

# Results from the 2021-22 communications training needs survey

## Background

The communications training needs survey is aimed at people communicating in the health research space. This includes professional communicators and those using these skills as part of their job, such as researchers or administrators. Many, but not all, are funded by the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR).

The survey ran from **3 December 2021 to 24 January 2022**. There were **224** responses in total. I removed a couple of respondents who said they had no communications training needs!

The NIHR Applied Research Collaboration West (ARC West) has a [well-established training programme](#). Since 2016, I've run two free to access communications courses, [Writing for a lay audience](#) and [How to win at Twitter](#), as a core part of the programme. Since then, these have had nearly **1,000 attendances**.

I developed both courses based on a perceived need rather than one supported by evidence – although their continued popularity six years later shows the need is there. But I felt that it was time to look at what other communications courses people would like.

The aim of this work was to:

- Understand the communications training that people feel they need
- Identify existing courses that meet those needs
- Develop new (ideally free to access) courses where none exist, either as part of the ARC West training programme or via another appropriate mechanism

The existing ARC West courses are short 2-hour introductory sessions. This format has been very successful for the target audience. Longer, paid for courses on many of the topics identified in the survey may already exist. But the intention is to develop or identify short, punchy sessions that offer a quick insight, rather than longer sessions that people may struggle to commit to. Although this approach might not always be possible for more technical topics.

I am hoping that other communications professionals and topic experts can help contribute to this enhanced communications training offer.

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## What subjects did people want to see training in?

