Sheffield Hallam University

‘BATTLING ON MULTIPLE FRONTS’

Institutional barriers to public involvement in university research and teaching

November 2025

Foreword

I first became "involved" as a member of the public in the late 1980s in service delivery, then later in education and research - working mainly with different universities. I recall university academics scrabbling around trying to find unspent money at the end of financial years in order to pay people like me. There was little guidance at that time and no organisations like INVOLVE to provide advice or support - involvement seemed to rely solely on the goodwill and commitment of individuals.

Thankfully the situation has improved considerably, however, there is still some way to go. Even recently I hear of public members not being paid for six months or access and support requirements being refused so that public members have been left out of pocket or unable to take part at all in initiatives.

I was very pleased to be involved in this study and really hope that the findings will be acted upon - both within individual universities and nationally, where organisations such as the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) and the Health Research Authority (HRA) could be influential.

Eleni Chambers

Disabled researcher/activist

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People with lived experience (of health conditions, poverty, migration, and all kinds of other things) want to be involved in research, and researchers want to involve them. Funders actively encourage involvement. But administrative processes within universities can make it difficult, leading to frustration and additional work all round.

What we found: the role of universities

Universities don't have consistent information or policies about public involvement

Some universities provided information about public involvement on their websites, but often this was linked to a specific department. Most places did not have a university-wide policy about public involvement. It was not always clear who to contact, and there was inconsistency within and between universities.

University support and funding make involvement better

Members of the public can contribute earlier when a university has an ongoing involvement group which meets regularly. Having an involvement coordinator can also make it easier, both for the public to get involved in research, and for researchers to find suitable public contributors.

What we found: practicalities

Contractual relationships are uncommon and inconsistent

Most universities do not routinely use contracts for members of the public involved in research or teaching. However, there was a lot of variation between projects and roles.

The process of induction varies considerably between projects and universities

Many public contributors had inductions at the start of a research project, but this had usually been developed by project staff – there were no official university inductions.

Payment amounts and formats are variable, but not flexible

The majority of participants in this study reported that public contributors were being paid for involvement activities, but there was great variety in the amount people were paid and how the payments were made between universities, and in some cases, even between projects within the same university.

Payment for involvement can affect benefits, but university staff don't understand the rules

Payment for involvement can affect benefits, but misunderstandings about the rules led to inconsistency within and between universities. Both public contributors and university staff found this a source of stress.

What we found: inclusion

The process of claiming for payment varies within and between universities

The process of claiming for payment varies both within and between universities. In universities without a clear policy or written process, there was often confusion, and both staff members and public contributors spent considerable time working out the process.

The onus is on public contributors to track their own payments

Participants in all stages of our research reported that payments were usually tracked by public contributors themselves. Researchers sometimes tried to keep track, but had little access to university finance systems, and finance teams tracked payments generally, but had little involvement with specific projects and no contact with public contributors directly.

Payment forms are often not fit for purpose, causing difficulties and exclusion

Payment forms were sometimes difficult to complete, particularly for people without access to the latest technology.

What we found: frustration and burdens

Everyone is worn down by the burden of administration

Both public members and staff expressed frustration with the time and administrative burden of chasing payments and finding out the correct processes to use. The language used to discuss the frustration felt with the difficulties with organising the practicalities of paying and involving members of the public in research was very emotive.

Involvement coordinators are great, but not always available

Involvement coordinators provide a lot of useful support to both researchers and public contributors, and are knowledgeable about university processes. However, they are not available in every university.

Knowledge of processes often rests with an individual rather than a team

At universities where there was no involvement coordinator or designated member of staff to go to for advice or guidance, academic staff were left managing at individual project level. Staff members often had one person they went to, either because that was their dedicated role, or they knew the person was 'good'. This caused difficulties for staff who did not have relationships with these people or know who they were. This reliance on one person can increase the burden on that staff member and cause difficulties if they leave.

Teams don't always have the same knowledge or priorities

Different teams within a university often did not share understanding or priorities, and this could make it difficult for members of staff find out information or get approval easily.

What we found: values

Staff value relationships with public contributors, but are aware that bureaucracy can create a lack of trust

Staff and public contributors both talked about valuing people and relationships, but this was different for each group. For staff, it was important to build relationships with members of the public, but staff were aware that trust could be threatened when processes failed.

Public contributors see public involvement as work, and want to be both valued and paid

Public contributors also discussed values and principles, but placed more emphasis on the value of good communication, and of being paid for involvement.

Public involvement needs to be valued at a high level

Having support from senior staff could make public involvement, and coordination across an institution, much easier. In addition, most universities did not seem to have public representation or involvement at a high level within their institution.

Our recommendations

➢ Universities should have a policy for public involvement

We recommend that each university creates a policy for public involvement, to include clarity about payment rates and methods, forms, expenses, access and support requirements, and timescales. There should be a publicly available version of this on the university website. In creating a policy, universities should draw on national guidance (for example from the National Institute for Health and Care Research, the Health Research Agency, and other bodies) around doing public involvement well.

➢ Universities should have a person or team responsible for public involvement

Having a centralised source of knowledge around public involvement will save staff time, and also sends a clear signal that the university values public involvement. It also makes it easier for public contributors to get involved in research and teaching, contributing to the civic mission of many universities.

➢ Involvement and support at high levels within universities

Support for public involvement should be visible at high levels within universities. In addition, members of the public should be involved in governance and decision-making within universities.

➢ All forms for public contributors should be accessible

Official forms may be inaccessible to some public contributors, who may not have access to specific technology (for example Microsoft Excel). Ideally, finance and academic staff should work with public contributors to create accessible forms which will be accepted by university finance teams. In the shorter term, it may be appropriate to support public contributors to complete forms, or to create locally simplified ways of collecting and storing information for the duration of a project, minimising the amount of times payment forms must be completed.

➢ Everyone should understand the process at the start

This will be more difficult if there is no written university-wide policy, but we recommend that staff planning any public involvement should find out their university or departmental process for payment etc *before* doing any public involvement work. Public contributors should be informed of any restrictions, dates, and forms at the start of a project.

➢ Communicate about payment tracking

Finance teams should send straightforward remittance advice to academic or research staff (and public contributors, if appropriate) when a payment for public involvement is made. This should be clear and detailed, showing exactly what the payment has been made for. Academic and research staff submitting forms should make a note to check progress within a specific timeframe, and continue to follow up until payments have been made.

➢ Work to eliminate workarounds

Workarounds are created when there is no clear policy. A workaround may be a short-term fix for a problem experienced by an individual project, but longer term, workarounds ensure the system never changes for the better. Universities should seek to make workarounds unnecessary by creating clear, usable processes which demonstrate how much public involvement is valued.

A note about language

There are lots of different words associated with involvement. NIHR has produced a briefing note for researchers, which defines public involvement in research as

> 'research being carried out "with" or "by" members of the public, rather than "to", "about" or "for" them.'

NIHR distinguishes involvement from engagement (where information about research is provided to the public, for example through a public talk), and from participation (where people take part in a research study, for example by filling in a survey, or being part of a clinical trial). There are different approaches to involvement. NIHR talks about a continuum:

- Consultation – researchers asking for people's views and using these to inform decision-making
- Collaboration – an ongoing partnership between researchers and the public with shared decision making
- Co-production – researchers, practitioners and the public working together, sharing power and responsibility from the start to the end of a project
- User-controlled – research is actively controlled, directed and managed by the public – they decide the research questions as well as how the research is designed and carried out.

In our research, we did not ask people what type of approach they used, so we use the term involvement very generally to cover all of these. We could not find a similar overarching list of approaches to public involvement in university teaching, so again, we use the term generally and, where relevant, describe specific activities.

Introduction

People with lived experience (of health conditions, poverty, migration, and all kinds of other things) want to be involved in research, and researchers want to involve them. Funders actively encourage involvement. But administrative processes within universities can make it difficult, leading to frustration and additional work all round.

Research funders in the UK and elsewhere now often require universities to involve the public in research. This should not be just as participants, but also as advisers, collaborators, co-researchers, and co-applicants. Universities also prioritise public involvement in teaching over a variety of programmes. This work involves building and nurturing relationships between researchers, external partner organisations, and members of the public.

