



Involving young people and school staff to co-design training for self-harm disclosures

Changes, Benefits and Learning from Public Contributors: Public Involvement Impact Case Study

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Introduction

The UK National Standards of Public Involvement are used as a framework for the ARC EoE Public, Community, Involvement, Engagement and Participation (PCIEP) Strategy and includes 'impact'. We define 'impact' as "**the changes, benefits and learning**, gained from the insights and experiences of patients, carers and the public when working in partnership with researchers and others involved in NIHR initiative's" (*NIHR Patient and Public Involvement Impact Working Group, 2019*). Through this, we seek improvement by identifying and sharing the difference that public involvement makes to our research.

The ARC EoE PCIEP Impact Case Studies are used to evaluate the impact of PCIEP on ARC EoE research and to highlight the changes, benefits and learning gained from partnership working and public involvement in ARC EoE.

Public contributors have been invited to co-produce the case studies and the perspectives of public contributors are included in the case study.



Public Involvement Impact Case Study: Involving young people and school staff to co-design training for self-harm disclosures

Project Title: SORTS – SuppOrtive Response to Self-Harm

What problem is this research addressing?

Self-harm among young people is a significant public health concern. Research indicates that young people who self-harm are at greater risk of experiencing mental health difficulties later in life and have an increased risk of suicide. Concerningly, rates of self-harm have been steadily rising, particularly among those in their mid to late teens, with up to 34% of 15-year-olds reporting self-harm at some point.

Schools play a crucial role in early intervention. School staff are often the first professionals to notice signs of self-harm and are well-placed to offer support. However, many staff report feeling unprepared, lacking the knowledge and confidence needed to address the issue effectively. Without access to proper training, staff may damage the trust of the student seeking help by reacting with shock or distress, therefore affecting the young person's willingness to seek help. A recent systematic review highlights the urgent need for staff training and clear policies to guide schools in supporting students who self-harm. Despite this need, evidence-based training specifically designed for school staff remains scarce.

The SORTS study was developed to fill this gap. It aimed to create a flexible, low-cost training resource that equips school staff with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to respond appropriately to students who self-harm. The result is a 30-minute self-harm awareness e-learning module that provides evidence-based information and interactive scenarios, helping staff to reflect on their responses to self-harm disclosures. The accompanying website and resource toolkit

includes infographics, activity sheets, and information leaflets for school staff, parents, and young people. All of these are free for school staff to access.

A person-based approach was central to development. The research team worked closely with mental health professionals and school staff, integrating their feedback to ensure the training is relevant, accessible, and engaging. Initial findings show that the module significantly improves both confidence and understanding, with staff rating it as highly acceptable.

The SORTS training equips school staff with practical strategies to respond to self-harm disclosures in a supportive and effective manner. By promoting a whole-school approach, it helps create a more informed and compassionate school environment - one that encourages young people to seek help, facilitates signposting to appropriate support, and improves access to community resources.

Figure 1 explains the process of the project:

