

Ethical Public Engagement

A tool for assessing whether a public engagement activity requires ethics review or not and guidance for ethical conduct of public engagement

Introduction

This tool was created by a working group, convened by the Research Governance and Research Impact Teams in Research and Enterprise Office, to support University staff and students identify whether their planned activities involving members of the public incorporate research and therefore require ethics review; or if their planned activities do not need ethics review. University of Essex researchers and ethics reviewers can use this tool to assess if a planned activity is likely to require ethics review. Please note that ultimately ethics reviewers reserve the right to request the submission of an ethics application for review if they are in any doubt. When using the tool, we recommend discussing with your supervisor or collaborator(s) or external partner(s) linked to your planned activities. For further advice about planning your public engagement activities, please approach the [REO Research Impact Team](#). Contact the [REO Research Governance Team](#) or you [Departmental Ethics Officer](#) if you are still uncertain whether ethical review is needed. For planning purposes, we advise using the tool when you are at an early stage of your project/activities.

What is public engagement? What is research?

Public Engagement: In the UK, the National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE), defines public engagement as the “myriad of ways in which the activity and benefits of higher education and research can be shared with the public. Engagement is by definition a two-way process, involving interaction and listening, with the goal of generating mutual benefit.” Activities may include public outreach and communications, patient involvement, collaborative research, citizen science, community engagement, and more.

Research: Research and experimental development comprise creative and systematic work undertaken in order to increase the stock of knowledge – including knowledge of humankind, culture and society – and to devise new applications of available knowledge. It also may include some consultancy, knowledge exchange, impact activities and public engagement with research. All research involving human participants, whether undertaken by the University's staff or students, must undergo an ethics review and ethical approval must be obtained before it commences.

See in **Appendix 1** some key characteristics of research and public engagement activities.

Decision making tool

Use the self-assessment tool below to determine if your activities might need ethics review.

In what capacity will people be involved in your activity?

Needing ethics review	Key determinants: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ They will be acting as participants by contributing data ▪ They will be approached and recruited by the academic researcher(s) using eligibility criteria and they will give consent to be involved ▪ They will participate in data collection activities predefined by the academic researcher(s) ▪ They will share personal views and opinions for academic researcher(s) to systematically analyse these and generate new knowledge
Not needing ethics review	Key determinants: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They will be consultants/advisors co-developing/co-delivering activities with academic researcher(s) • They will take part as audience or take part in meetings generating ideas for activities • They will be invited because of their relevant lived experience. Their views and experiences will not be formally analysed and reported. • They will be involved in decision making and may have an ongoing role in the activity

What is the aim and outcome of your activity?

Needing ethics review	Key determinants: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To answer a specific research question ▪ To systematically generate knowledge/research findings ▪ To gather and formally analyse information for publication purposes (i.e. journal article) ▪ To use participants' information to inform the literature
Not needing ethics review	Key determinants: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using the public's insight to design a new study or activity • To build relationships • To share research findings • To write a grant • To co-create public-facing materials such as a web page • To inform delivery of an event

What will happen to the gathered information?

Needing ethics review	Key determinants: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gathered information will be systematically analysed and may be used for future projects • Collected information about views and opinions will be used to generate new knowledge
Not needing ethics review	Key determinants: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gathered information may be organised (i.e. using labelling) • Gathered information on an activity/event may be used as feedback to inform future activities/events

Appendix 2 presents a case study illustrating an occasion where there is no need to apply for ethical approval because the public engagement activity does not cross over into research, and a case study illustrating an occasion where a public engagement activity needs ethical approval.

Guidance on ethical conduct of public engagement, without ethical review

See below guidance on ethically undertaking public engagement activities not requiring ethics review.

Well-being and safety

- Public contributors may find that looking at and discussing the data or talking to other people with a similar condition reminds them of their own negative experiences. This can cause distress, in which case the member of the public may need additional counselling / support.
- Members of the public involved as research co-investigators should have adequate training appropriate and proportionate to the circumstances in the same way as they do for any other member of the research team.
- Academic researchers should establish if they need a risk assessment and consider if there are any policies that they should be aware of (i.e. DBS; Lone worker; Safeguarding children and adults at risk; Overseas travel health and safety)

Inclusion and transparency

- Recruitment strategies should be used to ensure diverse and representative participation, thereby mitigating selection bias.
- Academic researchers should establish a code of conduct that clearly defines the roles, expectations, and outcomes for public contributors.
- Academic researchers should book in advance any translators/interpreters.
- Academic researchers should consider people's ability to use/access technology.

