

Public involvement and engagement in official statistics

A toolkit for statistics producers

The [Code of Practice for Statistics](#) (the Code), published by the [Office for Statistics Regulation](#) (OSR), sets the standards that those producing official statistics should apply to deliver statistics that serve the public good. Compliance with the Code gives people confidence that published statistics have public value, are of appropriate quality, and are produced by people and organisations that are trustworthy.

The third edition of the Code, published in October 2025, includes an emphasis on engaging with the public to better:

- understand and meet their needs as users of statistics
- understand and strengthen the degree to which the collection and use of data in the production of official statistics are viewed as acceptable by society

This toolkit helps statistics producers involve and engage the public in statistics production in a proportionate way that reflects the nature of, and public interest in, their statistics. It provides advice on why, when and how to reach members of the public. It is not a guide specifically on user engagement but will help statistics producers develop their wider public involvement and engagement strategy, as well as being useful in other data developments, such as with operational data.

The guidance is based on a Design Lab, held on 4 February 2025 with Connected by Data, involving experts from over 20 different organisations across the statistics, research and public involvement and engagement ecosystems. It also incorporates findings from the [Independent report on the 2025 UK Statistics Assembly](#) and [OSR guidance on user engagement](#).

This guidance has four parts:

1. [Involving the public](#) discusses how to identify relevant stakeholders to involve in statistics production and explains the relationship between user engagement and public involvement and engagement
2. [Key decision points](#) sets out the kinds of decisions that are made during the production of statistics where public involvement and engagement could be important, and discusses why, how and when to involve the public around those decisions

3. [Tips for effective involvement](#) highlights principles and approaches that make for effective public involvement and engagement. It also explores some of the common barriers to public involvement and engagement, and some ways to approach them
4. [Resources and learning](#) contains some additional links to relevant information to support statistical producers who are considering involving or engaging members of the public.

Throughout this toolkit, you will encounter two kinds of boxes:

Green boxes hold case studies illustrating different forms of public involvement and engagement.

Blue boxes indicate content you should include in your public involvement and engagement plan.

Involving the public

Official statistics serve the [public good](#) as public assets that provide insight, which allows them to be used widely for informing understanding and shaping action.

When we talk about “the public” in this toolkit, we mean individual people who may or may not be direct users of official statistics, and who should have a say in what statistics are produced, and how that is done.

Key definitions

Public involvement – The [National Institute for Health and Care Research](#) describes involvement as research being carried out ‘with’ or ‘by’ members of the public and communities rather than ‘to’, ‘about’ or ‘for’ them. It is an active and ongoing partnership between individuals with specific experiences (and the organisations that work with them) and researchers that influences and shapes a particular project.

Public engagement – [ADRUK](#) describes public engagement as a purposeful set of activities designed to promote an ongoing dialogue with the public about administrative data research, driven by active listening and responding. This can be through focus groups or workshops, or in relaxed settings like public debates and science festivals, as long as there is a dialogue.

User engagement with official statistics

Statistics producers carry out user engagement to better understand what the people who consume statistics need from them – their data needs and their views about the published statistics. This includes members of the public, as well as institutional users from businesses, civil society, academia and government. Public involvement and engagement may be part of a wider user engagement strategy, but it also goes beyond this to understand views of non-users as well, for example around public acceptability. Similarly, user engagement may form part of a public engagement strategy, but exploring internal or institutional users may be viewed as separate to public involvement and engagement.

Public involvement and engagement with official statistics

Public involvement and engagement can be used by teams producing individual statistics and teams working across the Government Statistical Service (GSS), such as the [GSS’s Harmonisation Team](#), to understand:

- the degree to which the collection and use of data in the production of official statistics are viewed as acceptable by society;
- how different groups want to be represented within data; or

- the language used in statistical surveys or outputs.

Even when members of the public are not using statistics themselves, data about the public and other public resources are used to create statistics. In addition, people are affected by the decisions and actions taken by public, private and voluntary and community sector organisations on the basis of those statistics.

Frequently, intermediaries play an important role in the way members of the public access statistics. In the same way, these intermediaries can also be used to reach members of the public to let them know about opportunities to be involved in improving or developing statistics.

The following table illustrates the different kinds of people who may be relevant when producing statistics.