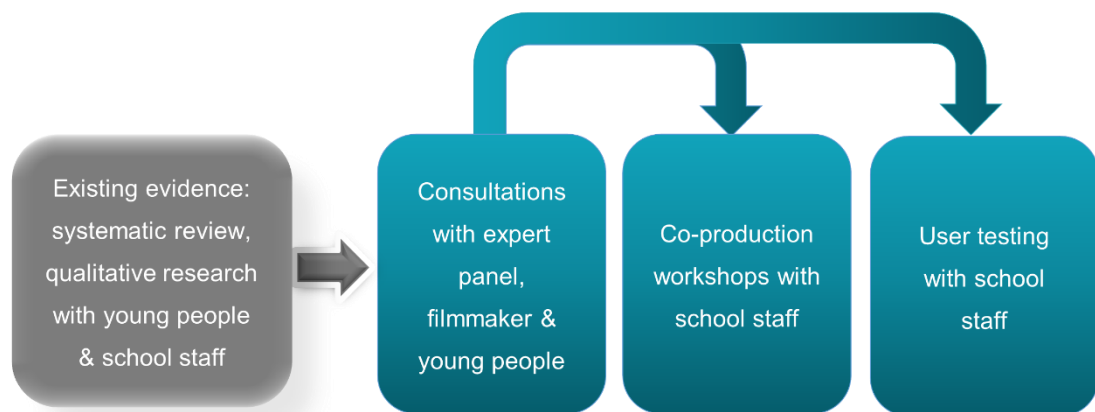


Figure 1 SORTS Process Diagram

How were the public involved in this research?

Coproduction and public involvement were central to this project. At the pre-application stage, young people and secondary school teachers helped shape the research proposal. At the project's outset, we established a Young People's Advisory Group (YPAG), comprising young people with lived experience of self-harm and those who have supported someone who has self-harmed, such as a friend or sibling. Members actively contributed to developing study materials, advised on study procedures, and provided feedback on two film scripts.

In parallel, we formed an expert PPI panel, including school mental health staff (e.g., mental health leads, safeguarding officers, school counsellors, and therapists) and representatives from the Charlie Waller Trust, a leading mental health charity. This panel collaborated throughout the project to co-develop resources, training content for the e-learning module, and film scripts. Regular meetings allowed us to refine content and design before presenting it to school staff. Additionally, we consulted an educational psychologist to explore ways to integrate tailored guidance for students with SEND who self-harm.

The overarching goal of this PPI work was to iteratively develop the training materials. The SORTS team ensured an ongoing feedback loop by regularly meeting with PPI members to share how their insights had shaped the project and contributed to continuous refinements of the SORTS toolkit.

What were the outcomes of public involvement in this project?

The feedback from our Patient and Public Involvement (PPI) groups was instrumental in shaping and refining the SORTS toolkit, leading to the version we have today. The involvement of young people, school staff, and mental health professionals contributed to both positive and challenging outcomes, which helped inform key aspects of the project.

E-Learning Module:

Discussions with the Charlie Waller Trust and school mental health staff led to several significant revisions to the e-learning module. These included:

Content Development & Structure

- Developing the draft training content and framework.
- Defining self-harm and its complexities.
- Ensuring a whole-school approach to self-harm support.
- Addressing teacher preparedness and support to help staff feel more confident in responding to disclosures.
- Emphasising relationship-building to foster trust between staff and students.
- Highlighting self-care for teachers to acknowledge the emotional toll of supporting students.
- Restructuring the training to increase interactivity and engagement.
- Providing a CPD certificate upon completion to support professional development.

Communication & Safeguarding

- Enhancing confidentiality and communication strategies.
- Addressing student silence and non-verbal communication, equipping staff with tools to engage students who struggle to articulate their experiences.
- Recognising the emotional impact of self-harm disclosures on staff and introducing a reflective process for them to discuss their experiences.
- Acknowledging the different ways self-harm may present in students with SEND and adapting staff approaches accordingly.
- Incorporating filmed scenarios as a learning tool for effective communication when responding to student disclosures.
- Emphasising the root causes of self-harm to encourage a deeper understanding of student behaviour.
- Discussing helpful and less helpful staff responses to self-harm disclosures.
- Providing effective communication strategies, including conversation starters for staff who may lack confidence in discussing self-harm.



Figure 2 Example of advert for E-Learning Module

Videos Scenarios:

Feedback from the Young People’s Advisory Group (YPAG) and the expert PPI panel led to several key changes to the video scenarios (Figure 1):

- Adjusting the video scenarios to make them more relatable to students.
- Avoiding stereotypes of students who self-harm, including representation of boys, as their self-harm behaviours may manifest differently than girls.
- Depicting staff who do not have all the answers immediately, reinforcing a realistic and supportive approach.
- Focusing on staff building trust with students, helping them feel safe to open up.
- Highlighting safeguarding considerations, ensuring multiple staff members are involved in discussions about self-harm rather than a single individual.
- Incorporating scenarios that present challenges, such as difficult conversations or situations where a student is not receptive to support.



