

## Peer reviewing research proposals

# Guidelines for members of the public

### 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 members of the public interested in getting involved in peer review.**

Numbers in brackets [ ] are text notes and give additional information, see section 8, page 10.

Words in **green bold** are explained in the Glossary in section 9, page 11.

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](http://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.

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# 1. What is peer review?

Peer reviewing is the stage in the **commissioning** process 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.

# 2. Why should I be interested in getting involved?

Public involvement in peer review helps to ensure that research is relevant and important to people who use it. As a member of the public you will be asked to comment on the research from your perspective or the perspective of members of the public more generally.

Your input would be valuable to the peer review process as you would be able to offer:

- knowledge and experience of a particular condition or service relevant to the research topic
- a public perspective
- views about the best ways to involve other users and carers in research.

The benefits for you personally may include:

- influencing what research is funded
- opportunities for personal development including learning new skills
- getting involved in interesting work and increasing your knowledge about a topic.

The comments **commissioners** receive help them to decide which **research grant application(s)** to fund [1]. Commissioners and other reviewers may not have the experience and knowledge that members of the public can bring and therefore your input is especially valued.



### 3. How do I get involved?

If you are interested in peer reviewing then you could contact the research commissioners or funders. Some research commissioners and funders commission a range of topics e.g. the **Social Care Institute for Excellence** [www.scie.org.uk](http://www.scie.org.uk), others will commission research in a specific area e.g. Alzheimer's Society or Asthma UK.

If you are interested in getting involved with the Research Programmes funded by the **National Institute for Health Research**, their contact details can be found on the website [www.nihr.ac.uk](http://www.nihr.ac.uk) - see Programmes.

For example, if you are interested in peer reviewing for the **Health Technology Assessment programme** [www.hta.ac.uk](http://www.hta.ac.uk), or the **Central Commissioning Facility** [www.nihr-ccf.org.uk](http://www.nihr-ccf.org.uk), the public involvement pages have information on how you can volunteer your services.

### 4. What do I need to know?

What is important is your experience as a member of the public and/or as a user of health and social care. You do not need any formal qualifications to be a peer reviewer or to have knowledge of research.

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 consumer networks/associations/organisations/societies/groups.
Special skills	Willingness to familiarise yourself with medical and research language.	To keep up to date with current consumer issues via consumer networks and media.

### 5. How will I be involved?

#### 5.1 How will I be asked to carry out the peer review?

There is no one process for carrying out peer review. Most research commissioners provide forms to complete and some instructions for reviewers. Usually you will carry out the peer review

on your own at home (or work). However, you may be asked to peer review with other people.

Below are some examples of how commissioners ask members of the public to peer review.

- Some projects funded by the Department of Health's **Policy Research Programme** ask the peer reviewers to look at quality, value for money, policy/practice relevance, ethical conduct, skills and experience of researchers. They also look at user and carer involvement in the research process. Members of the public are asked to comment on any or all aspects of the research.
- The **National Forensic Mental Health Research and Development Programme** has facilitated group discussions amongst service users on peer review. Users have come up with positive ideas about how research projects might be improved. [www.nfmhp.org.uk](http://www.nfmhp.org.uk)

## 5.2 What will I be asked to consider when peer reviewing research proposals?

Commissioners will ask you to comment on the research proposal. You do not have to comment on all aspects of a proposal.

You may be asked to make specific comments on the proposal, for example:

- whether the research question is important to you/the people you represent
- whether you feel the methods would be appropriate and acceptable to the participants
- safeguarding the public interest
- the quality of the research
- how relevant the research is to members of the public
- whether the research is likely to contribute something new or significant
- ethical issues
- whether the study is designed well
- how the research could be improved
- whether the plans for public involvement are appropriate and organised to a high standard
- the skills and experience of the researchers
- whether the research offers value for money
- potential improvement to patients quality of life
- economic costs of participation - whether the appropriate costs of involving members of the public have been outlined; for example payment for their time and expenses (including carer costs where appropriate).



