Research at Essex County Council

Equality, diversity, inclusion, and public involvement principles.

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Background

This guidance outlines our approach to Equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) and public involvement in research.

Its purpose is to ensure that all research has good research integrity. It outlines how researchers should work with and include members of the public. It includes the expectations and behaviours that we have of people conducting research for, or on behalf of, Essex County Council.

It applies to the whole organisation. This includes hosted bodies, such as the Greater Essex Health Determinants Research Collaboration (HDRC). We are guided by this standard when conducting research:

- alone
- in formal collaboration with other organisations including academic partners
- in informal collaboration with other organisations including academic partners

It applies to professional researchers and staff who are conducting research with members of the public or service users. Staff may not be in a professional research role or may not consider themselves researchers.

Why is this important?

Research integrity ensures that researchers follow best practice and achieve high research standards. This allows people to have trust and confidence in the research methods and findings. Our research needs to have integrity to inform good decision-making.

EDI and public involvement in research are important contributors to the commitments within our Equality, diversity, and inclusion policy, the equality objectives and the progress set out in the Equality Objectives Progress Report.

Good EDI and public involvement research practice is important in reducing inequality. By including more diverse views in research we reduce inequality by:

- ensuring our research has better relevance and reaches more people
- listening and responding to the experiences of groups seldom involved in research
- improving the accuracy of our research findings and recommendations
- ensuring our interventions, resources, and services work for everyone who needs them
- ensuring the actions that we take as a Council are based on high-quality research evidence

Definitions used in this guidance

Equality	Ensuring that everyone is given equal access to resources and opportunities to utilise their skills and talents.
Diversity	Being reflective of the wider community. Having a diverse community, with people from a broad range of backgrounds represented.
Inclusion	An approach where groups or individuals with a range of backgrounds and experiences are: • welcomed • culturally and socially accepted • given equal access • engaged with as an individual A sense of belonging that is respectful of people for who they are.
Equity	Trying to understand and give people what they need to achieve their potential. Promoting notions of fairness, justice, entitlements, and rights.
EDI in research	Researchers ensuring equality, diversity, and inclusion in research. Ensuring that the public has equitable access to be involved in and take part in research, as participants or shaping the research (public involvement).
NIHR	The National Institute for Health and Care Research. Provides guidelines for EDI and public involvement in research.
The public	Essex residents, service users or people who work in Essex. This includes adults and children.
Participants	The individuals who take part in research. Sometimes referred to as respondents.
Public involvement in research	Members of public who work with researchers to shape the research as collaborators or advisors rather than participants of research.
Research	In terms of this guidance, 'research' includes activities such as: • quantitative and qualitative research • evaluation • behavioural insights

	Research uses data that is gathered from people (i.e. primary research) or data that already exists (i.e. secondary research).
Researchers	Includes: • council staff who are conducting research with the public and service users. They may not be in a professional research role or may not consider themselves researchers • council professional researchers • commissioned research providers or other organisations, such as universities
Research ethics	Guiding principles that seek to encourage high standards of research and researchers conduct. Research ethics review is the process of reviewing the research proposals to maximise the benefits and mitigate any potential risks.
Research Ethics Panel (REP)	The REP reviews the research proposals and advises on how to improve the design and management of the research. It aims to protect participants and researchers. It creates better research practice and ethical reflection.
Groups seldom involved in research	Some people or population groups do not often take part in research. There are many reasons why this is. For example: • lack of awareness • cultural reasons • lack of time • concerns their voices might not be listened to • lack of support or reasonable adjustments • researchers providing limited routes, formats, methods and communications to enable people to participate

The first 4 definitions are adapted from NIHR's Research Inclusion Strategy, 2022-2027.

Equality, diversity, and inclusion in research

What is Equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) in research?

EDI in research aims to ensure that a diverse range of people shape, as well as take part in, research.

> This aligns with our [Equality, diversity and inclusion policy](#) which states **"We are committed to developing a culture that embeds the effective management of equality, diversity and inclusion in all we do".**

The National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) sets out best practice in EDI in research. We follow [NIHR's operating principle of inclusion](#) as it reflects the research values that we wish to deliver.