The importance of public involvement is now acknowledged by all major research funders. UK Research & Innovation (UKRI, covering the main UK research institutes), along with the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) and many other bodies have signed the Health Research Authority (HRA)'s Shared Commitment to Public Involvement in Health and Social Care Research (HRA, 2025). The focus in STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths) research has been more on public engagement and science communication, but there is evidence that narratives around this and a separate stream of public involvement in shared decision-making are converging (Wilkinson et al, 2024).

The focus has shifted over several decades from questioning *why* we need public involvement, to understanding *how* to manage this in a meaningful way (Rossvoll et al, 2023). Health research has often been at the forefront of this shift, with the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) producing guidance on a wide range of issues related to public involvement over many years, including a series of briefing notes for researchers (2021).

The UK Standards for Public Involvement (2018) act as a framework for what good involvement looks like, and include inclusive opportunities, involvement in governance of research, good communication, and impact.

However, evidence suggests that institutional barriers at university level can unintentionally hinder public involvement work. The *Breaking Boundaries Review of progress of PPI in NIHR research* identified that 'despite the availability of guidance, local NHS and Higher Education Institute institutional policies and administrative practices are obstacles which slow down prompt reimbursement and payment' of public contributors (Staniszewska et al, 2018, p39).

This poses a significant reputational risk to universities and individual researchers, threatening carefully developed relationships with external partners who can often ill afford to take on further financial risk. There is also a risk that, faced with such barriers, researchers and the public will not engage with involvement work, affecting the quality and impact of research.

The Tickell Review of Research Bureaucracy (2022) identified institutional level bureaucracy as the most-cited source of unnecessary bureaucracy by individuals (above that related to funders, regulators, and government), and suggested that universities work to address this. The Co-Production Futures Inquiry (Vince-Myers, 2025), while still ongoing, has reported many bureaucratic impediments to co-production work within universities.

In this report, we explore the detail of that university-level bureaucracy around public involvement more broadly. We have included public involvement in teaching here too – it has not had the same focus as involvement in research, but both public contributors and university staff are often involved in both research and teaching, and many of the bureaucratic processes are the same.

Advisory group and public involvement

The project had an advisory group consisting of two public contributors, and representatives from the National Institute of Health and Care Research (NIHR), Association of Medical Research Charities (AMRC), and an academic with experience of involvement work (see list in Appendix 1). The advisory group met four times throughout the research study to support with the evolving design of the project and feedback on updates about the project.

One significant contribution to the project from the advisory group was to change the project design. The focus of the project is public involvement processes, particularly around payment, within universities, and our original emphasis was on how researchers found out which forms to use and where to submit them. Our attention was therefore limited to the experiences of university staff. The advisory group public members stressed the missed opportunity to gain the perspectives of members of the public engaged in involvement work.

The public contributors on the advisory board had a wider remit than being members of the advisory group. They also supported with key aspects of the research design, providing feedback on information sheets and survey questions as well as disseminating adverts for participants. One public member supported with the facilitation of the focus groups and the other was involved in the analysis of the qualitative interviews and writing up of the project.

What we did

Our research had four stages

1. A review of public involvement policies on public websites of 121 UK universities (detail in Appendix 2).
2. Survey of 88 members of university staff) with experience of involving members of the public in research or teaching (detail in Appendix 3).
3. Interviews with 17 members of university staff with experience of involving members of the public in research or teaching (detail in Appendix 4).
4. Focus groups with 11 members of the public with experience of being involved in research or teaching in universities (detail in Appendix 5).

Throughout this report, we use codes rather than participants' real names. The codes of members of university staff who took part in interviews begin with the letter S (for Staff, so S1, S2, S3 etc). For members of the public who took part in focus groups, we refer to the focus group rather than the individual, for an extra layer of anonymity. For this, we use the code FG (for Focus Group, so FG1, FG2, FG3).

There is a short summary at the start of each section, highlighted in pale blue.

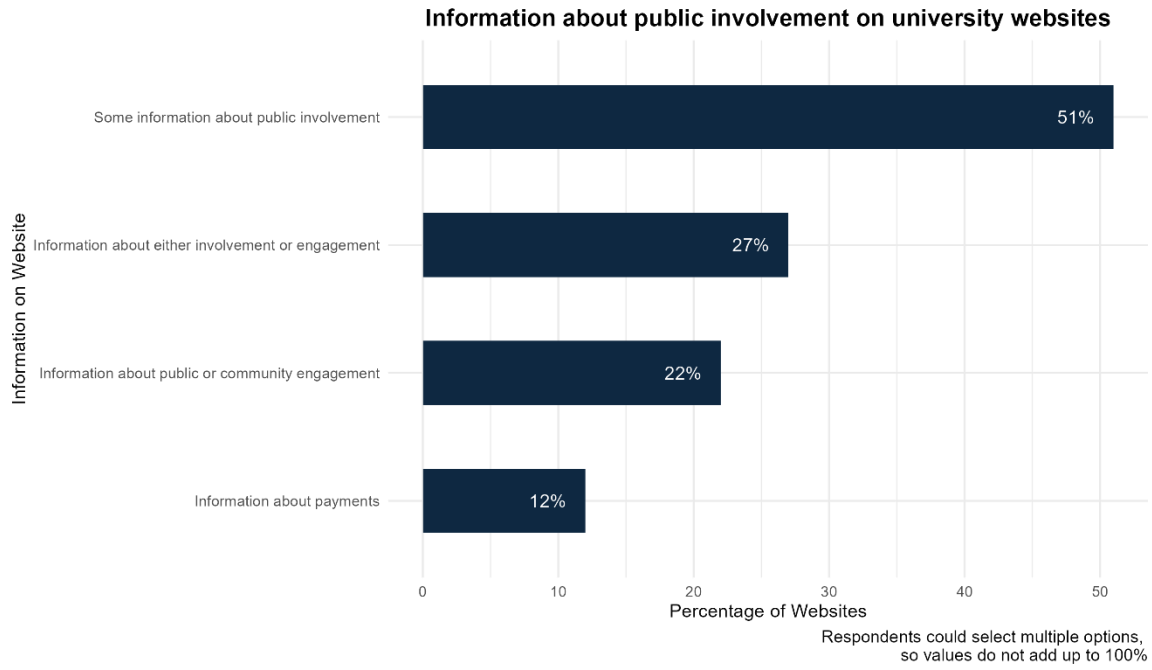
What we found: the role of universities

Universities don't have consistent information or policies about public involvement

Some universities provided information about public involvement on their websites, but often this was linked to a specific department. Most places did not have a university-wide policy about public involvement. It was not always clear who to contact, and there was inconsistency within and between universities.

Just over half (51%) of the universities had some information about public involvement on their website – 12% included information about payments. Just under a quarter (22%) had information about public or community engagement (for example sharing research findings with the public), and just over a quarter (27%) had no information about either involvement or engagement.

Figure 1: Information about public involvement on university websites



When universities did provide information about public involvement on their website, in 44% of cases this was linked to a specific department, rather than being general across the whole university.

Almost half (47%) of survey respondents did not know if their university had a public involvement policy for teaching or research. 17% said their university did have a public involvement policy, but in most cases, this was not available publicly.

Only one member of the public was aware of a university they had worked with having a public involvement policy. Several members of staff had developed policies for a specific research project, but this meant a lack of consistency even within a university, and even more so for public contributors involved in projects at several universities.

Many of the staff we interviewed told us that, without a policy in place, it was difficult to know what processes to follow.

> 'There are some rough guidelines, I think they're on public-facing pages... [but] I found it really, really difficult to find answers, or even to find where to signpost someone to.'
>
> (S6, Research Support Manager)

One university involvement team had attempted to tackle this confusion by working with finance and human resources to create a public involvement policy.

> 'We are finding that there is a larger demand for more of that supportive infrastructure, those foundational policies, for people to understand how to do this, and how to do this properly.
>
> (S12, Involvement Lead)

A university-wide policy did make payment and other processes run more smoothly.