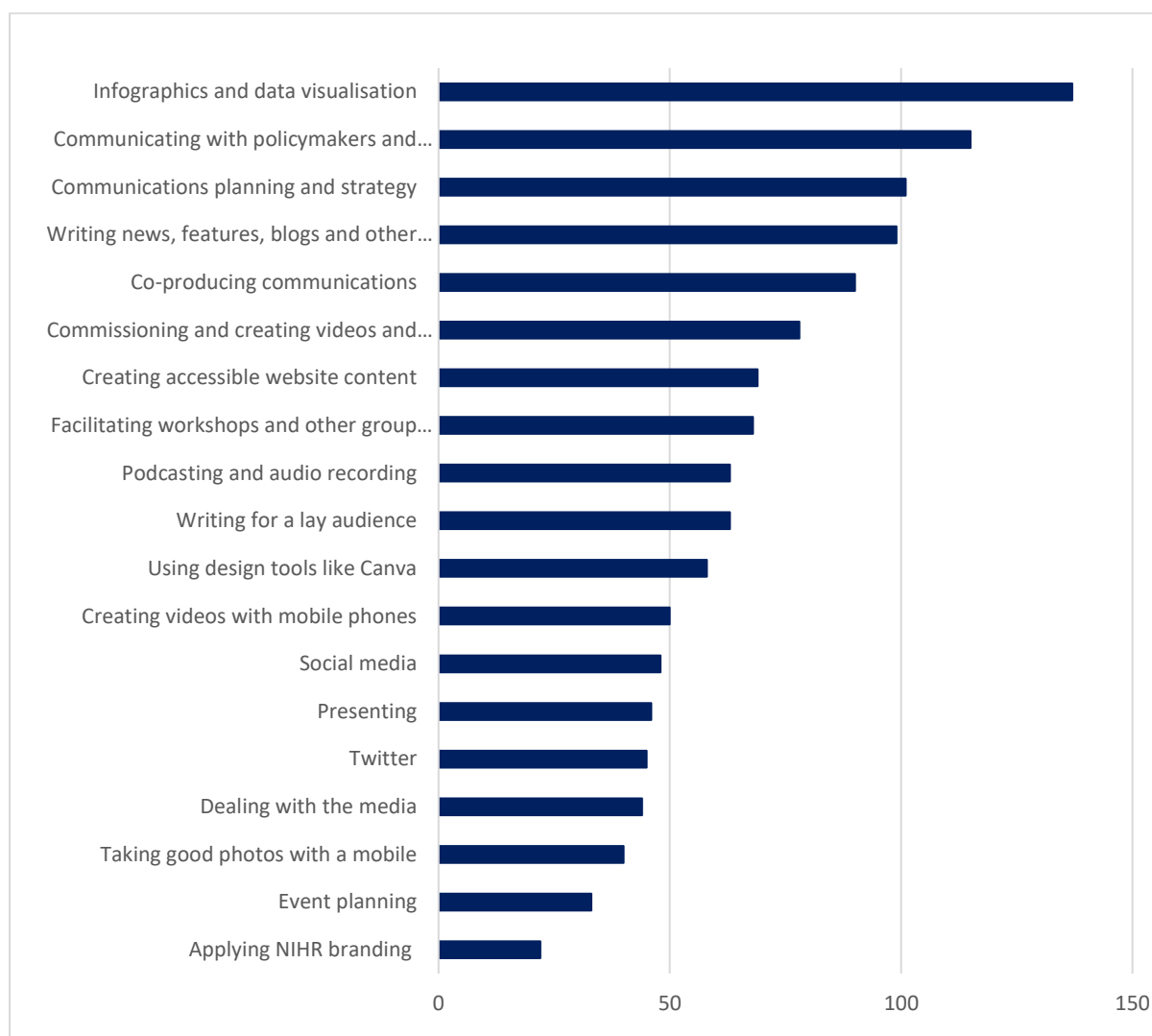


Fig 1 – all responses (224) to the question ‘What subjects do you want to see training in?’

The number of votes each subject got, plus whether there is currently a course available, is in the table below:

Rank	Course	Votes	Currently existing?
1	Infographics and data visualisation	137	<b>Yes</b> , 1 hour course developed by ARC Oxford and Thames Valley but not yet offered on a regular basis
2	Communicating with policymakers and commissioners	115	<b>No</b> , but there may be existing internal courses from policy units within universities eg PolicyBristol
3	Communications planning and strategy	101	<b>No</b> , though this should be relatively easy to develop for most experienced communications professionals
4	Writing news, features, blogs and other writing styles	99	<b>No</b> , though some of this exists in Writing for a lay audience

5	Co-producing communications	90	<b>No</b> , though Will Hunter (Comms Executive NIHR Bristol BRC / ARC West) suggested this subject as he has experience in this
6	Commissioning and creating videos and animations	78	<b>No</b>
7	Creating accessible website content	69	<b>No</b> , though some of this exists in <i>Writing for a lay audience</i> . Lauren Hoskin and Zoe Trinder-Widdess could develop this course
8	Facilitating workshops and other group activities	68	<b>No</b>
9	Writing for a lay audience	63	<b>Yes</b> , <a href="#">Writing for a lay audience</a>
10	Podcasting and audio recording	63	<b>No</b>
11	Using design tools like Canva	58	<b>No</b> , but Lauren Hoskin could develop something with anyone else who has these skills and wants to contribute
12	Creating videos with mobile phones	50	<b>No</b>
13	Social media	48	<b>No</b>
14	Presenting	46	<b>No</b>
15	Twitter	45	<b>Yes</b> , <a href="#">How to win at Twitter</a> plus other courses developed by other ARCs eg East Midlands and North West Coast
16	Dealing with the media	44	<b>No</b> , but most universities offer this training to their staff. It may be harder to access for those in NHS settings
17	Taking good photos with a mobile	40	<b>Yes</b> , ARC North West Coast have a short training session on this
18	Event planning	33	<b>No</b>
19	Applying NIHR branding	22	<b>No</b>

Whether a course currently exists is based on my limited knowledge! I hope to identify existing courses or people willing and able to develop new courses in the coming months.

I propose that the focus initially is on offering the five most popular course subjects, with additions further down the list where courses already exist and so could be delivered relatively easily. Please get in touch ([zoe.trinder-widdess@bristol.ac.uk](mailto:zoe.trinder-widdess@bristol.ac.uk)) if you have skills in any of these subjects.

### Focusing on communications professionals

Of the 224 respondents, 25 identified themselves as communications professionals. I thought it would be useful to focus on their responses, as they were different from non-communications professionals.