Table 1: Different types of stakeholders who might be relevant when talking about “users” and “the public”

Members of the public involved in statistics	Intermediary users who can help reach the public	Institutional users whose decisions affect the public
<p>Survey respondents from whom data is collected.</p> <p>Public service users about whom administrative data is held.</p> <p>Members of identity or interest groups that official statistics talk about.</p> <p>Community members affected by decisions made using official statistics.</p> <p>Citizens who use information based on official statistics as part of engaging in democratic processes.</p>	<p>Civil society organisations who can reach or represent members of different communities.</p> <p>Community-based institutions such as schools, libraries, churches, who can reach particular segments of a local community.</p> <p>Journalists who include statistics in their stories.</p> <p>Fact checkers who summarise evidence from different sources.</p> <p>Search engines and generative AI tools that summarise statistical information.</p>	<p>Public servants across central, devolved, and local government who use official statistics as evidence in policy making, evaluation and operational delivery.</p> <p>Businesses who use official statistics for business planning.</p> <p>Academics who use official statistics within their research.</p> <p>Community and civil society groups who use official statistics in their research, campaigning and delivery.</p>

Members of the public involved in statistics

Intermediary users who can help reach the public

Institutional users whose decisions affect the public

Individuals who use official statistics as part of their daily lives, such as [to inform decision making](#).

Just as good representation is important when gathering data and creating statistics, it is also important when engaging the public in questions about statistics production. Some people are more able and willing to engage with the statistics process than others, which means that the voices we often hear (for example in the media or responses to open consultations) are usually not representative of all publics.

Case study 1: Including community and civil society voice

The Third Sector Statistics User Panel facilitates communication between the Welsh Government and the Voluntary and Community Sector regarding official statistics. Its objectives include understanding Voluntary and Community Sector needs, gathering feedback on statistical plans and outputs, and advising on statistical developments.

The panel consists of standing members including the Chief Statistician of the Welsh Government and the Chief Executive of the Wales Council for Voluntary Action, along with representatives from various Voluntary and Community Sector organisations including the Council for Wales of Voluntary Youth Services, Shelter Cymru, RSPCA Cymru and the Workers' Educational Association Cymru. They meet every six months, and the panel papers are published online.

Source:

[Third Sector Statistics User Panel](#)

Public involvement and engagement plan – Box 1

Answer the following questions to identify the publics relevant to your statistics:

- Who are your statistics about? Who is data collected from?
- Who are the direct users of your statistics and what do they use those statistics for?
- Who might be affected by those uses of statistics? Are any of those groups likely to be particularly adversely affected?
- Who might be left out of your statistics?

It may be useful to develop “personas” for different kinds of users and members of the public. However, these should be informed by user research rather than stereotyping and are not a replacement for involving people directly.

Once you’ve identified the publics who are relevant to your statistics, you should answer the following questions about the intermediaries you could use to help you reach them:

- Where do these publics go for information?
- Which community groups work with these publics?
- Which civil society groups speak for these publics?
- Which community institutions might be used to reach these publics?

Key decision points

This section of the toolkit discusses approaches to public involvement and engagement at four key points in statistics production:

- [What statistics should producers prioritise?](#)
- [How do people want to be represented in statistics?](#)
- [What would help people trust us with their data?](#)
- [How should producers make their statistics usable?](#)

What statistics should producers prioritise?

Involving the public as you are thinking about developing new statistics or refining existing statistics can help to:

- better meet the needs of people who will ultimately use or be impacted by your statistics
- support better participation in surveys or other primary data collection
- ensure proposed data collection, reuse of data, or use of administrative and operational data, is publicly acceptable
- demonstrate trustworthiness through transparency
- ensure the delivery of value for money by maximising the value of statistics and reducing the cost of collection error, data cleaning and respondent follow-up

You should proactively engage: statistics users; those the statistics are about and whose data is used; and those impacted by the use of the statistics. The following table lists some of the kinds of questions you might ask and methods you could use to ask them.

Example questions	Example methods
What do you see as the benefits of having these statistics? How might you use them?	Standing advisory panels that include general public members with lived experience.
What would be lost if these statistics weren't published? What would you use instead, if you didn't have them?	Post-survey questions or conversation with participants during data collection.
How comfortable or uncomfortable are you about these statistics being published? What do you see as the risks around how these statistics might be used or misused?	Opinion polling on the reuse of data to create specific statistics. Citizens' jury or other deliberative approach with witnesses arguing from different perspectives about the utility of statistics.