University support and funding make involvement better

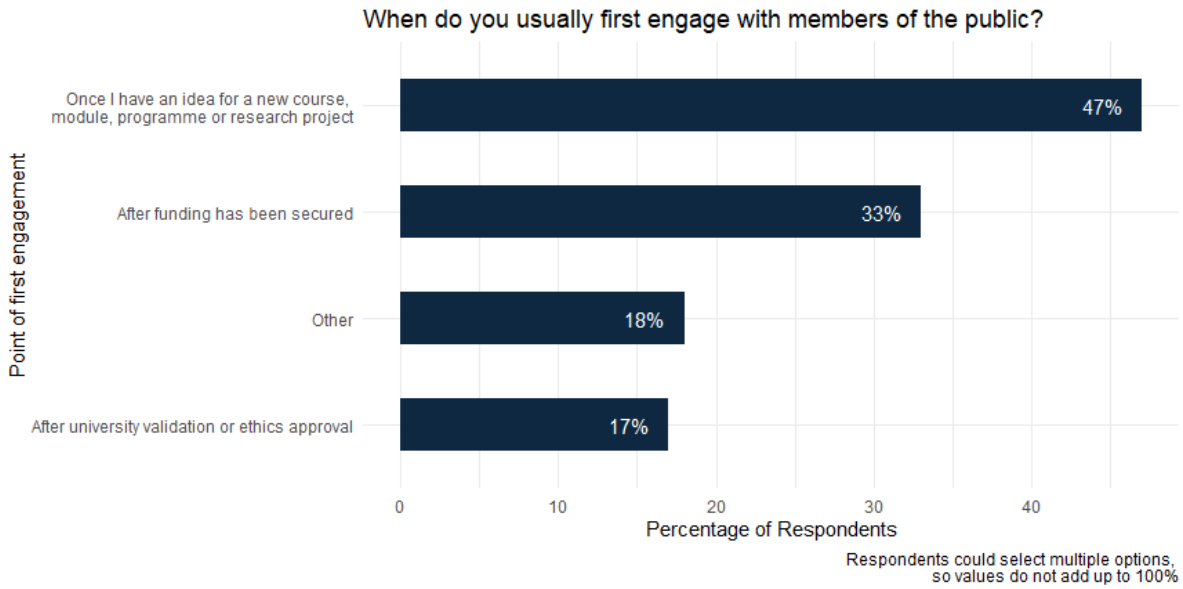
Members of the public can contribute earlier when a university has an ongoing involvement group which meets regularly. Having an involvement coordinator can also make it easier, both for the public to get involved in research, and for researchers to find suitable public contributors.

Almost half (47%) of the staff in our survey said they typically engaged members of the public as soon as they had an idea for a teaching or research project, rather than waiting for funding.

This was easier when the university had an ongoing involvement group or an involvement coordinator. Involvement coordinators could help researchers to link with wider networks of people too, which could facilitate involvement in specific projects.

> 'It's already an established network, you can go in and have conversations... they can provide advice on drafts. We also have a PPIE advisory group [specific to a research centre], so from there you can get connection to other groups.'
>
> (S5, Research Adviser)

Figure 2: Time at which staff usually engage members of the public



The activities of involvement coordinators were varied, and some were more proactive than others.

> ‘We have quite an active network [of public contributors], probably about 250 strong.... So we will go out to that network, but... we have the community engagement side of things... We’ve started doing a series of [lunchtime] engagement events, taking our researchers out to the community to talk about their themes first and foremost, but then a little bit about the research as well.’
>
> (S11, Public and Patient Involvement Lead)

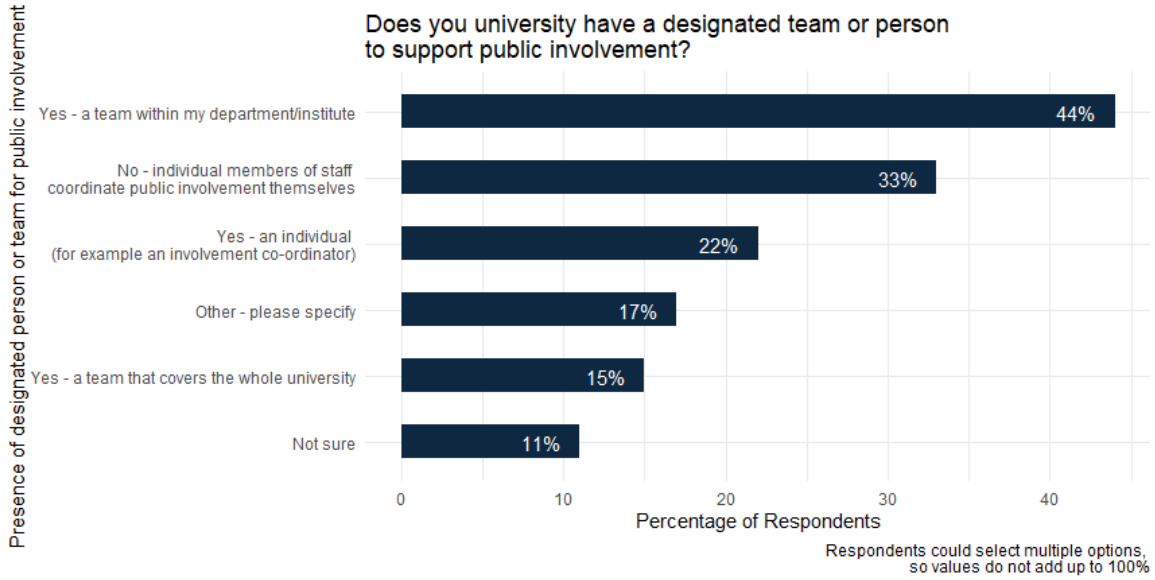
In some cases, an involvement coordinator or a long-standing involvement group, meant that public contributors were involved in the generation of ideas for research.

There was a clear feeling from involvement coordinators that the role needed to be valued and staffed appropriately. This was not a role that could be added onto another role as an afterthought, it needed to be properly funded and resourced. There was also a feeling that the potential for burnout in this role was not really understood or acknowledged.

> ‘'I feel like our team is just really respected and valued as well and it’s not seen as a box ticking exercise.'
>
> (S11, Public and Patient Involvement Lead)

However, a third (33%) of survey respondents said they had no designated team to coordinate public involvement in their department or university, and a further 11% were not sure. In these institutions, public involvement was coordinated by individual researchers, and there was no systematic way for members of the public to get involved in research.

Figure 3: Presence of designated team or person to support public involvement



A third (33%) of staff in our survey said they typically engaged members of the public once funding was secured. The advantage of doing this is that there is money to pay public contributors, but the disadvantage is that there is no input into the development of the project.

> 'Would love to talk to people earlier, but often it's not feasible. Wouldn't want to talk to people without paying, but that means I can't talk to people until payment is secured.'
>
> (Survey respondent, member of university staff)

What we found: practicalities

Contractual relationships are uncommon and inconsistent

Most universities do not routinely use contracts for members of the public involved in research or teaching. However, there was a lot of variation between projects and roles.

Many survey respondents (41%) reported that public contributors do not have contracts with their universities, and most of the public members of our focus groups reported that they had never had an official contract with a university.

When public contributors did have contracts, they were most commonly casual worker contracts (16% of staff survey respondents reported using this type of contract), or associate lecturer contracts (usually used for hourly paid teaching staff with no guaranteed hours). One public contributor reported having a freelance contract with a university, 'like as a subcontractor'.

One member of staff did report a more comprehensive system used by a previous employer.

> ‘Option A… you ask them to be a co-applicant, you are actually put them as a staff, right in the research team. Even though they don’t always do research activities, they do help with those. So they have to have a contract as an employee, it will be like a set level of expertise… So they are reimbursed for the time with an hourly rate that is set up at the university rate for PPIE co-applicant. Option B is like they are part of [PPIE group] and therefore they are like volunteers, so they have a contract as a volunteer and they get reimbursed at that rate. Then you’ve got Option C, if it’s NIHR-related work, NIHR has an established rate for PPIE and we can use those or give them a voucher based on the time we think they will spend’
>
> (S5, Research Adviser)

This level of detail was unusual though, and most participants reported little consistency over whether and how contracts were used.

Public contributors reported that having a contract with a university could give a level of protection, but could also cause complications with benefits or pensions. One contributor was part of a peer-led research project, where they would be conducting interviews with research participants and be involved in analysis.

