

**INVOLVE**



*National Institute for  
Health Research*

**Improving the quality of plain English  
summaries for  
National Institute for Health Research  
(NIHR) funded research**

# Improving the quality of plain English summaries for National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) funded research.

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## 1. Background and scope

Applicants for research funding to the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) are currently required to include a plain English abstract as part of their research funding application.

In August 2012 INVOLVE was asked by the Department of Health to work with the NIHR Programmes and other key stakeholders to:

- review and develop the question and guidance for plain English summaries in NIHR funded research which are part of the Standard Application Form
- develop criteria and propose methods for assessing the quality of plain English summaries.

This Report summarises work we undertook with Two Can Associates, working with an advisory group, to review current practice and elicit views on guidance for writing plain English summaries for NIHR funded research. The report includes our recommendations to the Department of Health as well as draft guidance.

The draft guidance (see appendix 1) has been developed with the following assumptions:

- applicants will be responsible for producing the plain English summaries
- the guidance needs to be brief (similar length to existing guidance)
- the aim of the plain English summary is to both assist with reviewing applications and to provide a publicly available, stand alone summary of the research

- additional advice and guidance will be made available on the INVOLVE website.

It is anticipated that this work will be used to assist progress in developing plain English summaries for the UK Clinical Trials Gateway (UKCTG).

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## **2. Process**

### **Advisory group**

To assist us in undertaking this work we established an advisory group. The advisory group included representatives from the Central Commissioning Facility (Jean Cooper Moran), Trainees Coordinating Centre (Peter Thompson), the NIHR Evaluations Trials and Studies Coordinating Centre (Alison Ford), Research Design Services (Gill Green), School for Social Care Research (Mike Clark), TwoCan Associates (Bec Hanley), INVOLVE Coordinating Centre staff (Sarah Buckland and Helen Hayes) and INVOLVE members (Mark Petticrew and Lesley Roberts).

### **TwoCan Associates**

We commissioned TwoCan Associates (Bec Hanley and Kristina Staley) to help with the development of the project.

For the report of their review of current practice and consultation with stakeholders, see TwoCan Associates (December 2012) Improving the quality of plain English summaries for NIHR funded research: Review of current practice and consultation with stakeholders.

### **Stages of the project**

The project involved the following stages:

- A brief desk review of current practice in producing research summaries in plain English.
  - The information was obtained via an internet search, INVOLVE, project advisory group members and email requests to research managers.
  - The review included NIHR programmes, medical research charities which took part in the Association of Medical Research Charities' 'Natural Ground' programme to promote the development of patient

and public involvement (PPI), the National Research Ethics Service and a range of websites that include information about trials.

- Consultation with a range of stakeholders:
  - a workshop at the INVOLVE Conference
  - one to one interviews with lay reviewers, panel members, programme managers, directors and chairs of research programmes, researchers working with Research Design Services, and NIHR trainees (17 people)
  - a group interview with NIHR Evaluation, Trials and Studies Coordinating Centre (NETSCC) programme managers.

Following the review of current practice and discussion with the advisory group draft guidance was produced. This was further developed taking into account the suggestions and comments from the consultation. For the final draft of the guidance see appendices 1 and 2.

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### **3. Key findings of review**

#### **Review of guidance for researchers on information to include in plain English summaries**

- The main purpose of current NIHR plain English abstracts is to assist lay reviewers in assessing the applications, but they are also used by non-specialist reviewers and NIHR programme Coordinating Centre staff.
- The plain English abstracts of successful NIHR applicants are all made publicly available on the research programmes' websites.
- Guidance on writing plain English summaries varied across the NIHR programmes. Some of the programmes (but not all) specified what details are to be included.
- Amongst the medical research charities reviewed, all specified the information to be included in the summary.
- Current requirements for the length of plain English summaries for NIHR applicants vary across the programmes from 100 words (Trainees Coordinating Centre) to 450 words (Programme Grants for Applied Research) and 6,500 characters, equivalent to approximately 1,500 words (Health Technology Assessment, Health Services and Delivery and Public Health Research).

