



Championing public voices in research

By Jean Boddy, ARC KSS Social Care Theme Public Advisor

Jean, is a Social Care Theme Public Advisor at the ARC KSS. Drawing on her extensive background in health and social care—including roles as a social worker and strategic commissioner—Jean brings a strong commitment to co-design and public representation in research. Her personal experiences navigating the healthcare system as a parent inspired her to advocate for more inclusive and practical approaches to service development.

Since joining ARC KSS, Jean has contributed to fellowship panels, helped shape strategy and governance, and championed meaningful public involvement. Her thoughtful insights and dedication to clarity have made her a valued voice in the social care team. Jean encourages others to “take the leap”—highlighting the rewarding nature of influencing research to better reflect the communities it serves.

What is your role within ARC KSS?

I am one of a pool of Public Advisors at the ARC. We are there to ensure that the public has a voice in developing better health and social care through applied research. We bring a wide variety of life experiences and perspectives to the table and advocate to ensure that the public and communities are fairly represented and have a voice throughout any project's lifecycle on issues that matter to them.

Tell us about your background and experiences prior to joining ARC KSS?

My work life got off the ground as an air hostess, (pardon the pun) I then married and had three children.

We did spend a significant period of my children's younger years in and out of paediatric hospitals and attending clinics, trying to navigate the system, trying to keep jobs going and explore if there was any help out there.

During this period, I witnessed just how very exhausting and difficult it was for disadvantaged parents such as single parents or a parent with a disability to cope with a very sick child, with little support. This motivated me to volunteer, study, and raise funds and try to do something to improve the system.

My career background is in health and social care. From early admin roles in the NHS, I moved to a local authority and subsequently trained as a social worker. Before retiring seven years ago, I served as an area director in adult social care and was a strategic commissioner, developing a range of services to meet the needs of adults and older people in Surrey.

I am proud to have been involved in the early-stage developments of integration, championing integrated services and helping in the development of the first combined NHS and Adult Social Care service.

Unfortunately, I had to retire early due to ill health and a course of cancer treatment. I am, however pleased to report that I received excellent care and am currently well.

What drew you to the role of public advisor at ARC KSS?

I saw the role as an exciting and interesting opportunity to work and learn within a different field and have a say as a member of the public. I believed the role would make the best use of my social care background and experiences. The role emphasised the importance of co-design with the public, which I strongly support. The saying 'nothing about us without us' perfectly captures the essence of this role. Additionally, the very flexible nature of the hours means I have the opportunity to work as and when there is a project to work on which was appealing. There are regular, bimonthly meetings to take part in but otherwise I could balance it with my other responsibilities, including my duties as a grandma.

How would you describe your journey since becoming a public advisor at ARC KSS?

The journey has been very smooth and supportive. Lou and Pippa, who oversee the public advisors, are incredibly positive and helpful. They make everyone's contributions feel valued. They explain every activity fully, facilitate training, support open discussion and development, and address any concerns. They encourage public advisors to chair our regular bimonthly meetings and set agenda items. When I applied for the role, I was unaware that I could claim an hourly rate for my time. We are encouraged and supported to claim for any work we do.

What projects or initiatives have you been/are you involved in?

I have been very fortunate to have been involved with some very interesting pieces of work. I was a member of a panel to assess applications for the Social Care Capacity Fellowships. This was funding to enable those working in social care to undertake research training. The funding was for small research project related to adult social care priorities, bridging the gap between academic research and practice, and with the aim to impact policy or practice. Social care is underrepresented in the field of research, so this was a great opportunity to shape the future.

I also had the privilege of serving as the public advisor on a Knowledge Mobilisation Fellowship panel. Researchers applied for a fellowship to turn their ideas and research into practical applications in the real world. It required applicants to showcase their research, ideas, project management skills and leadership abilities. We had eight very impressive applications to review, which meant I had a lot of pre-reading to do and had to score the applications against set criteria.

However, I received training to understand the process and the key aims of the fellowships and was provided with clear criteria to help allocate appropriate and consistent scoring across the panel. I then attended an online panel meeting to discuss the applications and agree on funding awards. In both panels, my main focus was reviewing the PCIE sections of the applications. The format of the forms allowed applicants to be clear and detailed about their plans for public involvement, with plenty of prompts. There were some excellent applications that fully embraced the need to engage from an early stage of any research. However, some applications fell short in this crucial part of the process, and its important researchers understand the fundamentals of coproduction.

Finally, as a member of the social care theme group, I have been encouraged to put forward ideas for future research. We are at the early stages of discussions but, hopefully will be undertaking a literature review (summarising and analysing existing research), to help inform the needs for research in a specific area.

How has it evolved over time?

All public advisors are given the opportunity to contribute to setting priorities and strategies for the ARC. In addition, invitations are given to all public advisors to sit on various governance groups demonstrating that the public voice is heard from early research and throughout the ARC.

In what ways do you feel your contributions have made a difference?

My main focus in all my work has always been about genuine collaboration. While true involvement has improved, there are still some areas that need work. I love challenging ideas like "we won't bother them with that part" or "the travel would be too much," and involving people only at the final review stage. I also use my professional experience to highlight that, while project proposals may be nice to have, they also need to demonstrate the practical realities and identify value for money, financial benefits, and how any changes to services could be funded in the current financial climate.

What has been the most rewarding moment or highlight of your time with ARC KSS?

The PCIE team hosts a yearly away day held at different universities. I have been to two of these – one at Sussex and one at Surrey University. Most of our meetings and work are done from home or online, so these away days give us a chance to meet colleagues face-to-face to work together and have fun. During each away day, we have been invited to a lunchtime research showcase. Here, researchers working in different ARC KSS areas present their diverse projects. Even brief presentations require significant effort and research, and presenters frequently respond to challenging questions under pressure. In addition, they provide invaluable learning opportunities, it has been very impressive.

Have there been any challenges you've overcome that you're proud of?

I had to work hard on reading papers and proposals and not spotting or challenging jargon right away. I have spent so many years working in the system and realised I might gloss over terms that could have been confusing for most people or where ideas weren't explained fully and I read between the line. To fix this, I read the papers carefully multiple times to ensure we get the right tone in public documents. The research projects can cover a huge range of topics, from mindfulness to palliative care, autism to liver failure to name a few. Even though I work in the social care theme, I can work on various projects outside my sphere of knowledge. The details can feel overwhelming, but it's important to focus on the role of the public advisor. You don't need to be an expert on the research. If the plain English summary of the proposal is too hard to understand, it's my job to flag that and make recommendations.

What advice would you give to someone considering becoming a public advisor?

Take the leap! You don't need to be a researcher or have a background in research. Public advisors come from a wide range of backgrounds, interests, cultures, and experiences. You'll meet new and fascinating people, both online and in person, and discuss cutting-edge research projects in areas you might not have known about before. You'll learn a lot and have the chance to influence research to be more inclusive of the people it impacts. It's a truly satisfying and rewarding role.