> ‘Contracts were a bit of a nightmare, because I actually don’t want to be employed, because I’m medically retired. So I had to, what they had to do was find a workaround where I had some kind of contract with the university, because… I was handling people’s data, so I needed the protection of having a contract with the university.
>
> (Public contributor, Focus Group 2)

NIHR (2024a) has produced guidance about the different roles public contributors might take in research. Not all roles require a contract, but some do, for example if a member of the public is a co-applicant on a research project, which places legal and financial obligations on the university (NIHR, 2021).

The process of induction varies considerably between projects and universities

Many public contributors had inductions at the start of a research project, but this had usually been developed by project staff – there were no official university inductions.

Most public members reported some kind of induction process, either to specific projects or universities, and again, these varied widely. For project-specific public involvement, particularly for a relatively small project, the process was simple and informal.

> ‘They didn’t really have so much of what I’d call an induction, it was probably more a phone call and just a little bit about the project.’
>
> (Public Contributor, Focus Group 1)

The induction process, in whatever form, was useful for setting and understanding roles and expectations, for example around communication. This could be done in a co-produced way.

> ‘Induction wise for the Patient Advisory Group we’ve sort of co-produced or co-designed the set-up of the group with them, so that was sort of through our first meeting, and then at the half-way stage I did some feedback and evaluation one-to-ones with all the members, just to check out, and we got some really great feedback.’
>
> (S8, Research Coordinator)

However, this person acknowledged the importance of their role, and that it was difficult to do good public involvement without it.

> ‘My role as that key link person means that people or the public contributors feel very supported and communicated with, whereas one of our public contributors works on another study and she says they don’t have [anyone in a similar role]. They don’t have somebody in that role, she’s ended up trying to do a bit herself, which is a lot to ask.’
>
> (S8, Research Coordinator)

Public contributors were, in some cases, offered training as part of the induction process, although again these opportunities varied widely according to the institution and the amount of funding available.

For ongoing work, the process of induction could be more involved. For example, one public contributor, a member of a university-wide involvement group, described the process before starting each new piece of research.

> ‘What is really good is that every time we have a piece of work, a project, we always have a pre-meeting with just the [involvement group] members, so that we are very clear about what we are going to do, who we’re working with. It’s a place for us to ask any questions, to understand how it’s going, and also shape that piece of work as well, because quite often we might think well, how is that going to work? And we might bring to attention something that [the involvement coordinator] might not have thought about.’
>
> (Public Contributor, Focus Group 1)

In this established group, it was customary for the involvement coordinator to broker relationships between researchers and public contributors, and new members were inducted as part of the group itself, before being introduced to specific projects.

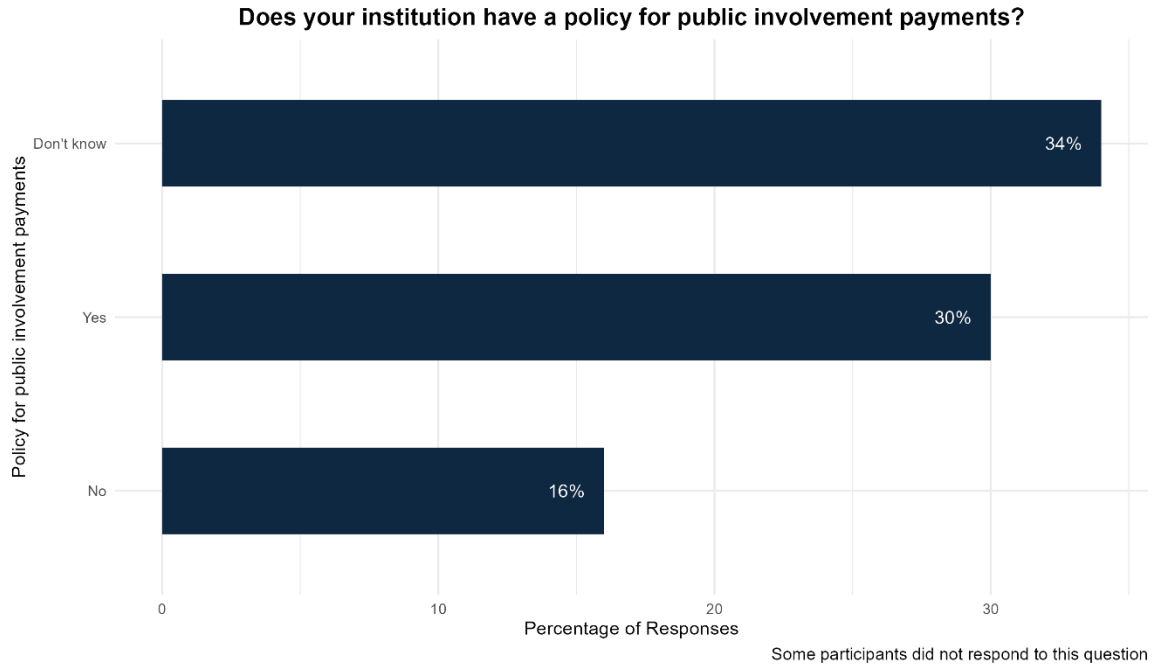
Overall, there was little consistency in inductions for public contributors, with experiences often depending on the availability of funding and an involvement coordinator.

Payment amounts and formats are variable, but not flexible

The majority of participants in this study reported that public contributors were being paid for involvement activities, but there was great variety in the amount people were paid and how the payments were made between universities, and in some cases, even between projects within the same university.

Just under a third (30%) of survey respondents reported that their university had a policy specifically for paying public contributors for involvement activities, 16% said there was no policy, and the rest weren't sure. Policies set out the circumstances in which people were to be paid, the amount, and the process, so without this clear written guidance, the situation could become confused.

Figure 4: Presence of policies for public involvement payments



The types of payments and the processes used to pay people for their involvement varied across institutions. Staff in our survey reported that payments were usually made into bank accounts (58%) or by vouchers (48%) (numbers add up to more than 100% as people were able to choose more than one option), and this was also reflected in our interviews with staff and focus groups with public contributors.

Many people mentioned using rates suggested by NIHR as a guide, but this was not always the case. For example, one university restricted payments for any involvement work to £10 per activity regardless of the time taken, and another university could only

offer one type of voucher. A small number of staff in our survey (6%) reported paying people in cash. This variety was echoed in our focus groups, with public members narrating accounts of different universities utilising different approaches to both the types of payments and the processes involved.

Several staff participants discussed the restrictive nature of their universities' payment methods recognising that a lack of flexibility meant they could not always be as inclusive as they would like. One academic described how online vouchers were not suitable for the public contributors they worked with:

> 'Anything that's kind of electronic for the people that I'm working with is just nearly impossible really because they don't have e-mail addresses.'
>
> (S1, Research Associate)

Other participants described being only able to use one type of voucher and this was not always accessible for everyone, either due to digital exclusion or a lack of those shops in their neighbourhood.

Some universities were more flexible, offering BACS (payment into a bank account) as standard but if public contributors had no bank account they could offer vouchers instead. Other universities offered a variety of vouchers, either online or physical with a choice of shops.

However, complete flexibility was not always considered practical within a large organisation. At one university, where a payment policy was in place, the finance team had tried to simplify the process to make it straightforward. This meant not being able to offer all options.

> 'We've tried to say to people, "you can't do that ultimate flexibility, you can't have the voucher for £5 plus payment for that and something else.... you need to make a decision, it's either this or this", that's what we've tried to do, to get off people offering every single permutation of payment which is virtually impossible to support.'
>
> (S15, Finance Manager)

In creating a central policy, the confusion over the process had been removed, but so had some of the flexibility.

> 'People go "I don't want to get paid for this, I want to donate this money to x charity". I'm like "no we are going to pay you, whatever you do with the money is up to you" and we do get a lot of questions around that sort of thing. Often that just complicates the issue you just go round and round in circles for months on end. So we made a clear policy around not doing things like that, and that helped kind of making it very clear rather than people saying "how do you want paying?"'
>
> (S15, Finance Manager)

A university-wide policy may therefore clarify processes, but may also reduce flexibility.

Payment for involvement can affect benefits, but university staff don't understand the rules

Payment for involvement can affect benefits, but misunderstandings about the rules led to inconsistency within and between universities. Both public contributors and university staff found this a source of stress.

