Sustainable and inclusive research practices in the social sciences

Pre-award checklist

Sustainability is an increasingly critical aspect of global social science research. Sustainable and inclusive research practices foster the development of strong, positive community relationships that create enduring societal impact, while also driving innovation, improving efficiency, and minimising environmental and social harm. It is increasingly important to integrate sustainable and inclusive practices from the conception of research ideas; something that funders expect to be demonstrated within applications. Through our collective efforts, social science research at the University of Birmingham can contribute to a more sustainable and socially just world.

This pre-award checklist outlines a range of considerations and steps you can take to incorporate sustainability into your research design. Your primary reference will be the specific funder scheme guidance, with the checklist being used alongside.

Quick checklist

Inclusive practices

- ☑ Ethical engagement
- ☑ Representation and accessibility
- ☑ Community benefit

Economic

- ☑ Cost awareness
- ☑ Fair compensation
- ☑ Reusable tools and workflows

Knowledge and integrity

- ☑ Open data & methods
- ☑ Reproducibility
- ☑ Long-term value

Environmental

- ☑ Sustainable travel
- ☑ Digital first – low impact computing
- ☑ Minimal physical resources - reuse or share

Inclusive practices

Considering equity, ethics, and stakeholder/community wellbeing.

- Representation and inclusion, such as building an interdisciplinary and diverse research team, with particular attention on early-career researchers, and involving diverse communities.
- Opportunity to include groups or individuals with lived experience of the research area, so that the research is co-created with them as ultimate beneficiaries. The UKRI's good research resource hub offers useful guidance.
- Establish strong partnerships (local, national, international as appropriate), to enhance collective and equitable knowledge.
- Consider longer term impacts on stakeholders and communities, both positive and negative. For example, how could you acknowledge and celebrate the contributions of stakeholders? How might your research support and enhance stakeholders and communities in the future rather than being a one-off rapid data collection intervention?
- Re-engage stakeholders during or after the research to follow-up on the outcomes of their contributions.

Economic

Responsible use of financial resources and considering broader economic impacts.

- Cost effective design – consider the costs versus benefits of your research. Factor in adequate budget to involve and engage relevant stakeholders and communities at every stage of the research. For guidance contact your RSSD Research Support Team.
- Ensure fair compensation for all staff and stakeholders for their involvement. Longer term resource planning such as reusable data systems, shared or second-hand equipment or leased equipment and facilities.
- Ensure accurate costing when considering sustainable practices, such as combining fieldtrips to reduce the number of journeys taken.
- Document any workflows and protocols that can be used in future studies.

Knowledge and integrity

Maximising impact using ethical and fair approaches.

- Ensure that your project team and partners are aware of and committed to the sustainable research practice goals.
- Include how you will build capacity and expertise over time by training post graduate researchers, early-career researchers and community partners.
- Consider the ways in which your research could have increased long-lasting usefulness.
- In what ways could your research have increased reproducibility such as using open data, methods and record keeping when confidentiality allows? How can you shape outputs so they can be updated or built upon rather than replaced?
- Responsible data stewardship, by using or producing data that will not quickly become obsolete.
- Responsible dissemination and impact statement, including criteria such as creating actionable insights for stakeholders and digital legacy resources using a variety of accessible communication methods.

Environmental

Minimising carbon impacts and considering alternative methods.

- Consider how your research might affect or depend on the environment and note ways that your environmental footprint can be minimised. For example, modifying data collection to use more digital methods (online surveys, virtual interviews), combining fieldtrips to avoid unnecessary travel, or limiting data transfers and compressing data where possible to reduce computing energy consumption.
- Assess whether the environmental effects of your research are proportionate to its expected benefits. Choose targeted methods to minimise negative environmental consequences whenever possible. Be transparent about decision making and environmental trade-offs.

Questions to consider when developing your research design:

- Is the data collection plan eco-friendly and resource-efficient?
- Have you identified where travel is critical to research success?
- What are the sustainability related impacts of the purchases, materials and equipment intended to be used?
- Are partners and participants treated ethically and equitably?
- Can the research process be inclusive and accessible to all?
- Are costs manageable without compromising quality and sustainability?
- Do intended partners share commitment to sustainable research practices?
- How will the research be useful in the long term?

Institution information

Our sustainability approach, progress and plans
Environmental pledges, partners and performance
Birmingham 2030 goals and strategic commitments
Research Strategy and Services
Responsible Research Practice

External information

Concordat for the environmental sustainability of research and innovation practice
UN sustainable development goals
UKRI environmental sustainability strategy 2025-2030
UKRI SPARK Hub
Wellcome Trust environmental sustainability funding policy

How could you build sustainability into your research?

Consider explicitly integrating environmental, social, and economic considerations into the way you frame your research.

When writing your research proposal you could consider the following factors:

- **Environmental:** How does the research impact or depend on the natural environment?
- **Inclusive:** How are people, communities, institutions, or inequalities involved?
- **Economic:** What incentives, costs, or resource flows shape the research?
- **Temporal:** What are short versus long-term consequences?
- **Intergenerational:** Who benefits now, and who might bear the costs later?
- **Justice and equity:** Which stakeholders are included, excluded, harmed, or helped by the research, directly or indirectly?

Assess sustainability in relation to a variety of aspects including:

- **Institutions** - governance, rules, organisations.
- **Behaviours** - choices, norms, habits.
- **Power** - who controls decisions or resources.
- **Culture and values** - beliefs, identities.
- **Economics and incentives** - costs, savings, benefits.
- **Networks and relationships** - diversity, inclusion, longevity.
- **Information and communication** - purpose, accessibility, clarity.

A sustainability-integrated research question should:

- ☑ Link social processes to environmental or long-term outcomes.
- ☑ Consider multiple stakeholders and reach (local, national, international).
- ☑ Address complexity rather than assume simple cause-effect.
- ☑ Be actionable—relevant for policy and/or practice.