You may be asked to rank or score the proposals.

### 5.3 What do I do if I don't understand something I've been asked to review?

If you do not understand something, contact the commissioner for further information. You could request a 'plain English' summary, if this has not already been provided.

### 5.4 How long does it take?

Peer reviewing can involve a lot of work. Obviously the amount of time will vary depending on the number of research proposals you have to review. Members of the public who were asked to peer review three research proposals for INVOLVE, took between eight and ten hours.

### 5.5 What do peer review comments look like?

Below are some examples of peer review comments made by members of the public.

“ The project summary and detailed description of the work emphasises the central role of the members of the public in this project and states clearly how they will be involved. ”

“ This research appears to be well planned and thorough. All research questions are addressed. There is a lack of information on recruitment and how exactly they will gain the co-operation of the people involved in the projects. ”



### 5.6 How should I write my comments?

The commissioner is likely to provide you with some instructions. Peer reviewers should be as objective, constructive, conscientious and systematic as possible [2]. You should feel comfortable being as honest and critical as you like, whilst remembering that your comments will be fed back to the researchers.

“ One difficulty has been in trying to get people to be constructive rather than just negative. Everyone knows what they don't like and it is easy to say that something isn't right but it is often harder to find out what it would take to make it acceptable. ”  
(Research commissioner)

## 5.7 How much time will I be given to complete the task?

This can vary, again depending on the task. You may be given a few weeks to read and comment on the proposals, but often you will be given less time.

“ Commissioners are under pressure to conduct their business as quickly as possible so our timescales can be quite short and absolute, making it difficult for some members of the public to engage with. ”  
(Research commissioner)

## 5.8 What happens if I cannot meet the deadline?

If you cannot meet the deadline it is very important to tell the commissioner as soon as possible so that they can either ask another reviewer, or discuss the deadline with you.

Research commissioning has to work to tight deadlines. The meetings at which the peer review comments are discussed are often set a long way in advance. If you miss the deadline your comments may not be able to be used.

## 5.9 Will the names of the authors/research team be shown?

Researchers usually have to complete a **curriculum vitae** (CV), which is part of the research application.

## 5.10 Will the research team know who I am?

Most organisations have a system where the research applicants receive the peer reviewer's comments but not their names. Some will have a peer review form which will have a section for you to put comments that you do not want the applicants to see. Others will have 'open peer review' so authors will know who the peer reviewers are.

Some commissioners publish a list of the peer reviewers who have reviewed for the programme each year, without attributing names to the particular research proposals. The commissioners should tell you whether or not your details will be given to the researchers or publicised in any way.

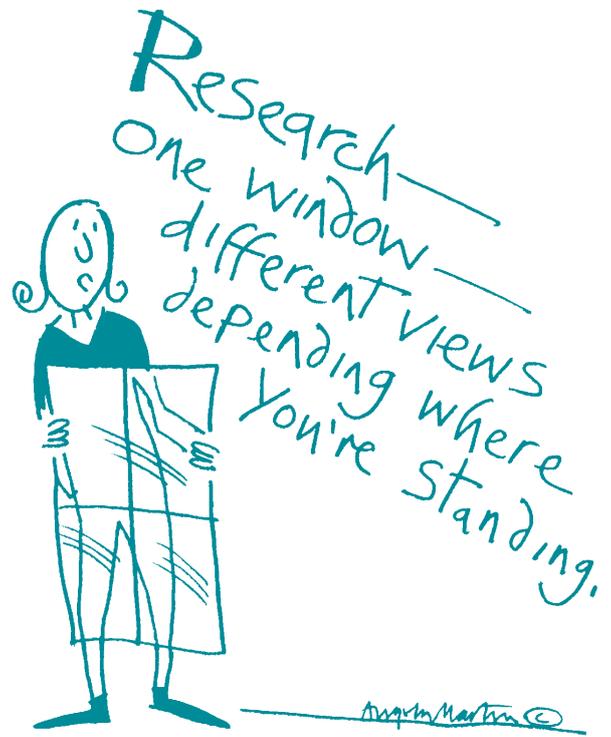
## 5.11 What will happen to my comments?