> The NIHR operating principles state **"We are committed to equality, diversity, and inclusion in everything we do. Diverse people and communities shape our research, and we strive to make opportunities to participate in research an integral part of everyone's experience of health and social care".**

Researchers should ensure efforts to be inclusive of the population who are the subject of the research. These are people who may be discriminated against because of a protected characteristic [(Equality Act 2010)](#):

- age
- disability
- gender reassignment
- marriage and civil partnership
- pregnancy and maternity
- race
- religion or belief
- sex
- sexual orientation

It also includes people who may experience inequalities due to other characteristics such as:

- socio-economic status e.g. low-income families, people who are homeless, refugees, asylum seekers.
- geographic location e.g. people living in areas of deprivation.
- poor access to health and care.

Our researchers, and those working on our behalf, should encourage and welcome a diverse range of people to shape and take part in research. They should use a range of ways to do this. Researchers should integrate inclusive research practice consistently in the way they work.

Why is EDI in research important?

There are benefits to both the members of the public who take part in research, and those who take part in shaping the research. It is important to involve a diverse range of people and communities in research so that:

- researchers with members of the public shape research that is relevant to different communities and people
- the experiences of groups seldom involved in research are listened and responded to
- research findings are accurate and not skewed for one population or another
- decision-makers have trust and confidence in the results
- our products and services can be used by, and work well for, everyone that needs them

EDI in research is not just about ensuring a diverse range of people is participating in research. It is also about the public's involvement in research activities to shape the research. This includes making sure there are diverse views in the research, such as:

- design
- planning
- decision-making
- research management

Public involvement in research

What is public involvement in research?

Public involvement is where the public and service users work alongside researchers, acting as a critical friend to shape the research and how it is run. It is different from taking part in research.

> The National Institute for Health and Care Research's (NIHR) definition of public involvement in research is **"research being actively carried out 'with' or 'by' members of the public rather than 'to', 'about' or 'for' them".**

> The UK Policy Framework for Health and Social Care Research states the public should be involved in **"the design, management, conduct and dissemination of research"** unless there is a good reason for not doing so.

Why is public involvement in research important?

Staff conducting research do not always have the range of life experiences and knowledge of the issues that the research is seeking to understand. Involving the public helps to expand this knowledge. It benefits the individuals involved, the research, the organisation and society. The public can be involved at different stages of the research pathway.
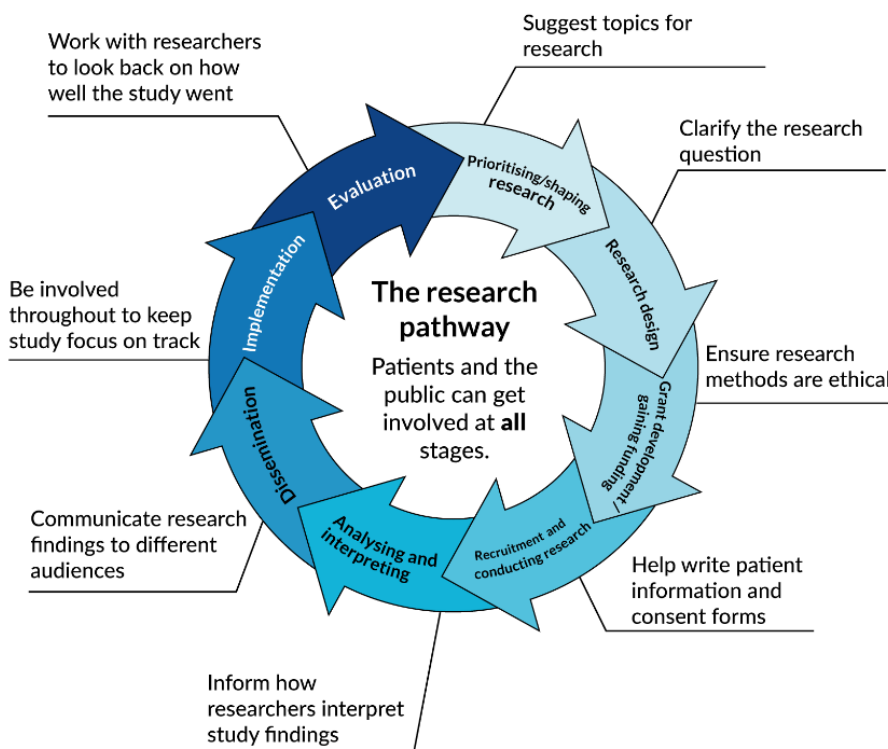
Caption: The Research Pathway cited by NIHR ARC Northeast and North Cumbria (2014, Jul).

