

Issues to think about before you start – support

Support might be provided by a range of people, for example public involvement support staff, researchers on individual projects or other members of the panel.

Encourage peer support. Panel members can offer valuable support to each other, which can be encouraged by creating the right environment. This might involve:

- holding workshops/events with time built-in for socialising
- encouraging the panel to discuss training and support needs
- asking individuals who go on training courses or attend conferences to share what they have learnt with other people
- encouraging more experienced panel members to co-facilitate training or mentor new members.

Staff who work with research panels can be an essential source of support. They are likely to form strong relationships with panel members and can act as a bridge between the panel and researchers to help negotiate involvement roles and manage any problems. They need to be:

- equipped with the relevant skills, for example good listening skills
- clear about boundaries – they are not counsellors or professional advisers
- know when and how to refer people to other services if appropriate

Staff who work with research panels can help researchers be clear about their support responsibilities. Researchers need to provide:

- support that is specific to the involvement role, for example briefing and supporting service users who become members of a project steering group or a project advisory group.
- a named contact for panel members on any given project who they can go to for support.

Providing additional support to new members. When relationships are already established, it can be difficult for a new person to integrate into the group and start working at the same level. The type of support that might be helpful includes:

- briefing and de-briefing after the first few meetings
- buddying-up new members with experienced members
- allowing new members to observe one or two meetings before being expected to contribute
- briefing the chair of the group to help with introductions and bring new members into discussions.