PRE-CLINICAL PPI NEWSLETTER

February 2026: A focus on Focus Groups

In December, we ran our first focus group with ECRs which provided useful insights and gave us a chance to test the focus group format. We have since completed 4 focus groups in total with members of the preclinical neuroscience community.

From the first focus group we tweaked and refined the session structure – zooming out from particular routes for public involvement (PI) to bigger questions around where PI could happen in their work, what kinds of public input would be valuable, what aspects of their work do they think matter to members of the public, and what would be needed to do PI.

Immediate Reflections

on prominent themes across focus groups

- **Communicating pre-/non-clinical research:** Research without a clear link to disease was seen as difficult to communicate, due to public expectations of direct health benefits. The term "*pre-clinical*" was viewed as potentially misleading, and participants described challenges in justifying the purpose and value of such research without reference to future clinical applications.
- **Openness versus cultures of secrecy:** Participants described tensions between institutional commitments to openness and everyday practices that emphasise caution or secrecy. Examples included discouragement from discussing animal research and controls on photography or recording within laboratory spaces.
- **Risks associated with openness:** Worries about the vulnerability of being open about your work were highlighted, particularly in the absence of an aligned, collective approach. Yet alongside perceived personal risks of being open, participants also discussed professional risks of being silent.
- **Engagement over involvement:** Engagement was more frequently discussed than involvement, suggesting the value of engagement is easier to recognise within this context. This was especially the case when engagement was framed as explaining or justifying animal research.
- **Value of involvement activities:** Some participants shared positive experiences of involvement, such as consulting patient or interest groups. These activities were described as beneficial for gaining new perspectives, reinforcing study decisions, and supporting motivation. Such experiences of involvement were often related to research with a clearer connection to disease. We also heard about the impact of patient testimonies and the importance of contextualising the difficult work done with animals with future benefits.
- **Public understanding of animal research:** There was a sense that the public has limited awareness of the value of fundamental science and the regulatory standards governing animal research. Participants expressed a desire for greater recognition of the care, responsibility, and connection researchers and staff have towards the animals involved.

What Next?

We are in the process of finalising online surveys which will be distributed to the neuroscience community and publics, and organising additional focus groups with researchers and professional staff in Newcastle to further capture experiences and thoughts on public involvement in pre-clinical research.

With thanks to Mark, Natalie, and David for help shaping the sessions and finding participants

https://tinyurl.com/PreClinPPI