The commissioners will pull together all the peer reviewers' comments and circulate them to the researchers as well as to members of the **commissioning board** [3]. All comments will be taken into consideration when the commissioning board is deciding whether or not to fund the research.

## 5.12 What should I do if I think I may have an interest that would influence or affect the way I made comments on the research?

You may have a conflict of interest with the task that you have been asked to complete. For example, personal or professional ties to the researchers, financial interests in the research, or strongly held personal, political or religious beliefs that might affect your ability to comment on a particular topic.

If you feel you have a conflict of interest then you should talk to the commissioners about it. It may mean that you do not review this particular proposal.



## 5.13 Can I discuss this work with others?

The proposal/s you have been asked to peer review will be confidential. You may be asked to review the research proposals with others. However you are more likely to be asked to review the research proposals on your own. Check with the person who is asking you to peer review if you want to discuss your response with others.

## 5.14 What should I do with the research proposals after I have reviewed them?

As the documentation is confidential the commissioners will provide you with information about what to do with the research proposals after you have reviewed them. You may be asked to return them in a pre-paid envelope. If you do not receive instructions on what to do with the papers, ask the commissioners.

## 5.15 Will I get personal feedback on my comments?

Procedures vary. In general, peer reviewers do not receive specific feedback on their comments. If you think it would be helpful, you could ask the commissioners for some feedback on your comments. Some research commissioners send peer reviewers each other's comments. This can provide useful feedback. Most commissioners will let you know the decision on whether or not the research proposals you have reviewed will be funded.

## 5.16 Will I have the opportunity to feedback my experience of peer reviewing?

Let the commissioners know if you would like to give feedback on your experience of involvement as this may help them to identify and make positive changes to their processes.

## 6. Will I be paid?

Some organisations such as NHS Trusts, Primary Care Trusts and voluntary organisations are not able to offer payment or may offer different amounts.

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 [4]:

**£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).

Payment for involvement in research can be complicated. It can affect your entitlement to Social Security benefits or change your tax position. If you are offered payment it is important that you check what effect this might have on your financial situation. It is always worth getting further information on this [5, 6, 7].

## 7. Where can I get further support and training?

Becoming a good peer reviewer takes time and practice, and finding help on how to review a research proposal can be difficult. If you need help and support then talk to the person asking you to carry out the review.

The **Cochrane Consumer Network** provides training on assessing and interpreting evidence (critical appraisal skills) for members of the public (and a checklist for assessing **Cochrane protocols**). [www.cochrane.org/consumers/homepage.htm](http://www.cochrane.org/consumers/homepage.htm)

The Health Technology Assessment programme provides detailed guidance for members of the public interested in peer review and ideas on how to do it [8, 9].

The Alzheimer's Society consumer network provides induction training for new recruits to their network. It also sends every member a manual on consumer involvement in all aspects of the research. The information on peer review includes examples of forms, comments and a glossary. [www.alzheimers.org.uk](http://www.alzheimers.org.uk)



## 8. Key reference and text notes

All INVOLVE publications are available on our website [www.invo.org.uk](http://www.invo.org.uk).

### Key reference

For more information about active public involvement in all aspects of the research process see:

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:

- INVOLVE (2003) Report of commissioning workshop. INVOLVE.
- A meeting with members of the public who shared their experiences of peer reviewing, December 2003.
- 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](http://www.jrf.org.uk) - see Bookshop.
- Sense About Science. (2004) Peer Review and the acceptance of new scientific ideas. Discussion paper from a Working Paper on equipping the public with an understanding of peer review. [www.senseaboutscience.org.uk](http://www.senseaboutscience.org.uk) - see Peer Review.
- Smith E, Ross F, Donovan S, Manthorpe G, Brearley S, Sitzia J, Beresford P. (2005) User involvement in the design and undertaking of nursing, midwifery and health visiting research. Nursing Research Unit, King's College London. [www.kcl.ac.uk/schools/nursing/nru](http://www.kcl.ac.uk/schools/nursing/nru) - see Research Reports