Example questions

What problems do you see (if any) with reusing this (e.g. administrative) data to create these statistics?

What would make this survey quicker and easier for people to complete?

In your opinion, are the benefits of these statistics worth the costs and risks? Is this something the public sector should be doing?

Example methods

Public consultation, following [consultation principles](#), to understand views around value of new or existing statistics.

Making the following information available will support engagement:

- Who are you? What are you trying to achieve as an organisation from this engagement, how, and what is the likely outcome?
- If you are planning a new collection: What statistics are you aiming to create? Why? Who made the decision to create them? Who are you hoping will use them?
- If you are refining existing statistics: What statistics are you refining? Why? Who made the decision to refine them? What do you already know about who uses them and how are you hoping that will change?
- What evidence do you have that these statistics are useful? How do they change things?
- What does it cost to provide these statistics? What value do they create?
- What data is or will be used to create these statistics? Where is that data coming from and how will it be collected?
- Who else will have access to this data? Will it be used for other purposes?
- What options do people have for opting in or out of the use of data about them? What are the consequences if people opt-in or opt-out, both for them and more broadly?
- How will these statistics be shared? When, where and at what frequency?

Case study 2: Developing the Below Average Resources measure

The Department for Work and Pensions is developing a new poverty measure named 'Below Average Resources' (BAR) based on the approach proposed by the Social Metrics Commission (SMC). As part of developing the new Official

Statistics in Development a user consultation ran for 12 weeks, from 18 January to 11 April 2024.

The consultation elicited 35 responses, with support for the value added by the Below Average Resources measure alongside existing poverty measures, but differing views on how to develop the framework in practice.

Source:

[Response to the consultation on the Below Average Resources measure](#)

How do people want to be represented in your statistics?

People have a right to be represented in statistics with accuracy and care. The terms and categories we use in statistics influences how people are seen and thought about. Statistics producers may be unaware of the nuances of different models, ways of thinking, and language, particularly when it comes to under-represented groups. Involving the people who belong to those groups in how they are represented in statistics helps to:

- support better participation in surveys or other primary data collection
- improve data accuracy
- better reflect the diversity of the population
- better meet the needs of people who will ultimately use or be affected by your statistics
- demonstrate trustworthiness through respect and inclusion

You should build on existing [harmonised standards and guidance developed by the Government Statistical Service](#), but may also need to proactively engage under-represented and (or) or disproportionately affected groups reflected in your statistics. The following table lists some of the kinds of questions you might ask and methods you could use to ask them.

Example questions

Example methods

How can we best collect data about your community or demographic to ensure people like you are accurately represented in official statistics?

Standing advisory panels including organisations representing particular under-represented and (or) or disproportionately affected communities.

How do you want to be represented? e.g. which model of disability, which ethnicity groupings?

Focus groups with members of under-represented and (or) or disproportionately affected groups.

How comfortable or uncomfortable would you be with answering these survey questions? What forms of these questions would you not respond to?

Co-creation or participatory design workshops to develop standard terminology.

For which aspects of your personal identity would an open text box be more appropriate?

Community researchers conducting peer-to-peer research.

How should your community or demographic be described? What other information (if any) do you think should be provided alongside these statistics to give context?

Cognitive interviews with people in target respondent groups.

What tailored reports or outputs (if any) would be useful for your community?

When deciding what to ask members of the public, you must consider what is feasible and appropriate in your situation. For example, if you do not have processing capability or subject matter expertise to analyse free-text data then you should not ask participants where they would like to express themselves through an open text box. Similarly, if you need to collect disability data in line with the Equalities Act (2010), you may need to use the [relevant harmonisation guidance for measuring disability](#). This could prevent you from representing some people in line with the disability model that they prefer. Therefore, in this situation, you should be clear about the constraints you are working within to avoid misleading the public. Understanding their preferences may still be valuable for how you describe their data, however you should align the specific questions you ask with the scope of their influence. Further detail on [being honest about the scope of public influence](#) is described in [tips for effective involvement and engagement](#).

Making the following information available will support engagement:

- What models, groupings or language are you currently using to represent people with different identity characteristics? Why do you use them?