Public contributors discussed how payments could affect their other circumstances, and found the inflexibility of some university systems problematic. For example, some benefits such as Carers Allowance are affected if someone earns even a very small amount over a set limit. One public member described how having a choice over being paid monthly or quarterly made it easier to keep abreast of payments and to ensure they were not breaching benefit limits. An overriding consideration in our focus groups was the amount of time public contributors spent in managing their payments and dealing with HMRC or the Department for Work and Pensions. This was a source of stress for some.

> 'I've managed to get them [the university] to pay me like every three months which then makes it a lot less stressful for me to try and work out to make sure that I'm keeping under the limit.'
>
> (Public Contributor, Focus Group 1)

Some public contributors described how they chose not to be paid for involvement work due to their complicated circumstances and valued opportunities for training or library access instead.

Staff participants also discussed the implications of payments on benefits and tax. A couple of researchers described how they made public members aware of the tax implications, but the onus was on the public member to manage this.

NIHR has produced guidance for members of the public (NIHR, 2024b) and for organisations (NIHR, 2023) outlining tax and employment details.

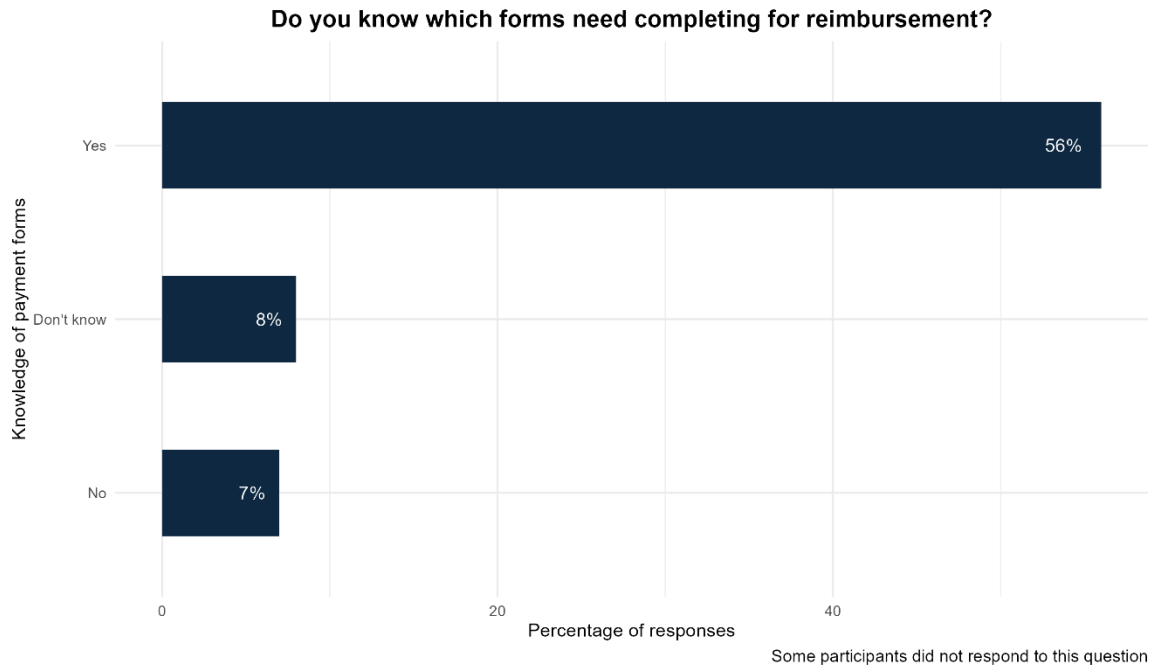
What we found: inclusion

The process of claiming for payment varies within and between universities

The process of claiming for payment varies both within and between universities. In universities without a clear policy or written process, there was often confusion, and both staff members and public contributors spent considerable time working out the process.

Just over half (56%) of survey respondents said they knew which forms to fill in to pay public contributors.

Figure 5: Knowledge of forms for paying public contributors



The process of arranging payment for public contributors worked smoothly in universities with a clearly defined process or payment policy. Participants told us that elements that made the process easier included simplified or specific public contributor claim forms, expenses being paid weekly, or a formalised process. One finance team had formalised the payment process for public involvement work.

> 'I mean I don't think there was anything staggering written down, I just think the very act of writing it down the custom and practice across all the departments helped a lot because it kind of formalised it.'
>
> (S15, Finance Manager)

A couple of universities did not require public contributors to complete a payment form for every involvement activity, instead they logged whether a public contributor attended a meeting and payment was made directly to them via BACS or vouchers. In both of these universities, an involvement coordinator did this work.

However, in universities without a clearly defined process, staff were negotiating payment systems not knowing where to find the correct forms to use on unwieldy staff intranets. There was a lack of consistency over what information was required and therefore forms were sent back and forth.

> 'The invoices, I mean, the information that the grassroots organisations need to include, there seems to be no consistency in what is being asked for.'
>
> (S1, Research Associate)

> ‘I just found it really, really difficult to find answers or even to find where to signpost someone to.’
>
> (S6, Research Support Manager)

> ‘The [staff intranet] is not user friendly as far as I’m concerned. It’s really difficult to find information. It’s not always clearly presented.’
>
> (S7, Senior Research and Innovation Administrator)

The lack of clearly defined processes or formal guidance on what types of payments could be made left staff finding out how to make a payment through their own initiative. There was a feeling of no one knowing exactly the correct way to make payments and therefore the participants used what they thought was the correct process and hoped for the best.

> ‘There isn’t a central guidance that’s works for everybody and I think that that’s the hardest part and like I said before I feel like if you can’t tell me exactly how I can do it then you can’t tell me I’m doing it wrong.’
>
> (S8, Research Coordinator)

The consequences of a lack of formal process or clear guidance could mean delayed payments for public contributors. This could be through forms getting rejected due to missing or incorrect information or missing the monthly deadline for payment. The impact of this on public contributors was clearly understood by staff.

> 'I won’t blame it on administration but to a certain extent sometimes the need that when there is a deadline for a payment to be made if the payment, paperwork and request isn’t put in in a timely manner those people aren’t going to get that money, they are going to have to wait another whole month and that’s not fair.'
>
> (S13, Research Grant Finance Administrator)

The onus is on public contributors to track their own payments

Participants in all stages of our research reported that payments were usually tracked by public contributors themselves. Researchers sometimes tried to keep track, but had little access to university finance systems, and finance teams tracked payments generally, but had little involvement with specific projects and no contact with public contributors directly.

In our survey, university staff reported that they were often only alerted to a missed payment when a public contributor contacted them directly.

Payments made into bank accounts often had little information attached, making it difficult to track what a payment was for, particularly if the claim form had been submitted several weeks previously. Public contributors found the onus was on them to

not only keep track of what payment was for which project but also that those payments had been made.

> ‘Can be very frustrating when you are doing many different things for many different establishments.’
>
> (Public Contributor, Focus Group 3)

> ‘'I think it’s like the onus is on you to keep track of all the work you do, especially if you’re working at different places, because you really can’t rely on them to pay you for meetings you attended.’
>
> (Public Contributor, Focus Group 3)

Public members supported simple solutions, for example the university automatically sending an email when a payment was made. However, this was rarely done.

Payment forms are often not fit for purpose, causing difficulties and exclusion

Payment forms were sometimes difficult to complete, particularly for people without access to the latest technology.

Almost half (47%) of our survey respondents reported that they provide support with completing forms for involvement work. However, only 11% reported that these forms were accessible on smartphones, and only 3% reported that the forms were provided in other languages and formats. Survey respondents noted that the forms were either PDF, MS Excel, or MS Word documents. Many participants also reported that universities tend to be rigid about the format of the forms and can be resistant to creating more accessible versions.

For some staff, the payment forms were not fit for purpose, promoting exclusion and particularly digital exclusion.