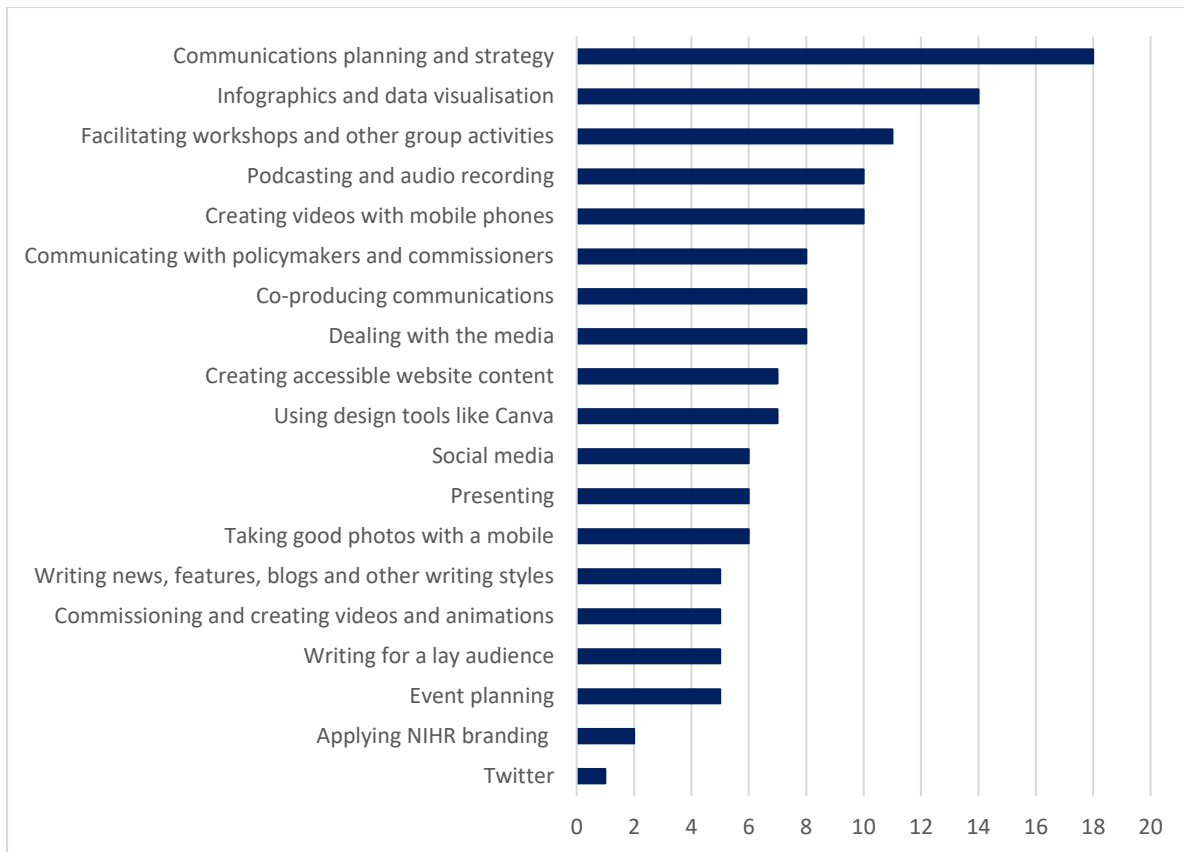


Fig 2 – responses from communications professionals (25) to the question ‘What subjects do you want to see training in?’

The majority (18) were NIHR funded and 20 identified as being linked to a part of the NIHR. They identified communications planning and strategy as their top training priority (18).

Like other respondents, infographics and data visualisation was popular, coming in second. Facilitating workshops and other group activities was much more important for this group than the other respondents, coming in third rather than eighth. Other top subjects were on the more technical side, such as creating video and audio.

There may be opportunities for NIHR’s central communications team to fulfil some of the training needs of this group.