Confidentiality/Consent

- Academic researchers should familiarise themselves with the University's guidance and policies on keeping public contributors' information securely stored.
- Academic researchers should avoid collecting any more personal data than is necessary to conduct their activities.
- Academic researchers should ensure that there is clarity and transparency about the purposes of the activity, what the information will be used for, and whether contact will be one-off or ongoing.
- Academic researchers should ensure that the activity is GDPR compliant and that everyone knows whether and under what circumstances confidentiality could be breached.
- All team members should have appropriate training in data protection.

Openness and equal engagement

- Academic researchers should ensure that public members have equal understanding of the subject. People should be provided with information about the planned activities in clear and jargon free language.
- The degree of involvement, time commitment, number of visits, data storage and future usage plans, should be explained to public contributors.
- Academic researchers should mitigate power imbalances using appropriate strategies to guide dialogues, manage conflicts, and encourage participation from less vocal representatives.

Further guidance and resources

- [Co-Production Collective: Working in partnership with people outside of the university system – Guidance for UCL researchers and staff considering ethics and research ethics](#)
- [National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement: Community-based participatory research: A guide to ethical principles and practice \(2nd edition\)](#)
- [National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement: Social and ethical issues in Public Engagement](#)
- [NIHR Ethical Practice Guidelines for Public Involvement and Community Engagement](#)
- [Research Impact Toolkit](#)
- [UKRI Public Engagement Guidance](#)

Appendix 1 – Some key characteristics of ‘research’ and ‘public engagement’

	Research	Public engagement
Recruitment	Participants are recruited according to research protocol using eligibility criteria. Participants sign consent forms.	Public contributors are invited because of their relevant lived experience.
Payment	Participants are reimbursed for travel and other costs	Public contributors may be paid for their time. Consider budgeting for this in any funding application if appropriate.
Who are they representing ?	Participants speak about their own experiences or about the experiences of others	Public contributors speak about their own experiences or about the experiences of others.
Who sets the agenda /topic guide?	Agenda is usually set by the research team.	Agenda can be decided by both the researchers and the public contributors.
How data are collected	Data is obtained, securely stored and managed according to University, ethical and legal requirements.	Any data collected is kept in line with the University’s guidance and policies on keeping public contributors’ information securely stored. (see section on data protection below).
Outputs	Data are formally analysed and outputs are developed (i.e. peer reviewed journals).	Outputs may result in changes to documents, processes, interpretation of results etc.

Appendix 2 – Case studies

Case study 1: No need for ethical approval

A research team want to present their work on exercise in the over-60s to a non-academic public at a local pub on a “Pint of Science” evening. Their faculty Research Impact Officer has advised that they need to evaluate the evening to see if/how public understanding has changed as a result of the activity. They have designed an interactive activity that will capture the audience’s understanding at the beginning and end of the evening. The team will use the results to help them develop a broader public engagement programme about the importance of exercise in the older population.

Applying the self-assessment tool

In what capacity are people involved in this activity?

They will take part as an audience.

What is the aim of the activity?

To share research findings and to inform the delivery of future events.

What will happen to the gathered information?

It will be used as feedback to inform future activities/events.

Case study 2: Need for ethical approval

A researcher has been exploring her research question focusing on the role of Virtual and Augmented Reality techniques in drama by developing a theatrical production. The play, a key output of her research, is ready to be performed and she is planning an evaluation exercise with an invited audience of theatre makers and technicians. She now wants to use their evaluations in a paper for a practice-research journal and plans to ask the audience to sign a consent form to allow their evaluations to be quoted in the paper. Although the performance as output was in her original funding application, she did not incorporate her evaluation and journal publication plans there.

Applying the self-assessment tool

In what capacity are people involved in this activity?

They will be approached and recruited by the researcher using eligibility criteria and they will give consent to be involved. They will share personal views/opinions for the researcher to systematically analyse, generating new knowledge.

What is the aim of the activity?

To gather and formally analyse information for publication purposes.

What will happen to the gathered information?

Gathered information will be systematically analysed and used for future projects.

Document control

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