### Text notes

1. See INVOLVE's guideline for members of the public on 'Getting involved in research grant applications.' [www.invo.org.uk](http://www.invo.org.uk)
2. Wager E, Godlee F, Jefferson T. (2002) How to survive peer review. BMJ Books.
3. See INVOLVE's guideline for members of the public on 'Being a member of a commissioning board.' [www.invo.org.uk](http://www.invo.org.uk)
4. 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.

5. For more detailed information about payment and the impact it may have on benefits and taxation see Steel R. (2006) A guide to paying members of the public actively involved in research. INVOLVE.
6. Department of Health. (2006) Reward and Recognition: The principles and practice of service user payment and reimbursement in health and social care. A guide for service providers, service users and carers. Department of Health. [www.dh.gov.uk](http://www.dh.gov.uk) - see Publications and Statistics.
7. 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](http://www.scie.org.uk) - see SCIE's Resources and Publications.
8. 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](http://www.hta.ac.uk) - see Involving the Public.
9. 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](http://www.hta.ac.uk) - see Involving the Public.

## 9. Glossary

This glossary provides brief explanations of terms in **green bold** in the text of this guideline and information about the National Institute for Health Research programmes.



### The Cochrane Collaboration

The main purpose of The Cochrane Collaboration is to develop systematic reviews of the strongest evidence available about healthcare interventions. Consumers and health practitioners can then work together to make the best possible decisions about health care. The reviews are published electronically within The Cochrane Library and are freely accessible in shortened versions. [www.cochrane.org](http://www.cochrane.org)

### Cochrane Consumer Network

The Cochrane Consumer Network is made up of fellow consumers who are committed to the philosophies of The Cochrane Collaboration and the importance of consumer participation in informed healthcare decision-making processes. [www.cochrane.org/consumers/homepage.htm](http://www.cochrane.org/consumers/homepage.htm)

### Commissioner

A commissioner is the person (or organisation) who asks for a piece of research to be carried out.

## Commissioning

Commissioning usually involves:

- identifying funding for a piece of research
- preparing a research brief
- advertising the research topic
- selecting a shortlist of researchers who apply to undertake the research
- arranging for proposals to be peer reviewed
- making a decision about which researchers are going to be awarded the funding
- agreeing a contract.

## Commissioning Board/Commissioning Panel

A Commissioning Board is a group of people who oversee the commissioning process. It is made up of research funders, researchers, health and/or social care professionals and often includes people who use services and carers.

## Curriculum vitae (CV)

A curriculum vitae is an outline of a person's educational and professional history, experience relevant to the job applied for and relevant skills; it is usually prepared for job applications. CVs that are part of research applications will include information on the applicants' experience, knowledge and relevant skills.

## Evidence base

An evidence base is a collection of all the research data currently available about a health or social care topic, such as how well a treatment or service works. This evidence is used by health and social care professionals to make decisions about the services that they provide and what care or treatment to offer people who use services.

## Health Technology Assessment (HTA) programme

This is one of the programmes funded by the National Institute for Health Research. The purpose of the programme is to ensure that high-quality research information on the costs, effectiveness and broader impact of health technologies is produced in the most effective way for those who use, manage and provide care in the NHS. [www.hta.ac.uk](http://www.hta.ac.uk)

## Involvement

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.

## Lay summary

A lay summary is a brief summary of a research project or a research proposal that has been written for members of the public rather than researchers or professionals. It should be written in plain English, avoid the use of jargon and explain any technical terms that have to be included.

## **Members of the public (or public)**

INVOLVE uses this term to cover:

- 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.

## **National Forensic Mental Health R&D Programme**

This is one of the programmes funded by the National Institute for Health Research. The programme funds research which supports the provision of mental health services for people with mental disorders who are offenders or at risk of offending.