> ‘They're difficult to navigate they've never been like let's say co-designed with members of the public that end user. It’s just assumed that these members of the public will be able to access that... which leads me to another point that's come up and that's the fact that it is an Excel spreadsheet that needs to be filled in. I mean what if you don't have Microsoft Office at home or you're just not tech savvy. How would someone in that situation overcome that barrier?’
>
> (S10, Research Coordinator)

The public members described the support and reasonable adjustments they received from staff to be included in involvement work. This was largely positive, with participants describing how research staff showed understanding of different needs and accessibility requirements on the whole, providing regular breaks and hybrid working. However, the forms themselves often remained inaccessible.

What we found: frustrations and burdens

Everyone is worn down by the burden of administration

Both public members and staff expressed frustration with the time and administrative burden of chasing payments and finding out the correct processes to use. The language used to discuss the frustration felt with the difficulties with organising the practicalities of paying and involving members of the public in research was very emotive.

The amount of time spent on facilitating payments and keeping track of them was discussed by both staff and public members as a source of stress and frustration. Staff members used strong language to describe their struggles with university bureaucracy.

> ‘So you’re battling on multiple fronts with finance, admin, the institution. You’re trying to have conversations and you’re just having all these complicated conversations and all it is, is about trying to pay someone.’
>
> (S3, Lecturer)

One academic described what the amount of time and back and forth it takes trying to get public contributors paid felt like:

> 'You know, it’s that kind of cartoon image of walking around, it’s like the Simpsons, you hit a rake and it smacks you in the face and you turn around and you see another one and it smacks you in the face.’
>
> (S3, Lecturer)

Public contributors expressed similar frustrations, which could have further consequences.

> ‘It’s really frustrating. You feel you’re not valued because you’re – it’s mainly finance – like you’re bottom of the pile.’
>
> (Public Contributor, Focus Group 3)

> ‘Even though I’m entitled to some money I don’t bother claiming it because the paperwork is just such a hassle.’
>
> (Public Contributor, Focus Group 1)

We will return to discussions of feeling valued later in this report.

Involvement coordinators are great, but not always available

Involvement coordinators provide a lot of useful support to both researchers and public contributors, and are knowledgeable about university processes. However, they are not available in every university.

Where involvement coordinators or teams were available, they provided practical support such as organising travel (38%), advertising public involvement opportunities (39%), induction or training of public contributors (36%), and administrative support (34%) (respondents were able to choose more than one option so figures do not add up to 100%). In addition, respondents reported that involvement coordinators also provided support in funding, networking, collecting feedback, and facilitating discussions.

Survey respondents from universities with involvement coordinators or teams reported knowing about payment policies for public involvement activities more often (24%) than those working in universities without involvement coordinators (13%).

Involvement coordinators were the group most likely to know which forms needed to be completed for payments – 82% of involvement coordinators said they knew which forms and where to find them, with a much smaller proportion of academics knowing this information. This is important, because many universities do not have a public involvement team, leading to much confusion.

Knowledge of processes often rests with an individual rather than a team

At universities where there was no involvement coordinator or designated member of staff to go to for advice or guidance, academic staff were left managing at individual project level. Staff members often had one person they went to, either because that was their dedicated role, or they knew the person was 'good'. This caused difficulties for staff who did not have relationships with these people or know who they were. This reliance on one person can increase the burden on that staff member and cause difficulties if they leave.

Academic staff described how they did not always know which forms to use, or where to send them for processing, particularly if there was no payment policy.

> 'We are constantly reinventing the wheel and having to do everything.'
>
> (S2, Director of Research Centre)

One participant acknowledged the disparity of knowledge within the university around involvement work, and described how they asked staff in a different department for guidance on payments. There was a feeling of working in silos from some participants, with no shared knowledge or support.

> ‘I don’t ever feel like our life is made easier or anybody, anyone from any other area of the university will offer to do anything helpful to be honest.’
>
> (S7, Senior Research and Innovation Administrator)

In addition, a lot of involvement-related work is done by relatively junior researchers, and there was a sense from some that they had been left feeling adrift by more senior members of staff.

> ‘And that’s kind of where it feels like this weaponised incompetence thing, because it’s like, “I don't know how kind of the admin thing works. Speak to that person or speak to that person.” But then if that person leaves, that kind of knowledge is instantly lost.’
>
> (S1, Research Associate)

Relying on one individual knowing how processes work reflects a dangerous lack of institutional memory.

Staff participants discussed the reliance on personal relationships or knowing who to go to, to get things done.

> ‘I have one person who is the like the PA to the head of department for us, she is great but she's one of those people that is supremely overworked.’
>
> (S4, Associate Professor)

The inequalities of this were apparent to some of the participants.

> ‘But I'm sitting there thinking "Christ, what happens if you're in a completely different department and you don't have this person?’
>
> (S2, Director of Research Centre)

> ‘Most of the time I know who I might be asking, but that's due to me being around for so long, other people might not do'
>
> (S6, Research Support Manager)

Participants who worked at universities with dedicated staff to support with involvement work described the value of having a consistent member of staff or team to go to for both staff and public contributors.

Not everyone had this constant point of contact, which could cause difficulties. A couple of participants discussed the difficulties with the constant rearrangement within universities professional services.

> ‘People get found out as being good, then presumably they get completely overworked and they have to move them on to a different job or something along those lines.’
>
> (S4, Associate Professor)

Reduction in staff in professional services left researchers not knowing who to contact for information, which could mean delayed payments for public contributors. This is particularly problematic in the current climate of redundancies and reorganisations in higher education.

Teams don't always have the same knowledge or priorities

Different teams within a university often did not share understanding or priorities, and this could make it difficult for members of staff find out information or get approval easily.

At the project level, researchers reported differences in understanding between finance and administrative staff about what involvement work actually entailed. These differences in understanding extended to a lack of awareness by finance staff of the issues faced by third party organisations and individuals when payments were delayed.

> 'My impression definitely from any dealings with finance, the finance department at [University] is that they aren't knowledgeable about research because maybe that's something that they don't deal with as often as the student side of things.'
>
> (S7, Senior Research and Innovation Administrator)

One participant described how the payroll team were the sticking point.

> 'It's payroll, and one of the things that's really tricky in this space is you've got people who don't understand the nuances of what we do and don't particularly care to.'
>
> (S11, Public and Patient Involvement Lead)

Participants who worked in finance teams discussed how a lack of knowledge of public involvement could lead to difficulties getting payments through the system, and having a clearly laid out set of processes explaining public involvement payments could help with this.

> 'Because we were having problems getting payments through finance, lack of knowledge of various people. It depended on who you actually got the expenses claim form through. Some people would just push it through, some people would send it back because they needed, well they didn't understand what PPI was basically. '
>
> (S16, Research Unit Administrative Manager)

Having a specific PPI expense form enabled payment processes.

> 'They brought in a specific PPI expenses claim form so you can see straight away that it's PPI so it sails through the system now because everybody understands the process.'
>
> (S16, Research Unit Administrative Manager)

Another finance staff member discussed how working in a PPI team enabled understanding of what PPI was it put a human side to it, moving it beyond just a finance process of tax and VAT.

> ‘I think I find from having been on both sides, from the finance side of things, central finance to them, you know it’s just a process, money gets paid in, money out, that’s that. You follow protocol, you follow VAT, you follow tax. But from the side of me that’s spent years working amongst a team … and having face to face contact with service users … you get to know, you know they are not just a process on a piece of paper.’
>
> (S13, Research Grants Finance Administrator)

What we found: values

Staff value relationships with public contributors, but are aware that bureaucracy can create a lack of trust

Staff and public contributors both talked about valuing people and relationships, but this was different for each group. For staff, it was important to build relationships with members of the public, but staff were aware that trust could be threatened when processes failed.

Just as relationships with other staff were key to getting support with involvement processes, the staff participants equally discussed the value of building trusting relationships with the public contributors they worked with. Building these relationships took time and effort.

> ‘So yes it's a bit of hard work and I don't think researchers do understand that, that it will you know, take a bit of their time and effort, it’s rewarding of course but there is a lot of relationship building needs to happen’.
>
> (S5, Research Adviser)

Maintaining these relationships over time was seen as key to future involvement, both with individual public members and community organisations.

> ‘We try to give people a named contact that they can go to and they can build that rapport and relationship with that person, and that’s really important, particularly as we might be engaging with who are perhaps more new to the PPIE space as well.’
>
> (S11, Public and Patient Involvement Lead)

Another participant described how the best involvement happened when there were good relationships with public members. One participant referred to this as trust, particularly with underserved populations who are not used to working with universities.