- Most of the medical research charities required summaries of 1,000 words or longer.
- Five websites with lists of clinical trials were reviewed, including the UK Clinical Trials Gateway. The guidance for summaries are similar to each other in terms of the topics they covered but varied in length. In addition to the topics covered in the guidance for grant application forms, they ask questions about eligibility, potential risks and benefits of participating, nature of participation required (for example extra hospital visits), timing and location of recruitment, length of study, and main contact. This additional information is required for people to be able to establish if it is a research study that they might want to take part in.

### **Review of guidance on writing in plain English**

- Some organisations produced their own guidance whereas others referred to external guidance such as that produced by the Plain English Campaign. TwoCan Associates identified a few simple rules for writing in plain English which are consistent across the guidance reviewed. These have been included in the guidance produced (see appendix 1).

### **Review of guidance on assessing plain English summaries**

- None of the research organisations reviewed produced guidance specifically relating to assessing the quality of a plain English summary, nor were TwoCan Associates able to find any published standards for assessing plain English summaries. However, a few organisations provided brief guidance as part of their overall guidance on assessing the quality of a funding application.
- A small number of the medical research charities advised researchers that producing a high quality summary was a requirement for funding.
- TwoCan Associates tested a tool for assessing the reading level of summaries (Microsoft-Word tools), however the language of research meant that even very clear simple plain English summaries registered as unacceptable when tested.
- Organisations renowned for producing high quality plain English summaries (for example CancerHelp UK) employ a dedicated team of specialist writers.

## **4. Key findings of consultation with stakeholders**

All the interviewees described the quality of the plain English summaries currently written for NIHR application forms as 'very mixed'. Some summaries are excellent and some are very poor.

The poor plain English summaries were described as:

- too short
- overly-simplistic to the point of being condescending
- unintelligible
- repetitive - copying other parts of the form
- a public relations exercise – over-selling the importance of the research.

The interviewees thought that a good quality plain English summary:

- is written clearly in plain English
- has a logical structure and flows
- is pitched at the right level
- provides a detailed case for support
- addresses the issues of interest to patients / the public.

### **Guidance on plain English summaries**

There were mixed views on both the purpose of the plain English summaries as well as who should write them and what support was needed to write them. Awareness of how the summaries were currently used also varied. There was also no consensus on the length for the summary, although the majority of interviewees thought that the most appropriate length was between 600 and 700 words (approximately 3,500 characters).

There were however, some clear messages from the consultation that are relevant for the NIHR in seeking to improve the quality of plain English summaries:

- guidance alone will not result in good quality plain English summaries
- researchers need to be made aware of the purpose and value of the summaries and that they will be made publicly available via both the NIHR and other websites
- summaries should be updated and checked by applicants following funding approval
- there should be explicit advice to researchers on what level to pitch the summaries at

- plain English summaries should focus on issues that are of interest and relevance to the public
- the summaries should include brief information on public involvement in the research
- patients / the public should be involved in developing / commenting on plain English summaries but not writing them themselves
- Research Design Services could have an important role in advising researchers on writing plain English summaries.

### **Assessing the quality of plain English summaries**

As part of the consultation, stakeholders were asked their views on how to assess the quality of plain English summaries. Suggestions to assist researchers improve the quality of their summaries included asking the lay reviewers or panel members (or other members of the public with no direct experience of the subject of the study) to comment on the summaries as part of the review process which could then be fed back to the researchers. Some however expressed reservations as to whether lay reviewers / panel members or staff would have the skills themselves and / or require training to assess the summaries.

Some interviewees suggested areas that reviewers could be asked to comment on, such as whether the plain English summary was clear, whether parts needed improving, whether any information was missing and whether it met the needs of reviewers.

There were mixed views as to whether researchers should be required to produce good quality plain English summaries as a condition of funding. Some felt that this could become part of the contractual negotiations for funded projects providing no further delay occurred. However, not all interviewees agreed that the quality of the plain English summary was of sufficient importance to withhold funding. Some programme managers were concerned about what would happen if a researcher (because of lack of skills or motivation) did not produce an acceptable summary. They did not think this should stop the research going ahead and were not clear who else could then rewrite them.

