

# I’ve heard about public involvement, is it for me?

Public involvement brings patients, service-users, carers, family members, and people from community or voluntary groups into health and social care research and other work to improve the services provided by the NHS and social care.

This could mean, for example, helping to identify problems that need attention, deciding how to investigate them, collecting relevant information and understanding what has been found out. It can also mean helping to put changes into practice. The aim is to help organisations and their staff listen to people who are affected by services.

We call any member of the public who gets involved a public contributor. This document helps you understand if public involvement is for you. It explains:

* What you might be asked to do
* How you might decide if you are the right person for this kind of work.

## What will I be asked to do?

There is not one answer to this question as it will be different in different projects and organisations. However, some important ways public contributors often help include:

* Bringing your personal and lived experience to help staff to understand a topic from a public or patient point of view.
* Thinking about whether the problems chosen for attention are important to patients, service users or family members, and to identify other issues which should be considered.
* Helping staff to communicate clearly and in plain language, for example thinking about how research questions and documents might be understood by an ordinary person.
* Helping to make sure what is suggested in projects is acceptable to patients/service users/carers/family members/the public.
* Helping to make sure the approach taken is fair and reasonable.

## Are you the right person?

You need to be interested in:

* Improving health and social care and the research process
* Sharing and discussing ideas
* Absorbing new information
* Meeting a variety of people
* Communicating your thoughts to make things better
* Developing your own skills

You need to be willing to:

* Bring your life and work experience, skills and knowledge, and share them when it is helpful and relevant
* Think about and speak from a patient, service user, family/carer or public perspective, depending on your experiences. For example, noticing when assumptions are being made about your health condition, or services you have used, that are different from your experience.
* Try to put yourself in the shoes of other people and think about their different needs.
* Stick to the topic/focus of the work
* Listen to others and respect different views
* Be aware that you can’t speak for other people and groups, but that your personal perspective is valuable
* Ask questions and say when you don’t understand something; this is important because if you don’t understand something, others might not either
* Acknowledge any support you need to do the work

**SOME public involvement roles might ask for other things, such as:**

* Having particular personal experiences. You might be recruited because you have a health condition, have had a particular treatment, or used a service.
* Being willing to share difficult personal experiences (if this is needed you should be offered appropriate support)
* Having confidence to speak up in large meetings
* Reading documents and preparing for meetings
* Thoughtful use of opportunities to influence decisions
* Identifying gaps in services which would not necessarily be obvious to service providers
* Links to other patient/user/family/carer/community/minority groups
* Some understanding of health systems, services or commissioning
* Being willing to review processes, objectives, priorities and actions carried out by researchers and health and social care staff and organisations to make sure they are happening with the patient/service user/family/carer/public in mind
* Previous experience of being a public contributor.

## What you should expect when you begin public involvement

* Information about the project or topic and ways in which you can contribute
* Plain language and good communication from staff at all times, without jargon or medical/ technical terms being used during meetings, or having such terms explained at a minimum.
* Not to be the only public contributor involved
* To be encouraged to contribute, especially by people chairing meetings
* To be offered support if necessary
* To have a named staff contact
* Payment to cover any out of pocket expenses and, usually, for your time
* Time to get to grips with this role. It is not necessarily straightforward and even experienced public contributors are often working it out as they go along.

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