

Public involvement in research: assessing impact through a realist evaluation

David Evans,^{1*} Jane Coad,² Kiera Cottrell,¹
Jane Dalrymple,¹ Rosemary Davies,¹ Christine Donald,¹
Vito Laterza,³ Amy Long,¹ Amanda Longley,¹
Pam Moule,¹ Katherine Pollard,¹ Jane Powell,¹
Anna Puddicombe,¹ Cathy Rice¹ and Ruth Sayers¹

¹University of the West of England, Bristol, UK

²Coventry University, Coventry, UK

³Human Economy Programme, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

*Corresponding author

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Plain English summary

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Plain English summary

Although the UK government is committed to public involvement in health research, there is not much evidence of its benefits, so this project explored how involvement worked in eight case studies. Each case was a research study where members of the public worked alongside researchers, and each was in a different area of health.

We used a method called realist evaluation, which asks 'What works for whom in what circumstances . . . and why?' (Pawson R. *The Science of Evaluation*. London: Sage; 2013). We collected information over a year from 88 interviews with 42 participants who were researchers, research managers, third-sector staff and members of the public.

We started this project with a set of ideas about what might work best (our theory), and what we found out supported some of our ideas but not others. We have confirmed that it is important for the researcher in charge to believe in the importance of involvement and to make sure that it happens. However, practical leadership could be passed on to other researchers. We found that public involvement was also supported when there was a strong culture and history of involvement in a research group.

In terms of practicalities, it was more important that researchers had time to make involvement happen than having a separate pot of money for it. Building good relationships was really important, and giving members of the public feedback about how they had helped was important in building their motivation and confidence. Payment and training for the public were more significant for some types of public involvement than others.

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Editorial contact: nihredit@southampton.ac.uk

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