Figure 3 SORTS Film Scenarios

Downloadable resources from schools

To further support schools, the PPI members recommended additional resources, including:

- A self-harm policy template for schools to use.
- Printable resources for students and parents, providing guidance and support.

How did public involvement influence the project overall?

Overall, PPI involvement had a significant positive impact on the project, shaping the SORTS resources to be more practical, relevant, and effective. While balancing perspectives and addressing all feedback within project constraints posed challenges, the iterative engagement process ultimately strengthened the final outputs, making them meaningful, accessible, and supportive for both students and school staff.

Public involvement was instrumental in shaping the website and e-learning module. Feedback from young people, school staff, and mental health professionals ensured the training was grounded in real-life experiences and reinforced a whole-school approach to self-harm support.

PPI input helped ensure the training reflects authentic challenges faced by students and staff. Their feedback led to more realistic video scenarios that better represent self-harm disclosures and staff responses. The e-learning module was refined to be concise and accessible, making it practical for schools while still offering links to academic journals for those seeking further learning. Additionally, PPI feedback highlighted the emotional impact of self-harm disclosures on staff, prompting the inclusion of reflective elements to help them process these experiences.

However, challenges arose when different PPI groups had conflicting viewpoints. For example, while young people stressed the importance of open discussions about self-harm in schools, school staff were concerned about the implications for safeguarding and confidentiality. Additionally, some valuable suggestions could not be fully implemented due to practical constraints. For instance, modifications to the training structure and reshooting video content, though beneficial, would require additional time and resources beyond the project's scope.

What was the feedback from public contributors involved in this project?

All PPI members expressed how rewarding it was to participate in the project and to know that their input directly influenced and improved the SORTS toolkit. They shared how exciting it was to watch the project evolve and come to life, feeling that their feedback and experiences were meaningfully considered and incorporated into the SORTS project.

Member of our PPI Advisory Group – Assistant Head and Mental Health Lead:

“I worked closely with the lead applicants in the design and development of the SORTS online training programme and I contributed to the development of the proposal. As a school we have noticed a sharp rise in young people struggling with their mental health and self-harm seems to be increasing. These are areas we have highlighted as a focus for wider staff education. This project provides the evidence about effectiveness and feasibility that schools need when choosing training programmes for their staff.”

“It was great to work with researchers to develop something schools genuinely need. This resource really supports a whole-school approach to self-harm, which is something we’ve been advocating for in our school.”

Public Contributor (age 18 years):

“I enjoyed being part of the SORTS project - it was interesting to see how research actually works and how it can make a real difference for students who are struggling”

What are the reflections and learning from public involvement in this research?

Reflecting on the SORTS project and the involvement of public contributors, there were several key successes and challenges. This project highlights the importance of continuous and meaningful engagement with public contributors throughout the process.

One of the most significant successes was the strong sense of collaboration between all the SORTS team and the PPI members. PPI feedback was crucial in ensuring the toolkit was practical, relevant, and grounded in real-life experiences. This collaboration led to the development of resources that were not only educational but also accessible and feasible for school environments. The engagement of these groups throughout the project ensured that the final outputs were both meaningful and supportive for those who would ultimately use them. Additionally, the iterative process of feedback and refinement proved highly effective in improving the quality of the resources at each stage of development.

One challenge of the PPI engagement was being unable to implement some of the suggested changes, such as reshooting video content which would require more time and funding. These practical limitations constrained the extent to which certain ideas could be fully realised. We learned that it is crucial to allow sufficient time for feedback and to be flexible enough to adjust when unforeseen challenges arise.

For more information, visit the [project webpage](#) or the [SORTs website](#)

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