This relationship building and trust was seen as particularly important when the processes failed, and payments were delayed.

> ‘Some of them I've been able to really work hard to build a relationship with enough that it’s me that they then trust to know that I'm doing my best in the background to get them paid.’
>
> (S1, Research Associate)

A couple of participants talked about valuing public members by not treating them as an asset and providing autonomy over whether to be paid or not.

> ‘I’m very conscious that you know when we’re at work, we live in our own box, come in and out and it’s fine, whereas if you’re a public contributor you’ve got your life and there are messages coming in and requests and getting a bit lost. You’ve just got to remember that [when we email a public contributor] it’s landing in someone’s personal inbox.'
>
> (S8, Research Coordinator)

> ‘You will likely get public contributors sign up again to research opportunities at [the university] or within a particular department or with a particular researcher if you have kept them informed and it’s another way of valuing their time and contribution, isn’t it? It’s showing respect for what they’ve given to you rather than just taking it. '
>
> (S12, Involvement Lead)

The importance of making sure involvement work was not just tokenistic and that clear expectations were set over what was involved and expected from the public members was key to good involvement.

Public contributors see public involvement as work, and want to be both valued and paid

Public contributors also discussed values and principles, but placed more emphasis on the value of good communication, and of being paid for involvement.

The public member focus groups did not talk about building relationships with staff in the same way, rather they discussed the importance of good communication between staff and public members. Clear communication around expectations and what is involved in a piece of work was important to public members. This supported them to feel prepared and not overwhelmed going into meetings. Equally, receiving feedback on projects they were involved with and whether grants were successful countered against tokenistic involvement.

> ‘I appreciate that, in terms of explaining exactly what’s going to be wanted timewise and everything else.’
>
> (Public Contributor, Focus Group 2)

This good communication fed into the feelings of being valued for the work done. Being paid was also considered an important indicator of value for public contributors. This was discussed by all three public member focus groups.

> ‘How we value and how we see work – because I think a lot of this is that a lot of people still don’t see PPI as work because they see it as volunteering. And I kind of feel that on numerous occasions I’ve been made to feel greedy actually, for expecting to be paid’
>
> (Public Contributor, Focus Group 2)

Public members often felt they had little power in their relationships with universities.

> ‘I think what I would say is the only power we have often, as public contributors, is the power to walk away, because actually we don’t have the power to change things.’
>
> (Public Contributor, Focus Group 2)

The importance of making sure involvement work was not just tokenistic and that clear expectations were set over what was involved and expected from the public members was key to good involvement.

Public involvement needs to be valued at a high level

Having support from senior staff could make public involvement, and coordination across an institution, much easier. In addition, most universities did not seem to have public representation or involvement at a high level within their institution.

Less than a fifth of our survey respondents (17%) reported that their universities had representation from members of the public at higher levels within universities, usually at the executive level and on the board of governors. Having members of the public involved in shaping the strategic direction of a university may help in prioritising public involvement, but there is no guarantee.

On a related note, university staff said the understanding of public involvement varied within their institutions, and that there were varying priorities which could affect processes of supporting and paying public members.

For example, in a small number of universities, there was confusion over whether ethical approval was required for public involvement activities

> ‘They’re now talking about making changes to ethics and thinking about PPI within that and again, you have this part of the university that doesn’t understand the ins and outs of what you do…When they don’t understand that work on the ground and that’s really frustrating.’
>
> (S11 Public and Patient Involvement Lead)

One interviewee explained that their university had changed their requirements recently.

> ‘It’s a real problem because… [the funder] demands that you do pre-project public involvement and engagement. We’ve now been told [by the university] that we have to get ethical permission to even do pre-project public involvement and engagement, and we’re sort of saying “well, you can’t, we haven’t got the time”. It’s just a complete impasse at the moment.’
>
> (S2, Director of Research Centre)

Guidance from the Health Research Authority (HRA), the body responsible for ethical review of health and social care research in England, states that ethical approval is not usually required for public involvement activities, but there is nothing to stop universities imposing their own restrictions.

How public involvement was valued and prioritised by universities was seen as instrumental in how it worked at the project level.

> ‘Having a director who understands it and gets it makes such a significant difference.’
>
> (S11, Public and Patient Involvement Lead)

Having senior leaders buy in for one participant meant that policies relating to involvement work were not ‘resisted’ by other departments such as finance.

University staff felt that the lack of awareness of public involvement work across the broader university environment had the potential to negatively effect future funding opportunities.

> ‘This is a risk to funding if we can’t engage with, you know, using HR terminology, underserved groups in a way that work for them, we risk losing research funding and the [funding organisation] gives X million to the university’
>
> (S11, Public and Patient Involvement Lead)

> ‘Again it's this kind of this dis-jointment between, you know, NIHR, the requirement to undertake PPI and providing this guidance but then institutions almost acting as if ‘what is PPI?’. It doesn't exist. There's no guidance from the institution.’
>
> (S10, Research Coordinator)

It is clear here that university actions can significantly hinder public involvement, for example by requiring ethical approval for involvement activities. However, they can also help involvement, for instance by funding an involvement coordinator.

Recommendations

In this report, we have explored bureaucracy around public involvement within universities from the perspective of public contributors and university staff.

It is clear that some aspects of university systems make administration around public involvement, and therefore public involvement itself, difficult and stressful for both public contributors and university staff.

Our recommendations are made within the current challenging financial context of higher education. The Office for Students predicted in May 2025 that, by July 2025, 43% of higher education institutions in England would be in a financial deficit. Universities are scaling back research and knowledge exchange activities, and reducing staff capacity, in a bid to save money (Universities UK, 2025). Reorganisation and redundancies mean that staff knowledge is being lost.

We have started our recommendations with three actions which we believe would have a fundamental effect on easing many of the challenges faced by university staff and public contributors in this research – a clear policy, a person or team responsible for public involvement, and both involvement and support at high levels. The remaining recommendations may take less time and resource to implement, but are no less important, and could be done in the process of working towards the first three.

➢ Universities should have a policy for public involvement

We recommend that each university creates a policy for public involvement, to include clarity about payment rates and methods, forms, expenses, access and support requirements, and timescales. There should be a publicly available version of this on the university website. In creating a policy, universities should draw on national guidance (for example from the National Institute for Health and Care Research, the Health Research Agency, and other bodies) around doing public involvement well.

➢ Universities should have a person or team responsible for public involvement

Having a centralised source of knowledge around public involvement will save staff time, and also sends a clear signal that the university values public involvement. It also makes it easier for public contributors to get involved in research and teaching, contributing to the civic mission of many universities.

➢ Involvement and support at high levels within universities

Support for public involvement should be visible at high levels within universities. In addition, members of the public should be involved in governance and decision-making within universities.

➢ All forms for public contributors should be accessible

Official forms may be inaccessible to some public contributors, who may not have access to specific technology (for example Microsoft Excel). Ideally, finance and academic staff should work with public contributors to create accessible forms which will be accepted by university finance teams. In the shorter term, it may be appropriate to support public contributors to complete forms, or to create locally simplified ways of collecting and storing information for the duration of a project, minimising the amount of times payment forms must be completed.

➢ Everyone should understand the process at the start

This will be more difficult if there is no written university-wide policy, but we recommend that staff planning any public involvement should find out their university or departmental process for payment etc *before* doing any public involvement work. Public contributors should be informed of any restrictions, dates, and forms at the start of a project.

➢ Communicate about payment tracking

Finance teams should send straightforward remittance advice to academic or research staff (and public contributors, if appropriate) when a payment for public involvement is made. This should be clear and detailed, showing exactly what the payment has been made for. Academic and research staff submitting forms should make a note to check progress within a specific timeframe, and continue to follow up until payments have been made.

➢ Work to eliminate workarounds

Workarounds are created when there is no clear policy. A workaround may be a short-term fix for a problem experienced by an individual project, but longer term, workarounds ensure the system never changes for the better. Universities should seek to make workarounds unnecessary by creating clear, usable processes which demonstrate how much public involvement is valued.