- What do your statistics say about different groups? What tailored reports do you currently provide?
- What are survey or data-collection response rates from different groups? What methods are you using to reach those groups? Are you using user-centric design approaches?
- What operational, technical, legal and organisational considerations will influence how you can collect and report data about the characteristics and (or) or communities of interest?

Case study 3: Improving the recording of ethnicity in health datasets

The Race Equality Foundation and the Office for National Statistics were commissioned by the Wellcome Trust to look at different aspects of the recording of ethnicity in healthcare.

Forty one participants from Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities were recruited via voluntary and community sector organisations in three geographical areas, with each participant taking part in three focus group sessions. Half the sessions included a community language interpreter and the other half were held in English.

The research also included 46 healthcare workers who participated in focus group sessions or one-to-one interviews, including from primary, secondary and community health settings, and including nonclinical staff and clinical staff.

The research found that communities want to be actively involved in creating data collection processes.

Source:

[Improving the recording of ethnicity in health datasets](#)

[Analytical Learning Points for Ethnicity Data in Health Administrative Data Sources](#)

Case study 4: Developing health and unpaid care questions for the Census 2021

The Office for National Statistics conducted extensive stakeholder engagement, research and testing over more than three years to inform the development of

the Census 2021 questionnaires. One of the areas they looked at was questions about health and unpaid care.

The questions were refined through a combination of focus groups; informal interviews; in-depth interviews (for example, cognitive interviews, paired depth interviews); peer reviews; and user experience (UX) research. These were supplemented by testing the questions with sample participants.

The research led to changes in the usage of particular words (such as “conditions” rather than “problems”), the phrasing of questions, the options that people could choose as responses (such as when answering how many hours they worked as unpaid carers), and the overall flow of questions in the census.

Sources:

[Health and unpaid care question development for Census 2021](#)
[Question and questionnaire development overview for Census 2021](#)

What would help people trust us with their data?

Understanding the social acceptability of different approaches to collecting, storing, using and sharing data helps to:

- demonstrate trustworthiness through protecting people’s privacy and agency
- improve participation in surveys or other primary data collection
- ensure the delivery of value for money by maximising the value of statistics

You should proactively engage the people from whom you collect data directly and those whose administrative data is used to produce statistics. You may want to particularly focus on hearing from seldom-heard groups. The following table lists some of the kinds of questions you might ask and methods you could use to ask them.

Example questions	Example methods
What uses of your data are you currently aware of or assume happens?	General public membership on ethics panels making decisions about data reuse.
How would you like data to be used? What motivates you to share data?	Focus groups or workshops with particular communities to develop evidence about public acceptability.
What harmful uses or misuses of data do you want to avoid? What motivates you to not share data?	Online surveys to understand public attitudes to different uses of data.

Example questions

What do you need to know about how data is being protected? What would restore your confidence if there was a data breach or accidental share of data?

What do you need to know to feel more informed about how data is being used? How can we best share that information?

What information do you feel you need to make decisions about your data? What principles should apply to those decisions?

Are there any organisations you trust to hold us to account?

Example methods

Mini-public deliberations to create principles for what data can and cannot be used for.

Co-design of website pages providing transparency information.

Making the following information available will support engagement:

- What data are you using? Where does it come from?
- How are you keeping data safe and secure? What data governance processes are in place to manage the ethical use of data?
- What techniques are you using to anonymise data? What are the risks of re-identification and how are those managed?
- Who has access to the data you hold? How are decisions made about how it is shared?
- Have any data breaches or misuses happened in the past? What happened as a consequence?
- Which organisations monitor and provide independent oversight over the ways you collect, store, use and share data?

Case study 5: Understanding reasonable expectations around health data

The UK National Data Guardian (NDG) and Connected Health Cities commissioned Citizens' Juries c.i.c. working in partnership with the Jefferson Center (Community Interest Company) to explore when people would normally expect their confidential patient information to be used and shared and when they would expect it to be kept private.

Eighteen people took part in the three-day “citizens’ jury” to test a number of scenarios where patient data could be shared and judge whether it was reasonable for a patient to expect the information to be shared, or to expect privacy. The jury members heard from, and asked questions of, expert witnesses, and worked in groups on the jury questions. They reached conclusions together and were polled on their individual views to identify criteria for sharing or not sharing data.

