and share examples of good (and not so good!) practice
- provide peer support within a safe environment.

Criteria are set for membership with new members being able to join at any point. For each group, the main criterion is simply to have a role in promoting and supporting public involvement in the relevant organisation. In the INVOLVE groups, this usually refers to staff members, but it can also include patients/members of the public. There are around 20 members in each INVOLVE group.

The approach aims to develop a network or community of people with a common interest. A structured element, for example meetings can initiate this with other mechanisms developing alongside as members get to know each other and develop relationships independently.

What does the support involve?

A key feature of the approach is planned meetings of group members. The INVOLVE groups have three full-day meetings each year. This format suits these groups as members are based across England – travel for a periodic full-day meeting is more efficient than for more frequent shorter meetings.

The meetings are facilitated by INVOLVE staff and include:

- discussion of topics chosen by group members and driven by their current priorities, for example training and support, evidence of impact and diversity
- time for updating each other on recent work and developments
- small group discussions to ‘problem-solve’ particular issues
- talk or presentations from others (when appropriate).

Group members may also decide to take forward specific projects. Members in the research commissioning shared learning group have worked together to produce a [tips sheet](#) for recruiting public contributors.

The main resources required for each shared learning group

include:

- venue to hold the meetings – this may be provided by member organisations
- catering – especially if whole day meetings
- time and travel for participants
- staff time from the facilitating organisation.

Who developed this approach?

This approach has evolved over time after a regular meeting for the public involvement leads for research commissioning was established in 1999. INVOLVE has learnt from other approaches such as the [User involvement in voluntary organisations – Shared Learning Group](#) and developed the approach in response to members' feedback.

When is this support most useful/effective?

This approach is most useful when there is a group of people with a shared interest who may not have naturally occurring opportunities to develop their role and work through peer learning. In these examples, providing a forum for public involvement leads across a set of organisations with similar objectives has been a key feature. This has helped to increase people's capacity and capability for their role/work and reduced duplication of effort as well as a sense of isolation.

This model also suits people who are interested in working with others and have the ability to travel to meetings.

Have you evaluated this approach?

An [internal review](#) of the Research Design Service Involvement Forum was carried out in 2012. A formal evaluation of the other INVOLVE groups has not been carried out but enthusiasm for attending the meetings is high, suggesting that members value them.

Learning points

- Activity between meetings by members of the groups might be low – try not to see this as an indicator that members do not value the group, they are probably just busy in their own roles/lives.
- Continuity of the person facilitating the group is helpful – this enables a ‘memory’ for the group (especially with changing membership), capitalising on the knowledge generated by the group and building on work carried out previously.
- Be realistic about the time needed for organising and facilitating meetings – INVOLVE estimates at least 15 days of staff time per year for a group that meets three times.

Contact for more information:

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Another example is the [User Involvement in Voluntary Organisations – Shared Learning Group](#). This group aims to encourage shared learning about service user and/or carer involvement between voluntary sector organisations working within the UK. It is facilitated by Bec Hanley of [TwoCan Associates](#).

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