Sustainable and inclusive research practices in the social sciences

Research delivery checklist

Sustainable and inclusive research delivery is the practice of conducting, managing, and completing research projects while minimising environmental and social burdens and optimising resource efficiency. It involves reducing carbon emissions and limiting waste, while fostering long-term benefits. These practices enable research that is ethical, environmentally responsible, accessible, and relevant to diverse communities, maximising research quality and positive social outcomes.

This checklist outlines a range of considerations and steps you can take to incorporate sustainability and inclusion into your research delivery activities. Your primary reference will be the specific funder scheme guidance, with the checklist being used alongside. You are encouraged to consult your research funding application throughout the project delivery stage to ensure that documented sustainability commitments are considered and implemented, wherever possible.

Sustainable and inclusive research practices tracker

Use the tracker template to explore and document how your research project team will incorporate sustainable and inclusive practices. Set goals and commitments at the start of the project and revisit at team meetings to discuss progress, document outcomes and highlight any challenges or lessons learned.

Quick checklist

Data and digital

- ☑ Re-useable and accessible data
- ☑ Appropriate data sharing and storage
- ☑ Responsible AI use

Travel

- ☑ Assess impacts and value of travel
- ☑ Lower carbon choices
- ☑ Combine purposes for travel

Workshops and seminars

- ☑ Low-carbon, inclusive formats
- ☑ Responsible venues and catering
- ☑ Inclusive contribution methods

Procurement and resources

- ☑ Circular economy suppliers
- ☑ Energy efficient equipment
- ☑ Responsible printing
- ☑ Explore alternatives to purchasing new

Inclusive practices

- ☑ Capacity building
- ☑ Responsible co-production
- ☑ Accessible outputs

Data and digital

- Consider using remote or online data collection methods (surveys, interviews, ethnography) where appropriate.
- Collect data using standard, non-proprietary file formats for long-term accessibility. Ensure data is not duplicated during the project.
- Use FAIR principles to manage, share and reuse data effectively - Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, Reusable – the University's research data management guide has more information.
- Minimise creating unnecessary large files such as video recording where possible.
- Re-use or adapt existing datasets (e.g. ONS, Understanding Society, UK Data Service) before collecting new ones.
- Use the University's Research Data Store, BEAR, which is hosted in an on- campus energy-efficient data centre. See the research data management policy and sustainable supercomputing blog for more information.
- Revisit data retention timeframes and review research data to check if it still needs to be accessed. If not, it can be moved to the BEAR Archive. This is more energy-efficient for long-term data storage.
- Practice responsible use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in your research. For example, use human made photos or art rather than AI generated, avoid using AI for simple searches and tasks that you could do manually. View the University's sustainable I.T. approach, sustainable AI guidance and AI guide for researchers for more information.
- Follow the University's accessibility guidelines when creating webpages. Read the University's digital accessibility information and guidance.

Travel

- Use Clarity, the University's business travel booking system. This system enables detailed carbon reporting. Clarity calculates the carbon cost of each journey so you can compare different routes and modes of transport. Record the carbon cost of project travel on the tracker template.
- Consider the purpose of travel. If travel is deemed necessary for project success, use lower carbon options, such as public transport over air travel. Guidance can be found in the University of Birmingham's sustainable travel action plan.
- Agree who is required to make specific trips and why. Consider aspects such as career development of project staff, equality and diversity, co-production, partnership collaboration.
- Combine trips or fieldwork, when possible, to reduce the number of journeys taken. Actively seek local sites for fieldwork, where viable, to reduce travel impacts. Also consider combining personal travel (using annual leave) with research fieldtrips.
- Consider holding regular virtual meetings with the team, partners and stakeholders once rapport and relationships have been established.

Workshops and seminars

- Choose the right format – online, hybrid or in-person, considering aspects like caring responsibilities and time zones. Try to offer an online option for participation if possible, so that people can join regardless of location, cost, travel times or mobility. Include lower-carbon options in your decision-making process.
- Plan low-carbon attendance by keeping venues, speakers and participants as local as possible. Encourage local public transport over options like taxis and flights. Consider clustering events together to avoid multiple trips.
- Choose sustainable venues that are near public transport, accessible for participants with disabilities, have energy efficient buildings and have recycling facilities.
- Consider using the University of Birmingham Conferences and Events Team to manage larger events. They provide sustainable services as standard and offer a green conference catering package.
- For catering, ensure accurate numbers to reduce waste, offer refill water instead of bottled drinks, avoid single use items, especially plastics, choose locally sourced plant based or low-meat options.

- Reduce printed materials where possible, using for example, QR codes and links to access information. Share slides and papers online. Use digital information capture technology e.g. Mural, Zoom Whiteboard, Miro.
- Make sessions accessible by offering captions or live transcription, hearing loops if needed, low noise environment, providing information well before the session, offering different ways to contribute (for example, Q & A, breakout groups), and provide time after the event for reflective feedback.

Procurement and resources

- Prioritise refurbished, leased, or second-hand equipment before you purchase new.
- Practice sustainable procurement. Familiarise yourself with the University's Sustainable Procurement Policy and use suppliers that align with key principles. For example, suppliers using circular economy practices, where products and materials are kept in circulation through processes like maintenance, reuse, refurbishment, remanufacture, recycling, and composting.
- Choose energy-efficient equipment and recycle or reuse devices responsibly. Share research tools and equipment with colleagues where possible. Use the National Equipment Portal to find shareable equipment within University of Birmingham and nationally.
- Avoid printing unnecessary information. If printing is required, print black and white and double sided. Be sure of quantities needed and limit copies.

Inclusive practices

- Nurture and support a diverse research project team. Commit to creating a culture embodying equality, diversity and inclusion. View the UK Research Integrity Office Equality, Equity Diversity and Inclusion resources.
- Build capacity and expertise over time by training early-career researchers and community partners.
- Involve participants and communities in shaping the research for co-production. The UKRI's good research resource hub offers useful guidance on involving the public, partners and the wider community in research activities.
- Provide fair compensation for participants' time and expertise. These costs should have been included in the project budget.
- Explore and follow research integrity and ethical processes such as GDPR compliance, informed consent, and transparent reporting. Helpful guides include the University's Ethics, governance and integrity SharePoint site, and the UK Research Integrity Office code of practice for research.
- Advocate for greater inclusion of environmentally sustainable practices in research activities through the existing and new collaborations and partnerships.
- Ensure outputs are accessible (plain-language summaries, community presentations, open-access journal papers).
- Ensure a diverse range of speakers for events, in terms of background, career stages and perspectives. Include a clear code of conduct and encourage inclusive, open discussions.
- Ensure there are benefits for research participants and communities.

Questions on inclusive practices to consider:

- Do you facilitate regular discussions with team members and partners about the opportunities and challenges of the project's sustainability goals during research delivery?
- Is there more that could be done to embed equality, diversity and inclusion culture and practices across all elements of the project?
- Are community partners or participants included meaningfully in decision-making processes? Are initial in-person meetings necessary to achieve this?
- Are research burdens shared equitably across the team and with stakeholders?
- Are accommodations in place to support marginalised participants in the research?

Throughout the research delivery stage, consider:

- Are you monitoring your sustainability goals throughout the project?
- Can you conduct any activities in a lower-carbon way?
- Are you on track to spend all the research budget efficiently and effectively, to maximise benefits of research?
- How can you ensure that each activity benefits participants and communities?
- Is this a good use of resources with lasting impact? Is the project maximising value for money?