Source:

Talking with citizens about expectations for data sharing and privacy
Patient and Public Involvement – Connected Health Cities

How should we make statistics usable?

Involving the public as you are designing statistical reports and outputs helps to:

- better meet the needs of people who will ultimately use your statistics
- prevent the misinterpretation or misapplication of statistics
- ensure that people can critically examine statistics and relate them to their own lives
- expand the diversity of those who can effectively use statistics
- ensure the delivery of value for money by maximising the value of statistics

You should proactively engage existing and potential statistics users of different types, including researchers, journalists, policymakers and the general public. The following table lists some of the kinds of questions you might ask and methods you could use to ask them, though there are many other [user research methods](#) that may be applicable.

Example questions	Example methods
Where do you look for statistics? Are you able to find what you are looking for easily?	Data diaries recording interactions with statistics over a period of time.
What statistics do you use? What other statistics or tables do you need or want? What would these support?	Cognitive interviews, shadowing, and (or) or data-based observations of people using statistics.
What level of detail is helpful in these statistics? What level of timeliness and comparability?	Surveys of statistics users. User-centric design and co-design workshops with statistics users.

Example questions

Example methods

What other information (if any) do you combine with these statistics?

Ongoing advisory panels including representatives of statistics users.

How do you prefer to engage with statistics? Do you look at datasets? Read the reports? Use our dissemination tools? Do you do it alone or in collaboration with others?

Standard government consultations: publishing plans and seeking input on them.

What language (in statistical releases) makes sense to you? Are there any aspects or terms that are particularly confusing or unclear?

What are the barriers to you using official statistics?

What makes you trust or distrust these statistics?

Making the following information available will support engagement:

- Where are your statistics and research results published? How do people find them?
- What statistical outputs do you make available? What do you already know about how much they are used?
- How frequently do you publish statistics and how timely are they?
- What breakdowns do you currently make available?
- What are alternative or supplementary sources of information that complement these statistics?

Case study 6: Communicating child heart surgery statistics

In 2013, concerns about child heart surgery statistics led to the temporary closure of Leeds General Infirmary's paediatric heart unit. Christina Pagel from University College London and Sir David Spiegelhalter from the University of Cambridge worked with the charity Sense about Science and experimental psychologist Tim Rakow from King's College London to create a website that would better explain the risk adjustment method known as PRAiS (Partial Risk Adjustment in Surgery), to avoid its misinterpretation in the future.

They involved families throughout the project to ensure that they used the right terminology and explained statistical concepts in ways people would understand. The resulting website, [Understanding Children's Heart Surgery Outcomes](#) doesn't compare hospitals to each other but to each hospital's predicted range, determined by the complexity of the procedures it undertakes, among other factors.

The researchers highlight that accessibility of statistics is crucial, and that incorporating feedback from the public is necessary to building something useful.

Sources:

[Parent-led tool opens up NHS children's heart surgery data to families](#)

Public involvement and engagement plan – Box 2

Public involvement and engagement should outline the specific topics around which you are intending to conduct public involvement and engagement activities. For each of these topics they should answer the following questions. You should describe for each question both what you are currently doing and what you intend to do in the future.

- What questions are you seeking to answer through involving the public? What existing information do you have about those questions?
- Which people, communities, groups or organisations do you want to hear from? How are you identifying or reaching them?
- What methods are you using to involve the public around those questions? Are you using different methods of engagement for different groups?
- What information are you sharing to help inform discussions around these questions?
- How will the results of this public involvement and engagement change what you do? How are you bringing other decision makers into the process so they best understand public sentiment?
- How will you feed back the changes you've made to the people and groups you engage so that they understand how their engagement has made a difference?

Tips for effective involvement and engagement

To support meaningful and inclusive involvement and engagement, statistics producers can use the [PEDRI Good Practice Standards for Public Engagement in Data for Research and Statistics](#). These standards provide a clear, practical foundation for planning and delivering high quality involvement.

Below are examples of how each standard can be applied in the context of statistics production.

Equity, diversity and inclusion: Engage a broad and diverse range of people, especially those whose data is being used or who are impacted by the statistics. Think beyond typical stakeholders to include underrepresented communities.