Working with the public can help researchers to:

- make the research stronger, and more relevant
- ask better questions that are expressed sensitively
- ensure the research is culturally sensitive, inclusive, and accessible
- design methods that are acceptable and feasible
- reach the communities it needs to
- increase the quality of the research
- develop research that has more impact

Members of the public can:

- offer advice and guidance to staff conducting research
- bring their own experience and knowledge, offering a unique perspective
- identify where things have been missed, are not clear or misunderstood
- provide ideas on inclusive questions, documents, or methods (e.g., focus groups, interviews)
- ensure the research better reflects the needs and values of the people who use our services
- provide oversight, accountability and assist with sharing findings

UK standards for public involvement

We expect that staff undertaking research within Essex County Council to reflect the [UK Standards for Public Involvement](#) in their work. These aim:

> **"To help researchers and organisations improve the quality and consistency of public involvement".**

These standards describe what good public involvement (PI) looks like.

INCLUSIVE OPPORTUNITIES	Public involvement opportunities are accessible and include a range of people and groups, as informed by community and research needs.
WORKING TOGETHER	Work together in a way that values all contributions, and that builds and sustains mutually respectful and productive relationships.
SUPPORT AND LEARNING	Offer and promote support and learning opportunities that build confidence and skills for public involvement in research.
GOVERNANCE	Involve the public in research management, regulation, leadership, and decision making.
COMMUNICATIONS	Use plain language for well-timed and relevant communications, as part of involvement plans and activities.
IMPACT	Seek improvement by identifying and sharing the difference that public involvement makes to research.

Example of a mechanism for public involvement in research.

The Citizens Involvement Forum (CIF) will sit at the heart of the Greater Essex Health Determinants Research Collaboration's (GE HDRC) approach to public involvement. Members of the public will sit on the GE HDRC's Leadership Board. They will have an equal role in decision-making alongside other members, setting the direction of the HDRC. They will provide advice and challenge to improve public involvement and research and ensure that materials and events are accessible. They will bring their own wide range of experiences to shape the research.

These standards have been used within the expectations below.

Expectations

Expectations of staff conducting research within Essex County Council

We would expect all researchers working on behalf of, or within, Essex County Council[1] to follow the guidelines set out below. This ensures appropriate equality, diversity, inclusion and, public involvement in research. These standards aim to increase the quality and consistency of public involvement and diverse views in our research. Members of the public, staff from our employee networks and research community have fed into these expectations.

Researchers should:

- communicate with a wide audience about public involvement and research and make it easy for everyone to take part
- work with the public to identify what support and learning they need to confidently act as collaborators in developing and undertaking research
- work with the public in a way that respects and values all contributions, builds relationships, and encourages communities to take part
- ensure that the people involved are rewarded and recognised for their time and contribution in line with Essex County Council's Reward and Recognition guidance

To enable this, researchers should:

- integrate EDI and public involvement good practice into their research[2]
- use the advice and guidance, available to them to achieve this (see Support for researchers.)
- provide inclusive opportunities for public involvement and participation in research by working with communities and understanding their research requirements
- consistently involve the public in research management and decision-making
- share learning on the difference public involvement in research has made to projects and the people involved
- learn from the difference that EDI and public involvement in research has made to decision-makers and what they will implement

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[1] 1. Council staff conducting research with the public and service users. 2. professional researchers; 3. commissioned research providers or other organisations delivering research or evaluation.

[2] e.g. quantitative and qualitative research, evaluation, behavioural insights where data is gathered from people (i.e. primary research) or uses data that already exists (i.e. secondary research).

Example of equality, diversity and inclusion in research

The Waste Strategy for Essex project team wanted to encourage a diverse range of people to participate in the consultation of the new Waste strategy. The team created an engagement plan that considered each of the protected characteristics. This outlined how information about the consultation would be shared and promoted to aid participation. This included:

- sharing information across different organisations, and networks
- using a range of methods such as posters, leaflets, newsletters, emails, social media
- providing a range of formats such as easy read, large print, briefing sessions, and events

The Waste Strategy for Essex team monitored the response to the consultation. They made targeted efforts to increase participation. This ensured a wider range of responses. They received a total of 4,545 responses to the consultation. This included 4,224 responses to the full survey and 321 responses to the Easy Read survey. The strategy is now published.

Example of public involvement in research

The Young People's Relationships and Sex Education Survey was led by our Youth Service and Public Health teams. They had input from the Research & Citizen Insight team to advise on survey design and deliver the analysis and reporting.

Researchers worked with young people in collaboration with the Youth Service to shape the survey questions. This ensured the questions were age appropriate and tailored to the target audience. This supported the capture of meaningful insights. The survey received 3,700 responses from young people.