## **National Institute for Health Research**

In 'Best Research for Best Health: a new national health research strategy 2006', the Department of Health established the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) to oversee the direction for publicly funded health research in England. [www.nihr.ac.uk](http://www.nihr.ac.uk)

## **National Institute for Health Research Central Commissioning Facility (CCF)**

The Central Commissioning Facility (CCF) was set up in 2006 to manage and administer the NHS National Research and Development (R&D) Programme. The national NHS R&D programme investigates a range of healthcare matters and assists how research-based knowledge is applied across all healthcare sectors. [www.nihr-ccf.org.uk](http://www.nihr-ccf.org.uk)

The programmes administered by the CCF are:

- **Research for Patient Benefit (RfPB)**

This programme has three deadlines a year with the aim of commissioning research to improve the day to day practices of the NHS staff.

- **Research for Innovation, Speculation and Creativity (RISC)**

These awards are intended particularly for speculative, novel proposals that are likely to have a low chance of success but a potential for high impact.

- **Research Centres**

A call has been issued for applications for support from institutions recognised for their world class biomedical research. Support will be for 3-5 years.

- **Programme grants**

There will be a bi-annual call for applications outlining 3-5 year programmes of work with a maximum budget of £2 million.

- **Invention for Innovation**

This fund is for innovative research in the area of medical technologies and devices. This new programme will incorporate two existing programmes, New and Emerging Applications of Technology (NEAT) and Health Technology Devices (HTD) and will be combined with the new challenge fund.

- **Policy Research Programme**

The Policy Research Programme commissions research to support a wide range of policy development and evaluation in health, public health and social care.

## **Protocol**

A protocol is the plan for a piece of research. It usually includes information about:

- what question the research is asking and its importance/relevance
- the background and context of the research, including what other research has been done before
- how many people will be involved
- who can take part
- the research method
- what will happen to the results and how they will be publicised.

A protocol describes in great detail what the researchers will do during the research. Usually, it cannot be changed without going back to a research ethics committee for approval.

Definition from: National Electronic Library for Health/National Institute for Mental Health, England (NeLH/NIMHE).

## **Research**

The term research means different things to different people, but is essentially about finding out new knowledge that could lead to changes to treatments, policies or care. The definition used by the Department of Health is: 'The attempt to derive generalisable new knowledge by addressing clearly defined questions with systematic and rigorous methods.'

Definition from: Alzheimer's Society/Quality Research in Dementia (QRD).

## **Research grant**

Research grants are given to enable researchers to carry out a particular piece of research. They might amount to millions of pounds for a major study about genetics for example, or a few hundred pounds for a local study about people's experience of using a particular service. Usually, in order to get research grants, researchers have to write a research proposal and receive a positive peer review.

## **Research proposal**

This is usually an application form or set of papers that researchers have to complete to say what research they want to do and how they want to do it. It will also cover the aim of the research, what the research questions are, who will be involved (both as participants and in carrying out the research), the timescale and the cost.

## Service Delivery and Organisation (SDO)

This is one of the programmes funded by the National Institute for Health Research. The SDO programme was established to consolidate and develop the evidence base on the organisation, management and delivery of healthcare services to increase the quality of patient care, ensure better patient outcomes and contribute to improved population health. [www.sdo.lshtm.ac.uk](http://www.sdo.lshtm.ac.uk)

## Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE)

SCIE's aim is to improve the experience of people who use care by developing and promoting knowledge about good practice in the sector. Using knowledge gathered from diverse sources and a broad range of people and organisations, SCIE develop resources which they share freely, supporting those working in social care and empowering service users. [www.scie.org.uk](http://www.scie.org.uk)

## Vignette

Vignettes are three to four page documents that summarise the importance of the health problem, its **evidence base** and the cost of intervention. The vignette is derived from a brief literature search to identify key papers and discussions with experts, including service user experts in the research area.

# 10. Acknowledgements

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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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