## Is there anything else you want to tell us about your communications training needs?

This was a free text field which 23 people completed. For the full list of comments, see [the appendix](#). Comments ranged over many topics, but a few themes were:

- Some people wanted more general communications mentoring and support – perhaps some kind of mentoring scheme for NIHR communicators?
- Why bother with communications? Or to put it another way, what’s best to bother with, given how time poor everyone is?
- Communicating with wider general audiences, stakeholders or specific groups of people

- Analytics and metrics – what’s important to measure?
- Support on the more technical aspects of communication, such as video, audio etc, would be welcome
- A couple of people specifically mentioned dealing with the media and writing press releases, though they were listed as subject options – implying a more urgent need
- Accessibility, both as a training subject and in terms of the delivery of the training itself
- Training should offer a combination of tricks of the trade, hands on exercises and several real-life examples. These examples shouldn’t be focused on one or two success stories – learning from people’s mistakes is useful!

Many of these queries could be addressed within courses on the various subjects in the survey, particularly communications planning and strategy, media training and creating accessible content.

## Preferred delivery method

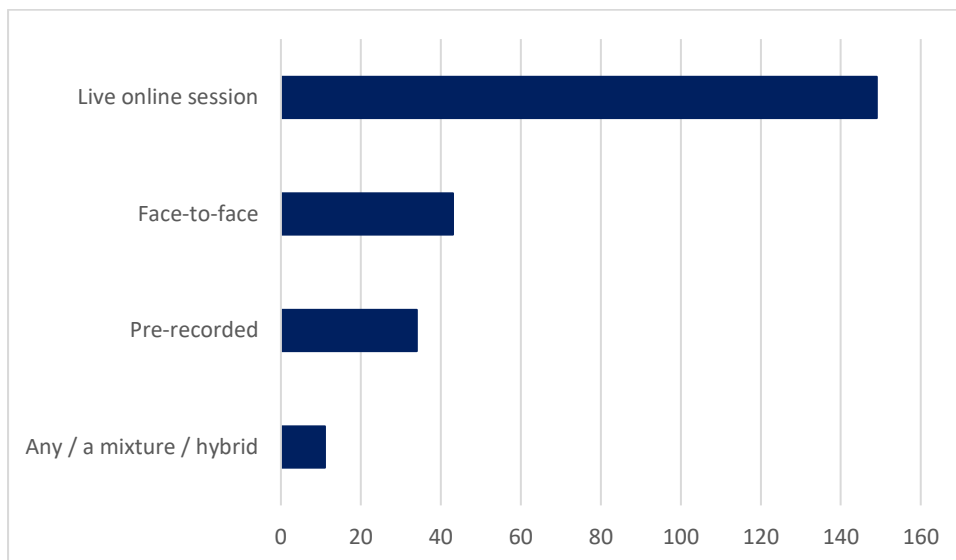


Fig 3 – all responses (224) to the question ‘How would you prefer to receive communications training?’

Live online sessions are by far the most popular format for delivery (149 responses). Face-to-face is a distant second (43), then pre-recorded (34). A few respondents mentioned a hybrid approach or that any method of delivery would be acceptable (11). Some respondents used the ‘other’ free text field to select one of the other methods, which is why the total is larger than 224.