'We Asked, You Said, We Did' summaries have been created for each age group. Their aim is to share with young people how their input is making a difference and what actions are being taken because of the survey.

Improving the relevance and quality of findings

These two examples demonstrate how public involvement and EDI in research can improve research and the quality of research findings. These principles can also be applied to different methods such as interviews, focus groups and workshops. The key things for projects are to:

- draw on the experiences of a diverse group of people
- involve members of the public in shaping the research
- create inclusive opportunities for public involvement and participation in research

Embedding this guidance

Who needs to embed EDI and public involvement in their research practice?

Everyone planning or delivering research or evaluation at, or on behalf of, Essex County Council, should follow the expectations in their research practice and projects.

Researchers with members of the public should consider EDI in research, such as when deciding how:

- to reach and recruit a diverse range of people for research
- to involve members of the public in the planning, design, or management of the research
- different research methods could be offered that work best for participants needs
- to support people's unique needs to ensure they can fully take part either as participants or during public involvement

There are few exceptions to this, but it does depend on:

- the aims and the context of the research
- the size of the research project, where a smaller project might not be representative of the wider population
- the population or sub-population the research is about

For example, research with people with a disability, may limit the need to include people without a disability. However, it should still include people with a range of characteristics such as but not restricted to age, gender and ethnicity.

There must be a justified reason for not adhering to these expectations.

How will we embed this guidance in the research we undertake?

We will embed EDI and public involvement through:

- our research governance and ethical review process
- activities delivered by our in-house research team to raise research standards

Support for researchers

There are a range of resources that researchers can access to upskill in good inclusive research practice.

- Health and Care Research Wales (2022, Aug). Public involvement toolkit – a guide to involving members of the public in your research.
- INVOLVE (2008). Nine principles for effective deliberative engagement.
- NIHR Research Support Service (2024, Jun). Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion toolkit
- NIHR (2019). PPI (Patient and Public Involvement) resources for applicants to NIHR research programmes.
- NIHR Learning for involvement.
- NIHR. Applied Research Collaboration Northeast and North Cumbria (2014, Jul). Ethical Practice Guidelines for Public Involvement and Community Engagement.
- NIHR (2024, May). Briefing notes for researchers - public involvement in NHS, health and social care research.
- UK Standards for Public Involvement are supported by questions. Researchers can use these questions to reflect on their practice and decide if the standards are met.
- University of Manchester (2021). Inclusive Research e-learning module.

Our research team will offer a range of advice, guidance, and information sessions including:

- practice guidance for researchers with examples and case studies
- templates for participant information sheets, consent forms and survey introduction texts
- advice and guidance from in-house professional researchers
- Research Community of Practice Show and Share and learning sessions
- guidance within the supplier pack for procuring research services

Any support required by the public that would enable them to fully take part in research, should be identified and provided by the research project lead and their project resources.

High standards of research

Our research governance and ethics review processes supports researchers to achieve high research standards. Research conducted by, with, or for Essex County Council should be reviewed by our Research Ethics Panel.

The Research Ethics Panel reviews research proposals and provides advice to researchers. They help ensure that the benefits of the research are maximised and that any potential risks are identified and mitigated. This is to protect both the participants and researchers. This protection extends to their rights, dignity, wellbeing and physical safety. The Research Ethics Panel will also provide advice on issues relating to equality, diversity, inclusion and public involvement in research. By working in this way, the Research Ethics Panel will ensure both good research quality and ethical practice.

Researchers will be expected to act on the advice given by the Research Ethics Panel.

To enable this review process:

- information on research projects' approach to EDI and public involvement will need to be shared with the Research Ethics Panel before starting the research
- guidance will be issued about the role of the Research Ethics Panel, how it operates and what researchers and managers should do

Processes will be developed so that:

- the research ethics review process will monitor how EDI and public involvement have been included in projects
- members of the public can be involved in our research ethics review process for the most sensitive and complex projects
- researchers will be asked to share the impact of EDI and public involvement to their research, including how this impacts decision-making
- learnings from these activities will further inform our guidance and support

Additional References

In addition to the references throughout this document, the following provided useful reading. They supported the development of this guidance although not directly referenced in this document.

- HDRC Coventry (2023, Oct). [Guiding Principles for Public Involvement Working with people in Coventry.](#)
- NIHR. Applied Research Collaboration. North Thames (2022, Mar). [Public Involvement in Health and Social Care Research: An Introduction for Researchers](#).
- NIHR. (2024, May). [Briefing notes for researchers - public involvement in NHS, health and social care research.](#)