
Developing an online learning and support forum: Summary of survey responses and next steps (November 2013)

Background

This project is part of the work of an INVOLVE-led, National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) working group that is focussing on the topic of [learning for involvement](#). The project is a collaboration between 4 NIHR organisations:

- Central Commissioning Facility (CCF)
- NIHR Evaluations, Trials and Studies Coordinating Centre (NETSCC)
- School for Primary Care Research (SPCR)
- Trainees Coordinating Centre (TCC)

The people currently involve in developing this project are: Peter Bower (SPCR), Vicky Cawdeary (NETSCC), Alison Ford (NETSCC), Peter Thompson (TCC), Amander Wellings (INVOLVE member), Philippa Yeeles (CCF).

The survey

In October 2013, we asked approximately 800 NIHR public contributors¹ about the following idea:

Establishing an online forum to share knowledge and support about the task of reviewing. Open to NIHR public contributors and people who support patient and public involvement (PPI leads) in NIHR coordinating centres².

The reasons for suggesting we set up an online forum include:

- Offering a different approach to learning and support in addition to what is already available (largely written guidance)
- Making a safe space in which public reviewers can ask and answer questions of one another, as well as of PPI leads

¹ 'Public contributors' is an umbrella term that we use to cover members of the public who take part in patient and public involvement activities. For example this includes public reviewers of NIHR funding applications and public members of NIHR research programme boards, committees and panels.

² There are five NIHR coordinating centres (Central Commissioning Facility, Clinical Research Network Coordinating Centre, INVOLVE Coordinating Centre, NIHR Evaluations, Trials and Studies Coordinating Centre, Trainees Coordinating Centre).

- Providing an opportunity for shared learning that can help reviewers improve the quality of their reviews and PPI leads improve the quality of the support they offer
- Having access to flexible and responsive support that doesn't rely exclusively on the knowledge and availability of PPI leads.

Survey Responses

We thank the 99 people who shared their views with us. The remainder of this report very briefly highlights some of the responses and issues that were frequently raised. It also describes our intended next steps. We summarise the majority of views expressed as '**broadly supportive but with some reservations**'.

Broadly supportive

We asked, 'Would you like to be a member of an NIHR-wide, online forum that offers access to mutual learning and support about the task of reviewing?' Of the 99 people who completed the survey, 53 said yes, 37 said maybe, 8 said no and 1 person didn't answer.

Comments included:

- A great opportunity to learn more from others and share current knowledge
- Peer learning and support could improve the quality of reviews and build reviewers' confidence.
- An online forum could reduce the sense of isolation that some reviewers have.
- A good way of bringing together brief advice, tips and FAQs!
- Any opportunity for constructive feedback is always useful.
- Helpful to have different methods of providing learning and support.

Some reservations

We asked, 'Do you think an online forum might have any drawbacks or create any difficulties?' Of the 99 people who completed the survey, 59 said yes, 38 said no and 2 people didn't answer.

Comments included:

- Deciding whether to be involved in a forum is a personal calculation based on the time needed to learn how to use the forum, the time needed to be an active participant and the frequency / infrequency of carrying out a review.
- Need for clear guidelines around confidentiality – what issues can and can't be discussed.
- Need for some form of 'moderation'. To ensure that advice given is accurate, that comments focus on the purpose of the group (to provide learning and support about the task of reviewing) and that the group isn't dominated by the voices of a few.

Other comments and suggestions

Other suggestions and comments were made including:

- Other ways of providing learning and support might be more useful such as having a newsletter, providing face-to-face training, mentoring or buddying, blogs, webinars, Twitter, teleconferences and a regular digest of Q and As.
- Importance of having face-to-face meetings in addition to anything else.

Next steps

We think there is sufficient interest and support for us to go ahead with a time-limited project to develop and test an online forum.

We plan to do this with the active involvement of a group of current NIHR public contributors. Fifty-four people who responded to the survey said that they would be interested to get involved in developing the forum. We will be contacting them all in due course.

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