## About our respondents

### What roles do they work in?

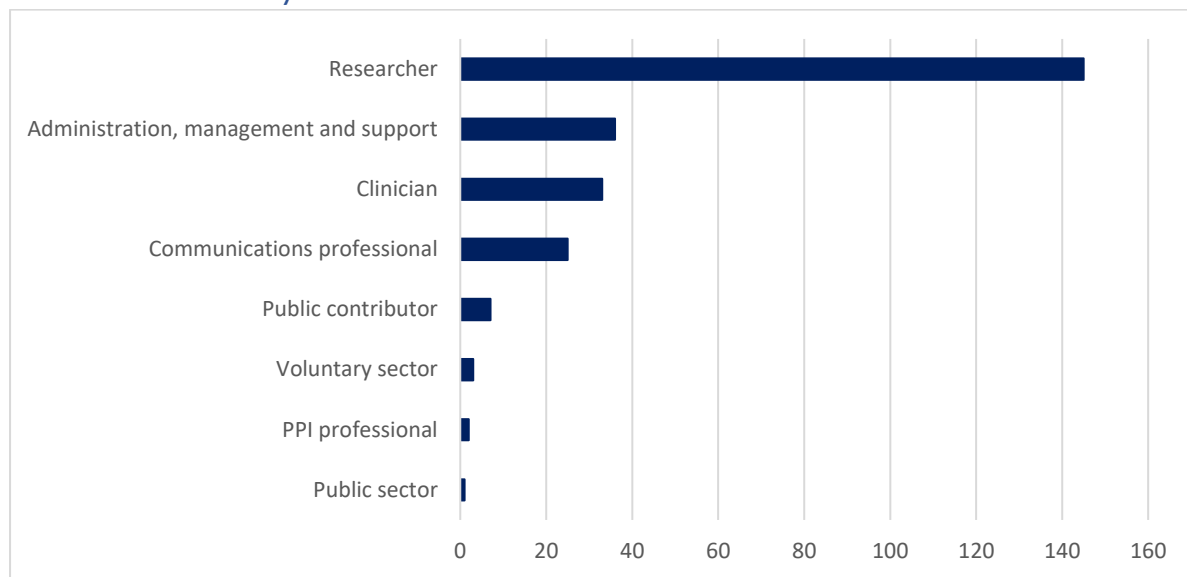


Fig 4 – all responses (224) to the question ‘What is your role?’

Researchers made up the majority of respondents (145). Administration, management and support (36), clinicians (33) and communications professionals (25) were the next most common groups. Public contributors (7), voluntary (3) and public (1) sector staff and patient and public involvement professionals (2) also completed the survey.

Many respondents (32) identified themselves as having dual roles, with clinician / researcher the most common (23).

### Are they funded by the NIHR?

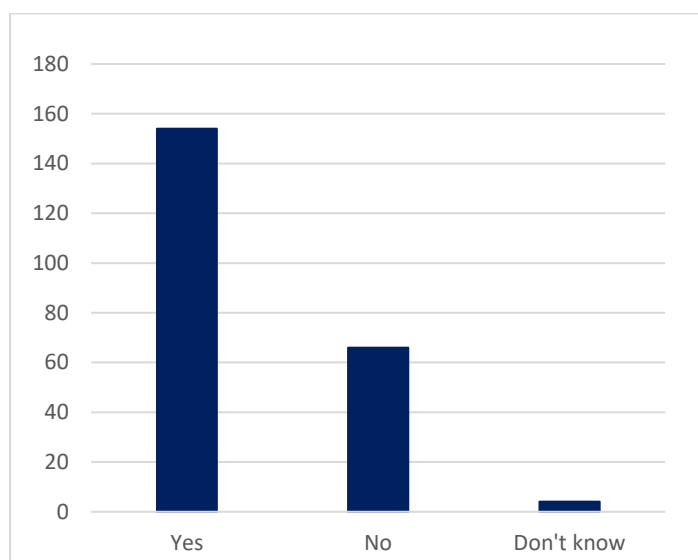


Fig 5 – all responses (224) to the question ‘Are you funded by the NIHR?’

The vast majority were funded by the NIHR (154). Sixty-six said they weren't, and four didn't know or left this question blank.

