

# What's the evidence for? A critical reflection on the evidence base for public involvement in research

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## Introduction

We held an invoNET sponsored workshop at the INVOLVE 2012 Conference to debate the evidence base of public involvement in research and inform the shape of future invoNET events and further work.

invoNET is facilitated by INVOLVE. It is a network of people interested in developing the evidence base on the nature, extent and impact of public involvement in research to increase the awareness of current research and findings, and also to promote shared learning and discussion. It is currently reviewing how best to support those interested in the evidence base and how to broaden awareness of invoNET and the Evidence library.

The workshop considered:

1. What do we mean by the 'evidence base'?
2. Who are we trying to influence with this evidence?
3. What are the purposes of the evidence base?
4. What is lacking in the existing evidence base in order to fulfil the purposes identified?
5. How can invoNET help build the evidence base?

The workshop was facilitated by Tina Coldham, Louca-Mai Brady and Rosemary Barber with support from other invoNET members: Jonathan Boote, Jim Elliott, Tara Mistry, Mark Petticrew and Patricia Wilson. Hugh McLaughlin also contributed to the initial development of the workshop.

The workshop was well attended and delegates were very enthusiastic about the discussion topics. There was limited awareness of invoNET and what it could offer.

## **Questions discussed at the workshop**

### **1 What do we mean by the 'evidence base'?**

The nature of the evidence about the impact of public involvement was contested, with different stakeholders valuing different types of evidence. Delegates felt that it was important to clarify the evidence requirements of different stakeholders in order to avoid misunderstandings about the type of acceptable evidence. Not all categories of evidence will be understood or accepted by all researchers. There was felt to be a need for greater specificity about what we mean by an evidence base and for more rigorous evidence

### **2. Who are we trying to influence?**

Many different types of people could be influenced by evidence of the positive benefits of public involvement in research, including: commissioners of research; NHS providers; influential peers who can provide leadership on public involvement; sceptical researchers as well as researchers in training; and research participants.

### **3. What are the purposes of the evidence base?**

Evidence can be useful to convince sceptics and provide knowledge and learning for people interested in or new to public involvement. We could begin to investigate what works for whom and how, and the importance of the context for public

involvement. Different stakeholders are likely to value different aspects of the evidence.

#### **4. What is lacking in the existing evidence base?**

We are lacking theoretical frameworks to explain how public involvement can work best and guide evaluations. Information about the impact of public involvement should move from descriptions to testing theories using a strategic approach.

Aspirations are to move towards implementing good practice underpinned by evidence and to build capacity. The links between research findings and the benefits for users of services need to be strengthened. We need to know if the research made a tangible benefit to services. Little information is available about cost effectiveness. If monitoring is set up by research commissioning programmes it could provide information about how public involvement was implemented in research projects and programmes.

Delegates stressed the need to ensure accountability to the public by informing them of the difference public involvement in research has made.

#### **5. How can invoNET help build the evidence base?**

Discussions during the workshop confirmed the need to raise awareness and increase the use of invoNET. Delegates suggested invoNET address further questions, including:

- What type of evidence should invoNET provide access to, and for whom?
- How can – and should – invoNET support the development of theoretical frameworks and a more strategic approach to public involvement?
- How can invoNET help to develop approaches to assessing tangible benefits and cost effectiveness of public involvement in research through monitoring and evaluation?

Help us to continue these discussions and find out what others are doing around developing the evidence base for public involvement in research.

## **Join invoNET**

Register on the INVOLVE website [www.invo.org.uk/invonet/](http://www.invo.org.uk/invonet/)

## **View the Evidence library**

A collection of over 230 references to articles on the impact, nature and extent of public involvement in research  
[www.invo.org.uk/resource-centre/evidence-library/](http://www.invo.org.uk/resource-centre/evidence-library/)

In the next newsletter we will feature interviews with invoNET members exploring their views on the impact public involvement has on the quality of their research.