Other suggestions included making sure the researcher agreed the final version to ensure technical accuracy, and to ensure that the information was current and that there were no confidentiality issues. Also that NIHR Programme Coordinating Centre staff would need to oversee the negotiations for producing the plain English summaries and have final editorial say.

## 5. Discussion and recommendations

Drawing on the findings from the review and the consultation with stakeholders, the advisory group make the following recommendations on the question and guidance for plain English summaries for NIHR research funding applicants. Appendix 1 has an outline of the draft guidance for researchers completing the plain English summary section of the NIHR standard application form and Appendix 2 the draft guidance for reviewers assessing the plain English summary.

### 5.1 Question and guidance for plain English summaries in NIHR funded research

#### i) Funding application question on plain English

**We recommend** changing the question in the application from plain English 'abstract' to plain English 'summary'.

The current question on the Standard Application Form refers to 'plain English abstracts'. The word 'abstract' is associated with scientific abstracts whereas 'summary' is a more accurate description of what applicants are being asked to provide. This proposed change to the question would require a change to be made to the Standard Application Form.

#### ii) Draft guidance for researchers

**We recommend** including in the guidance information on the following areas:

- why the summary is important
- how it will be used
- value of involving patients / carers or members of the public in developing the summary
- guidance on what to include
- brief guidance on how to write a plain English summary
- direction to further information on producing plain English summaries.

See appendix 1 for the recommended full guidance. The guidance is not intended to be prescriptive, but to provide assistance to those writing plain English summaries of recommended content and style. Whilst guidance alone will not result in good quality summaries it can provide some advice as to what is expected of a good quality summary and make researchers aware of how these summaries will be used.



Individual NIHR research programmes produce their own guidance for funding applicants. We would therefore anticipate that programmes may need to tailor the guidance to their own context.

### iii) Length of summary

**We recommend** that once the guidance is finalised, agreement should be sought from the research programmes as to whether a standard word length should be adopted or whether there is merit in the programmes maintaining their different lengths.

Lengths of plain English abstracts varied widely between the medical research charities and the NIHR and within the NIHR. There was also no consensus amongst the stakeholders interviewed, nor was there any evidence to support any particular length.

### iv) Level to pitch summaries

**We recommend** that the summaries should be pitched at the same level as an article in a broadsheet newspaper.

## 5.2 Criteria and methods for assessing the quality of plain English summaries

### i) NIHR requirements for funding applications

**We recommend** that the production of a high quality plain English summary should be one of the NIHR principles and requirements for funding.

The advisory group agreed that providing feedback and comments on plain English summaries could help researchers to develop their writing skills and improve the quality of summaries over time. In addition this work would support the development of high quality plain English summaries that could be used for publication on websites. Making the writing of a high quality summary one of the requirements for funding would further assist in encouraging researchers to improve the quality of their summaries. However, the advisory group acknowledged that views on this

varied and that it would be important to ensure that this did not slow the approval process.

## ii) Draft guidance and process for assessing plain English summaries

**We recommend that:**

- all reviewers should be asked to comment on the plain English summary as part of the review process and a separate section is added to reviewers' forms for this purpose
- commissioning boards should report back comments on the plain English summary through the current 'fund with changes' process
- chairs should review changes made by the applicants and seek the views of lay or other members if they require further comment or advice on the quality of the summary
- prior to making the plain English summaries available on the web, they should be reviewed by the applicants to check that no changes have been made to the design of the study.

The process of assessing the plain English summaries in research funding applications could be incorporated into the role of reviewers and members of the commissioning boards. See appendix 2 for proposed guidance for assessing plain English summaries.

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### 5.3 Purpose of plain English summaries

**We recommend** that the guidance for researchers provides clear information on how the plain English summary will be used and where it will be made available.

In developing the guidance we have assumed that the summaries are aimed at assisting reviewers in assessing funding applications as well as providing a stand alone summary for members of the public with an interest in the research area who would like to find out about research funded by the NIHR. We recognise that producing a single summary for these two different purposes is not ideal as slightly different information is required for each, but believe that the proposed

recommendations on content and style should provide sufficient information for both audiences.