## Which part of the NIHR are they from?

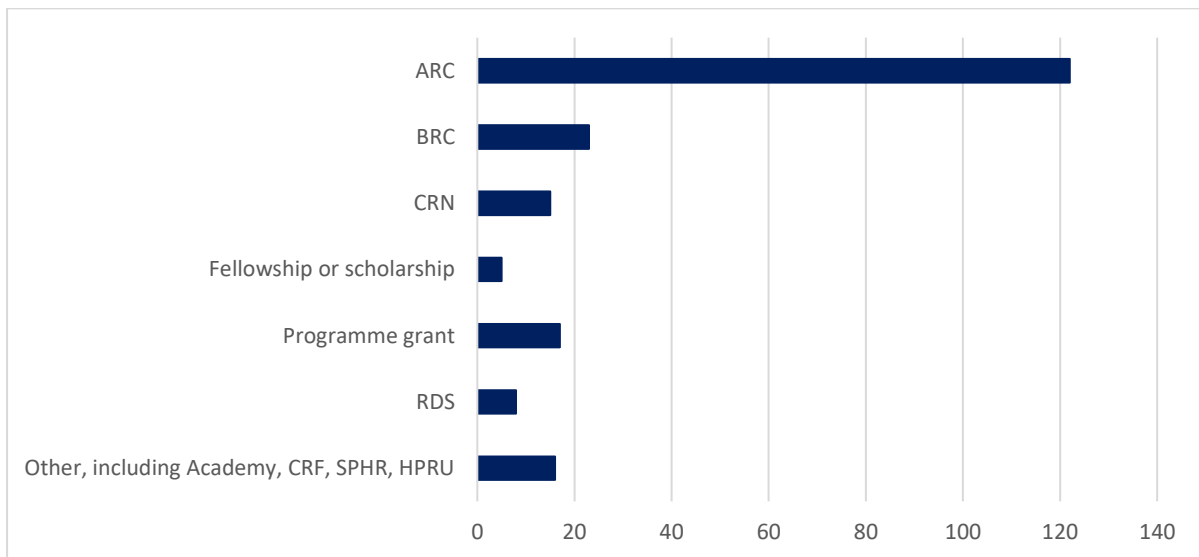


Fig 6 –responses (180) to the question ‘Which part of the NIHR are you linked to?’

ARCs represented the bulk of responses (122). BRCs (23), programme grants (17), CRN (15), RDS (8), and those on fellowships or scholarships (5) also responded. ‘Other’ (16) is made up of parts of the NIHR with two or fewer respondents.

Note that some people said they weren’t NIHR funded but then went on to identify themselves as linked to a part of the NIHR.

## Where are they based?

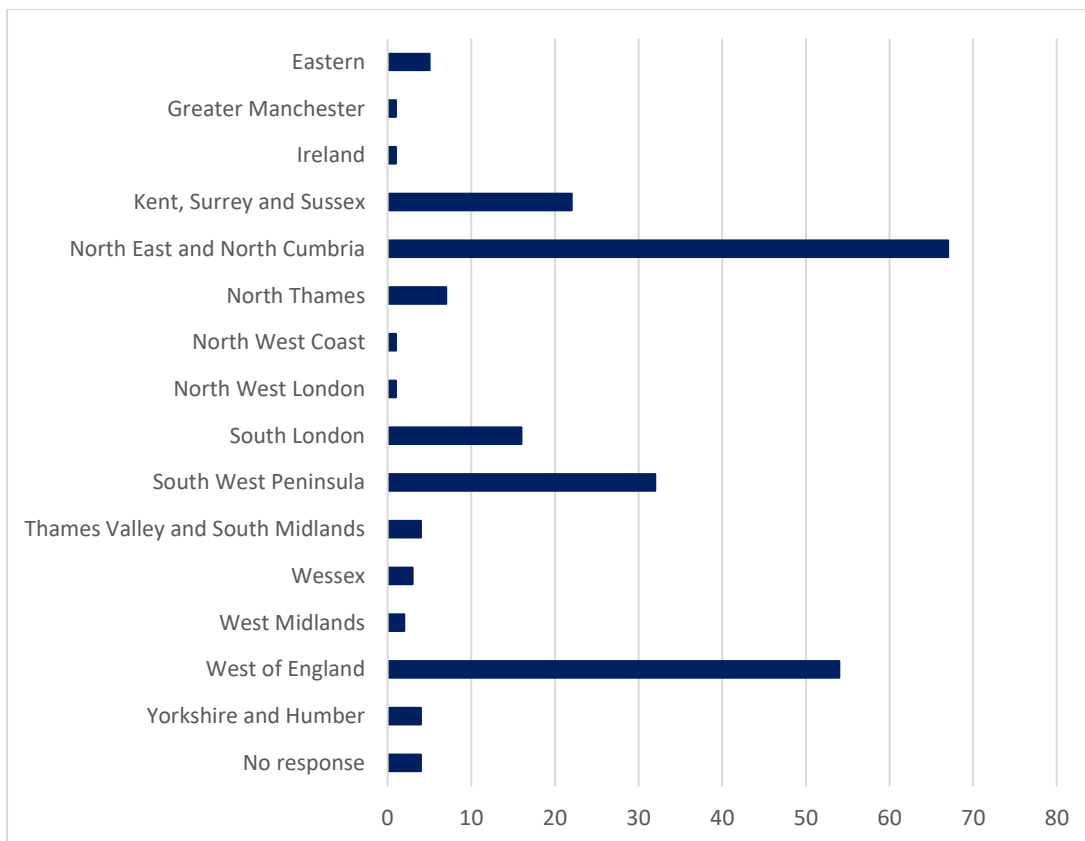


Fig 7 –responses (220) to the question ‘What is your location?’

