

A creative approach to a priority setting exercise

By Naomi Morley, Applied Research Collaboration South West Peninsula, University of Exeter

This case example describes a two-day public involvement process designed to prioritise themes from qualitative survey data about the challenges of involving people living with dementia in health research.

Survey responses from researchers, facilitators and people with lived experience of dementia had already been summarised and organised into headings, to avoid overwhelming people with too much text. The aim of the meeting was to work with public partners to identify which themes mattered most and should be addressed within our project.

Before beginning prioritisation, we introduced an initial reflective session to encourage people to think about their own values and priorities. In qualitative research, reflexivity supports awareness of one's own assumptions before engaging with data. Here, we adapted the idea for a participatory setting.

Rather than starting immediately with theme summaries and ranking tasks, Day 1 focused on creating space for people to reflect on:

- what matters most to them personally
- what hopes or priorities they bring into discussions about change

This prepared participants for more thoughtful engagement with the survey data on Day 2 and helped ensure that prioritisation was grounded in lived values, not just technical decision-making.

We agreed as a group to hold the activities over two consecutive days to allow a relaxed pace and give everyone time to engage fully.

What this approach offered

This two-stage design helped ensure that prioritisation was:

- Accessible and engaging for people
- Transparent about how decisions were made
- Connected to people's lived values and experiences

Day 1: Creative reflection

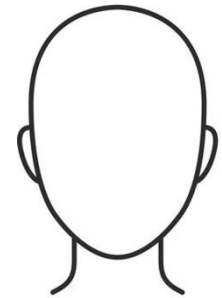
Aim:

To support reflection, relationship-building and awareness of own priorities before engaging with survey themes.

What we did:

Everyone, public partners and researchers, were invited to create a “portrait” of themselves using a simple outline of a head and a variety of creative materials (e.g. pens, paints, magazines, stickers). The portraits were not intended to be realistic, but to symbolise:

- hopes for people living with dementia
- feelings about research and involvement



People worked individually but also chatted, listened to music and drank a lot of coffee. At the end of the session, those who wished to, shared what their portrait represented.

Why this mattered:

The activity helped

- get to know one another in an inclusive way
- people feel comfortable contributing in their own way



- surface emotions, values, and priorities that might otherwise remain implicit
- create a shared reference point that carried into Day 2 discussions

The portraits were later brought together into a group booklet, reinforcing collective identity and shared purpose.



Day 2: Prioritisation of survey data

Aim:

To prioritise the challenges identified in the survey data and begin exploring possible responses.

What we did:

Everyone was given printed headings, short summaries and examples of each challenge.

- 1) We allocated time to give an overview of the data and explained how the task fit within the wider project, allowing time for questions.
- 2) We asked everyone to read through the themes individually and consider:
 - Which challenges feel most important to address?
 - What feels urgent, overlooked or foundational?
- 3) We then moved into pairs to share which challenges felt most important and why.
- 4) After the paired discussion, we asked everyone individually to rank the challenges using a point-based sticker system:
 - 3 = highest priority (must do)
 - 2 = medium priority (should do)
 - 1 = lower priority (could do)

Stickers were placed on large print outs of theme headings.

- 5) Coffee and thinking break.
- 6) Together as a group we identified the three highest-ranked challenges and discussed why these might have been prioritised.
- 7) We then invited everyone to suggest practical, achievable actions we could take during the project to address the top challenges. These were captured on a flip chart and later reviewed and agreed in a follow-up meeting.