

Getting involved in reviewing health and social care research grant applications

We are seeking members of the public to work with us to help researchers plan better research that has the needs and concerns of patients at its heart and is good value for money for the NHS

What is the Research Design Service South West (RDS SW)?

The RDS SW is part of the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) - the “research arm” of the NHS. The RDS SW is one of ten regional ‘hubs’ around the UK that make up the national Research Design Service. We are a team of people based in Universities and the NHS across the South West, who provide advice and practical support to researchers who are developing applications to bid for research funding. We each have different areas that we provide expert advice in, such as research methods, statistics, health economics or patient and public involvement in research. We also have a community of public contributors who work alongside us.

Find out more:

National Research Design Service: www.nihr.ac.uk/rds

RDS South West: www.rds-sw.nihr.ac.uk

What is a research grant application?

The NHS funds research to find new ways to improve peoples’ health and to improve health and social care services. Research funding is limited, so the NIHR only pays for the very best research to go ahead. This makes the process of applying for research highly competitive. To compete for funding, researchers must submit detailed grant applications that include a description of the problem they want to investigate, what they aim to find out, how they will go about doing that, and how much it will cost. These applications are then reviewed by a panel of academic and medical experts, supported by public contributors, who decide which research should be funded.

What is the (RDS SW) Project Review Committee (PRC)?

Our South West regional Project Review Committee (PRC) copies, as far as possible, the way a real funding committee works, and acts as a ‘dry run’ for researchers applying for funding. The process helps them identify any improvements they need to make in their grant application, or indeed any serious errors they need to address.

PRC meetings are held once a month, usually in Taunton. About 15 RDS SW staff attend, joined by two public contributors. As a group we discuss the applications and make suggestions for improvements that are fed back to the researchers. There are usually 4 grant applications each month to review, depending on funding deadlines.

Why get involved?

Getting involved can be interesting, rewarding and enjoyable! You will be doing something important, and helping to improve health and social care. It can also give you an opportunity to meet new people and to learn new skills.

When the public are involved in reviewing and commenting on applications, the research application is usually much better because the research is designed with patient's experiences, views and needs in mind. The better the application, the more chance of being funded, so your input could really help research in the South West become more patient-focussed.

What would I be doing?

When you join our community of public contributors, you can contribute to PRC in one of two ways:

- Review – we will send you a single grant proposal to read through. We have a 'feedback form' that will guide you through what to look out for and how to best to advise the researcher on making improvements. You will then send that form back to us, and we will present your report in the meeting.
- Review and attend PRC – you will receive a single proposal to review as above, but will also attend the PRC meeting and present your review on the day. Having a public contributor in the room allows really good discussion about how to make research more 'patient-focussed'. You will also be encouraged to contribute to the discussions about any other projects being considered.

In both cases, your review will form an important part of the advice that goes back to the researchers.

We do ask all of our public contributors to sign a confidentiality agreement.

How much time will it take?

A grant application can be quite a large document (average 20 pages). Our feedback form aims to walk you through reviewing the application, and to focus only on those bits of the application that are relevant to patients. But reviewing an application and completing the form may take you between 2 – 4 hours (it might be more to start with, until you get used to it). We can provide you with free training and any ongoing support you need.

If you attend the meeting, in addition to the time to review above, the PRC lasts around 3 hours. You would also have to travel to the meeting, and home again afterwards. We provide you with light refreshments on arrival and lunch after the meeting.

Do I need any skills or experience?

We welcome public contributors from a wide variety of backgrounds so there is no particular experience or qualification you need to become a reviewer with us. We do value any experience you might have of health conditions, caring for someone else with poor health, using NHS services, being part of a community group or previous voluntary experience.

As a public contributor, your role is to “put the patient first” and to think about whether the research proposal is an issue that affects patients; how many patients it might affect; whether the research asks the right questions, or whether the ‘endpoints’ match what patients might want, and so on. You will need to see things from a patient point of view – and have the confidence to put that view forward either in your written review, or at the PRC meeting.

Some of the proposals you read will be complicated, but you will be fully supported to get the most from being a reviewer. We have dedicated staff to support you, and any training you need will be provided for free.

Will I be paid?

Yes! We believe that getting public input into this review process is important. You become one of our ‘Advisors’ and your views are equally valued, so it is important to recognise the effort that you put into this work. We pay different rates for those who write reviews and send them in and for those who attend the PRC meeting and present reviews. This will be part of the discussion we have when you contact us.

We pay reasonable travel expenses for you to attend PRC (if you come and present your review), and other expenses can be offered (such as childcare or replacement carers) to support your work.

If you are interested in joining our community of public contributors please get in touch with one of the RDS SW patient and public involvement advisors:

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