All NIHR regions are represented except the East Midlands, though some had only one or two responses. The largest responses came from North East and North Cumbria (67), West of England (54), South West Peninsula (32), Kent, Surrey and Sussex (22) and South London (16).

Anonymised regional data is available for NIHR Regional Communications Links (RCLs) and ARC communications leads on request.

## Conclusions and next steps

Although responses from across the regions were patchy, the overall response rate of 224 hopefully gives us a representative sample. Certainly the leading courses emerged early on while the survey was open.

The next step is to develop courses or identify existing ones.

I will be reporting back to the respondents who asked to be kept informed about the project, initially with this report but further down the line, I would hope, with bookable links to all the most popular topics identified in this project.

**If you know of any existing courses that fit any of the topics or think that you could develop one, please get in touch!**

Thank you to everyone who helped me design and deliver the survey, responded to it and passed it on to colleagues. Special thanks to Jon Kerslake for setting it up for me and sending me the data on my whims, the ARC Comms Group for giving me the idea in the first place and being generous with their feedback as ever, and Will Hunter and Lauren Hoskin for helping me talk through what to include.

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## Appendix

Results from free text field 'Is there anything else you want to tell us about your communications training needs?' (23 responses)

- No
- Stakeholder analysis for research comms
- I think I feel a little left behind in the technical aspects of comms (video and audio creation and editing, data vis, etc.) so this is where I would need the most support.
- Communicating with adolescents
- I would like some dealing with the media (especially news reporters) training if possible.
- Thanks
- Accessible & inclusive languages including BSL
- lots of time to practice in the session



- innovative ideas would be brilliant. New ways of communicating with a wider audience.
- I'm starting from scratch, bit of a beginner here
- I think improving communication, particularly listening skills, within teams could also be helpful
- Writing press releases
- I feel there is a lot of learning I need to do and would happily engage with any of your wonderful training
- Keep refreshing / updates, using analytics would be good
- Something about why researchers need to do social media comms? What our aims should be? and why that is useful for us and how does it help the research? Sometimes I think I am just part of some web of people shamelessly promoting themselves and saying - look how well I have done - mostly because the comms I often see (not ours I hasten to add) are saying stuff about the researcher not the research. Partly this is my fault for being a bit shy and unlikely to blow my own trumpet - but... Also have heard academics decry social media comms - saying it's not an important metric at all. Maybe something about also about how to be strategic in what we do and why. Also we should give more webinars or seminars on our work? no? so maybe something on running webinars - because we could potentially engage a lot more people if - when we got a paper published we then - as authors ran a seminar on it - live in a webinar then people from our team could come - as well as others interested in the paper? Also something about designing better power point. I try to make mine interesting - but sometimes get a bit stuck with lame pictures that are attempting to make an allegory of some part of my research.
- Would like to know more about how to publicise communications so they get read, viewed etc
- Help specific categories like surgeons to improve communication skills via video recording and virtual live platforms
- I have profound hearing loss and I am autistic so it is essential that communications be well-designed, clear and concise, accompanied by subtitles and blissfully free of needless background sounds such as jingles, and animations that do not contribute to the message, and for spoken content should feature the speaker's face so I can lipread. If multiple speakers are involved, then there needs to be some cohesion in transition from one person speaking to the next
- Getting information to the wider community
- Communicating with the media
- Sorry I couldn't just pick 5 things as there are so many things I would appreciate training and support on! As a new communications professional, I would really value support and mentorship in the comms field.
- How to start it: getting in touch with policy makers; not the why we need it but the how to get it going; for training offered, I don't want to hear one or two people's half hour success stories but to be given several examples for each situation along with known tricks of the trade that work.