As reported in the review of guidance, the information content and style required for individuals who are considering whether to take part in a particular research study is different from that required for the current purposes of the NIHR plain English summaries. However, improving the quality of plain English summaries produced for NIHR funding applications will assist in providing the base from which summaries can be adapted and additional information added for use on website databases such as the UK Clinical Trials Gateway.

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#### **5.4 Additional advice on writing plain English summaries**

In March 2013 we will begin creating a section on the INVOLVE website providing additional guidance on writing plain English summaries. These pages will be developed over time but initially will include information on the importance of plain English summaries, links to guidance produced by others on writing plain English summaries as well as:

- information on the common errors and assumptions people make when writing a summary
- examples from a broad range of different types of research
- examples highlighting the contrast between a scientific abstract and a plain English summary
- links to guidance provided by individual research programmes.

We will also work with the Research Design Services to support them in providing advice on writing plain English summaries.

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## **Acknowledgements**

Thanks to the members of the advisory group for guiding this work and to TwoCan Associates for undertaking the review and consultation with stakeholders and for developing the guidance. Thanks also to all those who responded to requests for information and those who took part in the stakeholder interviews.

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**Helen Hayes**

**INVOLVE Coordinating Centre**

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## **Appendix 1:**

### **Draft plain English summary section for completion within the NIHR standard application form for research funding**

#### **Standard Application Form question: plain English summary**

#### **Guidance for researchers**

The guidance for researchers completing the plain English summary on the NIHR standard application form for research funding should cover:

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

#### **The importance of a plain English summary**

A plain English summary is a clear explanation of your research. Many reviewers use this summary to inform their review of your funding application. They include clinicians and researchers who do not have specialist knowledge of your field as well as lay reviewers. A good quality plain English summary is likely to contribute to a positive review.

If your application is successful, the plain English summary will be used on NIHR and other websites.

It is helpful to involve patients / carers / members of the public in developing a plain English summary.

## **What to include in your plain English summary**

When writing the plain English summary, think about the following questions:

### **Aim(s) of the research**

- What are you aiming to find out?
- How will patients / carers / members of the public and the NHS benefit from your research - either directly or in the longer term?

### **Background to the research**

- Why does this research need to be done now?
- How many patients / members of the public are affected and / or what are the costs to the NHS and other related services?

### **Design and methods used**

- What design and methods have you chosen and why? (in brief)

### **Participants**

If your research includes participants:

- How do you know taking part in your research will be acceptable to them?
- How will you ensure that you can recruit sufficient numbers?

### **Patient and public involvement**

- How have patients / the public been involved in developing this research to date?
- How will patients / the public be involved in the conduct / management of the research?

### **Dissemination**

- How will the findings be communicated to patients / the public?
- How will you seek to influence practice?

## **How to write a plain English summary**

The people who will read your summary will be an interested audience, but are not necessarily specialists. Therefore write your summary with this audience in mind, for example at the same level as an article in a broadsheet newspaper.

There are a few simple rules for writing in plain English. In summary these are:

- avoid using jargon and technical terms – explain them clearly if you use them
- avoid complicated English or uncommon words
- use active not passive phrases
- keep sentences short
- think about the order and structure
- break up the text. Use bullet lists.
- ask patients / carers / colleagues to read a draft to find out if there any sections that aren't clear.

The plain English summary is not the same as a scientific abstract - please do not cut and paste this or other sections of your application form to create the plain English summary.

Further guidance on writing in plain English is available from INVOLVE ([www.invo.org.uk/resource-centre/](http://www.invo.org.uk/resource-centre/)).

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## **Appendix 2**

**Draft plain English summary guidance for reviewers** (to be included in their guidance and / or feedback form)

The plain English summary is intended for an interested audience, who are not necessarily specialists. The summary should be written at roughly the same level as an article in a broadsheet newspaper. With this in mind, please comment on the following:

- Did the plain English summary give a clear explanation of the research?
- Did it help you carry out your review? If not, why not?
- Was the language used appropriate and clear? If not, where were there problems?
- Were scientific terms, abbreviations and jargon explained? If not, which terms need explanation?
- If this research is funded, the plain English summary will be published on a variety of websites, without the rest of this application form. Could this plain English summary be used on its own to describe the proposed research? If not, what further information is needed?

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