

Developing ideas and strengthening research proposals through public involvement: a practical example



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Background

In October 2023, Lavinia started developing a new proposal that aimed to explore how community-based services identify, assess, and support the needs and wellbeing related to food and drink of older people who live at home and use homecare. By food and drink needs we mean

- (a) access to food and drink that respect a person's cultural, religious, and ethical preferences (e.g. halal or vegan food);
- (b) food/drink preparation and social connection (e.g. eating together, celebrating festivities, etc.);
- (c) maintaining adequate nutrition.

This proposal builds on the findings of a project led by Dr Stacey Rand (2022 - 2024) that explored trends and existing literature on the food and drink needs of older people who live at home and use homecare. Lavinia and Karin worked together on this project as Research Fellow and Research Public Advisor respectively. You can read about the findings [here](#) and [here](#).

Homecare plays a vital role in providing support to older people but its contribution is often overlooked in research. It is important to explore how food and drink needs of older people who live at home are identified, assessed, and supported as this could improve services and reduce unmet needs and inequalities.



Why we sought public involvement

“ I feel that hearing from those with lived experience can make the research feel more “real” - nothing beats hearing from the real thing!”

Karin

Lavinia identified she needed to seek the involvement of people who use homecare and unpaid carers with first-hand experience of the topic, which she lacked, to develop a stronger proposal. Public advisors were invited to;

- reflect on the the current landscape of services to refine the scope and focus of the proposal,
- discuss who should take part in the research,
- review the proposal to make sure that it was written in a clear and accessible way.

Karin, an ARC KSS Theme Public Advisor, who had worked with Lavinia on the previous project (mentioned above) is a strong supporter for public involvement at the early stage of research and supported in reaching out to potential public advisor

What we did

Plan

Lavinia outlined the involvement activities, the number of public advisors to involve, and the timeframe for public involvement. This gave an idea of the resources (time and money) needed and channels to reach potential public advisors.

Resources

Lavinia applied for the Public Involvement Fund (granted by the NIHR Research Design Services). She was also able to use some budget and time from the project mentioned above that was ring-fenced to develop future research.

“It is important to have adequate resources and a feasible plan for public involvement that is clearly communicated to public advisors.” Lavinia

Recruitment

- We shared a call for Expression of Interest across different routes to reach out to older people using homecare and unpaid carers across England.
- Designed a flyer and circulated it with a wide network of people with support from ARC PCIE team.
- Call circulated through Karin (Public Advisor) to her networks of friends who are unpaid carers.
- Lavinia presented the proposal and opportunity to get involved to various forums (e.g. Kent Research Partnership).

Involvement Activities

8 public advisors took part in the following activities:

- Online focus group (90 minutes) with 4 public advisors to discuss the proposal (research question, scope, methods)
- Online individual meeting (90 minutes) with 4 public advisors to discuss the proposal (research question, scope, methods)
- 4 public advisors reviewed the lay summary.

Impact

- Public advisors shared their own expertise and were pivotal in strengthening the relevance of the proposal.
- We narrowed down the scope of the proposal thanks to a better understanding of the day-to-day provision of support for food and drink and related challenges.
- We added a sub-question on support for cultural and religious needs after hearing a few instances of issues with the provision of halal food.
- We reflected on the feasibility of co-production workshops with older people and carers, and how they should be organized.
- We mapped potential stakeholders to engage.




Was public involvement at this early stage worth it?

Absolutely! We found that this gave us the time and opportunity for ideas to form and take shape. The proposal has gained a lot from the contributions of public advisors: it is more relevant and meaningful to the people at the heart of this research.

Public involvement has also strengthened our confidence in the quality of the proposal and the need for this study.

Karin and Lavinia worked together in the previous study, and this was a fruitful continuation of that work and rapport. Karin was able to contribute their knowledge of the research findings from the previous study as well as her first-hand expertise as a carer for her mum.



Being involved as a public member makes you feel that you can use your own lived experience to help others in the future in a small way.”

Karin

