Reviewer’s report

Title: Learning to work together - lessons from a reflective analysis of a research project on public involvement

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Reviewer: Simon Stones

Reviewer's report:

This paper takes a realist approach to evaluate patient and public involvement (PPI) in the RAPPORT study. Overall, this paper highlights many of aspects about PPI that we know already, so I'm not sure what new evidence it adds to our understanding. Nevertheless, it is interesting to follow the leanings of this team. Given that it is a single case study of an NIHR funded project which received significant funding, the generalisability is not as strong as it would be with multiple case studies; however, the authors quite rightly acknowledge this in their limitations.

The plain English summary is good, and doesn't contain any complex terms. Abbreviations are explained. There is some inconsistency throughout the paper with regards to nomenclature of PPI contributors - in the plain English summary and main body, 'public contributors' is used, whilst in the main body of the text, 'lay people', 'PPI contributors', 'PPI representatives' and simply 'PPI' are all used, despite stating you used 'PPI representatives' to cover all PPI input. Therefore, it would be preferable to be consistent throughout.

We are well aware that funding bodies expect genuine PPI in research. The background should be reinforced with references to the literature. However, on many occasions, what we see on paper in applications is not reflected in what happens in reality with regards to PPI. In addition, there is not an acknowledgement of the scale of research projects (i.e. RAPPORT was a national study with significant funding) and so some researchers working with much smaller budgets may find some of the suggestions in this manuscript unrealistic. Therefore, I think acknowledging and emphasizing how the ingredients for good PPI can be modeled to each project depending on resources would be helpful.

There is occasionally a blurring of the lines between findings from the RAPPORT study, and findings of PPI involvement in the RAPPORT study (i.e. on page 4, you examined 22 case studies over an 18 month period). Therefore, I would just make this a little clearer. There is no clear aim of the work presented in this manuscript (you allude to the aim on page 5 by describing the focus). Numbers 1 to 7 on page 5/6 are the objectives of the study, so it would be helpful to provide an overarching aim. You would typically present the aim and objectives of the study in the background section, prior to the methods section.
The methodology section is very short and could be more comprehensive. The data obtained from the sources highlighted lends itself to qualitative analysis, so I would expect a description of the methodologies used to analyze the data. For example, framework analysis or content analysis. How data was coded, how themes were induced from the data, or deduced from the existing literature. How the data was stored and analyzed (i.e. in Excel, or NVivo) and who was involved in analyzing the data (i.e. one, two or three researchers).

I wouldn't place (below) in parentheses when referring to figures/tables/boxes on page 6. Placing question numbers in parentheses after sub-sections of the results doesn't add much to the results section, as you have to keep referring back to the objectives of the study. For each sub-section, I would link in the overall finding to the original objective for ease to the reader. There is an emphasis on the three different levels of PPI input, but there is not the acknowledgement that those three levels may have blended. Indeed, for good PPI, how were these three groups of PPI representatives connected together so they could share their ideas and experiences so as to benefit each aspect of the study that they were involved with? It has previously been reported that PPI representatives benefit from peer support, but this is not acknowledged.

You state that PPI representatives would be included in induction and ongoing training/support, but there is no description of this process, or how it impacted the study, researchers and PPI representatives themselves.

There is good critical appraisal on behalf of the study authors, such as reflecting on how PPI representatives on advisory groups don't feel as valued. This is very important, particularly for future work, to ensure that all PPI representatives, regardless of their position, are valued, respected and rightly acknowledged for any work they do. Reference to the INVOLVE principles would be good here.

I would like to see an implications for practice section, going further than the conclusion of the study. It's common knowledge that relationships are important for everyone in a research team to feel comfortable, valued and to have a voice, and the conclusion don't really suggest any future improvements or steps to move forward, which are important points to consider during a reflective analysis.

There are some minor issues with English, which need to be changed. I.e. Page 5, line 11, 'the outset' is repeated twice. Sentence spacing also needs to be checked. There are also some formatting issues on Page 9.

Overall, I commend the authors for sharing their reflection on this important study. Any in-depth discussion about PPI in research is welcomed. With changes mentioned above - primarily ensuring that the methods used are more systematically presented, and more in-depth reference to existing literature in the background and methodology section, I would be happy for this paper to be published.
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