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Appendix 1: Advisory group members

Peter Atkins, public contributor, carer for person with borderline personality disorder, and Public Involvement in Education and Research (PIER) Officer, University of Bournemouth
Silvia Bortoli, Senior Public Involvement Manager, National Institute for Health Research (NIHR)
Eleni Chambers, public contributor, disabled researcher/activist
Heidi Probst, Professor of Radiotherapy and Oncology, Sheffield Hallam University
Simon Turpin, Policy Officer, Associate of Medical Research Charities (AMRC)

Researchers
Jenni Brooks, Associate Professor of Social Policy, Sheffield Hallam University
Piyali Misquitta, PhD Researcher, Sheffield Hallam University
Samm Wharam, Research and Innovation Officer, Sheffield Hallam University
Amanda Willcox, Researcher, Sheffield Hallam University

Appendix 2: Review of university policies

We carried out a review of policies and processes around involvement available on public facing websites of UK universities in April 2024. We used the search terms '[University name] patient public involvement payment' and '[University name] patient public involvement in research'. If no results were returned for a university, their website was explored using the search function for information on patient public involvement.

We used a list of 121 UK universities compiled from an online source in early 2024. This was not a complete list, and excluded 43 institutions from the official UK government register of degree-awarding bodies, including some specialist colleges (eg arts, music, agriculture), private universities, and smaller university colleges, among other degree-awarding bodies. Our list is provided in Table 6.

Table 6: List of UK universities for website review
University of Aberdeen
Abertay University
Aberystwyth University
Anglia Ruskin University
Aston University
Bangor University
University of Bath
Bath Spa University
University of Bedfordshire
University of Birmingham
Birmingham City University
Birmingham Newman University
University of Bolton [renamed University of Greater Manchester in December 2024]
Bournemouth University
University of Bradford
University of Brighton
University of Bristol
Brunel University
Buckinghamshire New University
University of Cambridge
Canterbury Christ Church University
Cardiff University
Cardiff Metropolitan University
University of Central Lancashire
University of Chester
University of Chichester
City, University of London [merged with St George's University of London in August 2024]
Coventry University
University of Cumbria
De Montfort University
University of Derby
University of Dundee
Durham University

University of East Anglia
University of East London
Edge Hill University
University of Edinburgh
Edinburgh Napier University
University of Essex
University of Exeter
Falmouth University
University of Glasgow
Glasgow Caledonian University
University of Gloucestershire
Goldsmiths, University of London
University of Greenwich
Heriot-Watt University
University of Hertfordshire
University of Huddersfield
University of Hull
Imperial College London
Keele University
University of Kent
King's College London
Kingston University
Lancaster University
University of Leeds
Leeds Beckett University
Leeds Trinity University
University of Leicester
University of Lincoln
University of Liverpool
Liverpool Hope University
Liverpool John Moores University
London Metropolitan University
London School of Economics
London South Bank University
Loughborough University
University of Manchester
Manchester Metropolitan University
Middlesex University
Newcastle University
University of Northampton
Northumbria University
University of Nottingham
Nottingham Trent University
University of Oxford
Oxford Brookes University
University of Plymouth
University of Portsmouth
Queen Margaret University
Queen Mary University of London
Queen's University Belfast
University of Reading

Robert Gordon University
University of Roehampton
Royal Holloway, University of London
University of Salford
University of Sheffield
Sheffield Hallam University
SOAS University of London
Southampton Solent University
University of South Wales
University of Southampton
University of St Andrews
St Mary's University, Twickenham
University of Staffordshire
University of Stirling
University of Strathclyde
University of Suffolk
University of Sunderland
University of Surrey
University of Sussex
Swansea University
Teesside University
University of Wales, Trinity Saint David
University College London
Ulster University
University for the Creative Arts
University of the Arts London
University of the West of England
University of Warwick
University of West London
University of the West of Scotland
University of Westminster
University of Winchester
University of Wolverhampton
University of Worcester
Wrexham University (formerly Glyndŵr University)
University of York
York St John University

We collected the following information for each university:

- Whether there was any information about patient or public involvement on their website
- What types of information (general, payment, for public, for researchers)
- Whether information was university-wide or specific to a department
- Whether policy documents were available publicly

This data was used to build a picture of the general information available on public facing university websites surrounding public involvement, descriptive statistics were used to analyse this data.

Appendix 3: Survey of university staff

We created an online survey, administered using Qualtrics software, for university research and professional services staff. The survey was open between June and November 2024.

Participant recruitment occurred via emails to professional networks, social media, and using snowballing techniques. The participant information sheet was visible at the start of the survey and participants indicated their consent before proceeding to the survey. The inclusion criteria for participating in the study were

1. having worked in a UK university within the last 12 months and either
2. if respondent is academic or research staff, having experience of patient and public involvement in research as a member of university, or
3. if respondent is finance or administrative staff, having responsibility for finances or administrative aspects of PPI work as a member of university staff.

The survey contained a mix of multiple-choice, multiple-answer and free-text questions, included items about respondents' current role, their experience of public involvement, their knowledge of payments for public involvement work, their knowledge of the processes required to facilitate public involvement work, knowledge of institutional policies, and their examples of best practices, workarounds, barriers and facilitators to public involvement work.

In response to feedback from the advisory group, an additional question requesting the name of the respondents' current university was also added. This was done to understand the representativeness of the data. However, the results were not reported to maintain anonymity. To give participants flexibility in which questions they responded to, all questions were optional. The results of the survey were analysed using R statistical software (R core team).

Descriptive statistics were used to quantitatively summarise the responses to multiple-choice and multiple-answer questions. Free-text data were analysed thematically.

Appendix 4: Interviews with university staff

We interviewed 17 members of university staff working across a range of research, involvement, administration and finance roles – see Table 7 for job titles.

Table 7: Staff interviewees

Code	Job title
S1	Research Associate
S2	Director of Research Centre
S3	Lecturer
S4	Associate Professor
S5	Research Adviser
S6	Research Support Manager
S7	Senior Research & Innovation Administrator
S8	Research Coordinator
S9	Involvement Lead
S10	Research Coordinator
S11	Public and Patient Involvement Lead
S12	Involvement Lead
S13	Research Grants Finance Administrator
S14	Research and Business Manager
S15	Finance Manager
S16	Research Unit Administrative Manager
S17	Research Grants Finance Officer

The participants were recruited via existing networks, advertising on LinkedIn, and through expressions of interest on the survey responses. As the interviews progressed, we realised the importance of recruiting a range of staff roles, particularly from the professional services staff. This meant that a breadth of experience from across roles involved with public involvement was captured.

Most staff were interviewed individually, however one participant requested to include several colleagues, so participants S14, S15, S16 and S17 took part in a group interview. The interviews took place online and lasted between 30 to 60 minutes. The interviews followed a semi-structured format with topics covered encompassing experience of involvement work (barriers and good practice), practicalities of involvement work (type of involvement, payment processes, HR processes), and institutional policies. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcriptions were anonymised and analysed using framework analysis (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994).

Appendix 5: Focus groups with members of the public

We carried out three online focus groups in July and August 2024 including a total of 11 members of the public with experience of involvement in research or teaching with a UK university. The participants were recruited through existing networks and advertising on LinkedIn. Each was asked to complete a google doc expression of interest form, which asked which university/ies they worked with and a brief sentence about their public involvement experience. This generated a great deal of interest from public contributors and therefore we purposely sampled participants to include a range of experience and geographical distance. All interested public contributors were thanked for their interest and placed on a waiting list in case of cancellations. Indeed, this proved fruitful as people's commitments changed and we were able to offer places to a couple of people from the waiting list.

Each focus group consisted of 3 or 4 public members and lasted 90 mins. The focus groups included two facilitators, one a member of the research team and one public contributor from the advisory group for the project. The focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The anonymised transcripts were analysed using framework analysis. Topics covered in the focus groups included practicalities, inductions, payments and reimbursement, processes and policies.

The transcriptions were anonymised and analysed using framework analysis (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994), involving the core research team and a public contributor from the advisory group.

We have attributed quotations in the report to focus groups, rather than individual people, as a key purpose of focus groups is to generate discussion which goes beyond what each member might say individually.

Contact us

Dr Jenni Brooks

j.brooks@shu.ac.uk

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