Data literacy and training: Provide clear, accessible explanations of the data, methods, and purpose of your statistics. Support public contributors with tailored briefings or training so they can meaningfully take part in shaping or understanding your work. Where possible, show contributors what different options might look like, rather than describing abstract concepts.

Two-way communication: Foster open dialogue throughout your project, not just at the start or end. Enable contributors to ask questions, challenge assumptions, and offer insights into the real-world meaning and use of statistics.

Transparency: Be clear about what data you are using, why, and how. Make sure your engagement activities share information on methodology, limitations, and intended outcomes in a way the public can understand and respond to.

Mutual benefit: Ensure contributors gain something from their involvement, whether that's new knowledge, influence on outputs, or recognition. At the same time, reflect on how their input improves your statistics' relevance and quality.

Effective involvement and engagement: Define clear roles for public contributors. Whether they are reviewing questionnaires, commenting on data gaps, or helping interpret results, their involvement should be purposeful, not tokenistic.

Creating a culture of involvement and engagement: Make public engagement a routine part of how your organisation works, embedded in planning, quality assurance, and governance. Build time and support for teams to do it well, not as an add-on.

The rest of this section highlights points that have particular importance for statistics producers:

1. [Be open about what you are doing, and ask for feedback](#)
2. [Be clear about your goals for public involvement and engagement](#)

3. [Be proportionate](#)
4. [Use existing evidence and ask specific questions](#)
5. [Systematically record the evidence you gather about opinions, needs and preferences](#)
6. [Work with others in your organisation for effective involvement and engagement](#)
7. [Build relationships with communities](#)
8. [Be honest about the scope of public influence on your decisions](#)
9. [Be aware of the burden of consultation](#)
10. [Demonstrate “you said, we did”](#)

1. Be open about what you are doing, and ask for feedback

The baseline for public participation is to publish information about what you are doing, and to encourage (and respond to) feedback. Explain who you are involving or engaging about what you are doing and why, the purpose of their involvement or engagement, and how you intend to use their feedback. Each decision point lists the kind of information it is useful to provide to the public to enable them to provide informed comments.

2. Be clear about your goals for public involvement and engagement

At times it is important to involve or engage the public to understand the lived experience of particular groups, to ensure the interpretation of the data is representative and meaningful to relevant people. For example, you might want to understand how the terminology or analytical categories you are using land with people who belong to particular communities. Or you might want to factor in constraints people with different characteristics have when completing surveys. Here, you can specifically target people with the relevant lived experience.

At other times you need to involve the public to make judgments about what is and is not acceptable in our society. While we might talk about “the public”, there is no one public. People can have very different opinions about questions like what statistics are useful and whether it is acceptable to reuse data for new purposes.

In these cases, deliberative approaches enable discussion, disagreement, compromise and nuance. Presenting a [mini-public](#) with a wide range of evidence and arguments from different perspectives, including from those with lived experience, helps the outcomes of such deliberations to be fair, balanced and legitimate.

Case study 7: Designing materials for online surveys

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) is trying to encourage people to complete social surveys online. Participants receive letters through the post, and are asked to access the survey on the web. Some studies are longitudinal; engagement between survey waves can keep up interest and reduce attrition.

The ONS has used a variety of user research approaches to explore the design of contact letters, leaflets, calling cards and envelopes, and the impact these had on participation in surveys. These research techniques included interviews with both participants and interviewers; focus groups; workshop exercises; alpha and beta testing; cognitive testing; and pop-up (guerilla) testing. The results were a set of guidelines on how to design recruitment and survey materials to maximise response and retention through data collection processes.

Source:

[Respondent engagement for push-to-web social surveys – Government Analysis Function](#)

3. Be proportionate

It is not necessary to involve or engage the public in every decision you make. Decisions about the level of involvement or engagement should be guided by multiple factors, including the scale of the statistical work, the use of the statistics, the level of sensitivity attached to the statistics and the public interest in the statistics.

Public voice is also only one source of information to guide the production of statistics; expert and technical input is also important. You should not involve or engage the public in a decision if:

- you are not clear about why you are involving or engaging them, or their contribution cannot make a difference to what you do
- you are confident that you already know what the public will say, because there is existing research, you are already receiving feedback, or there is a clear message from public discourse
- you are at risk of straining relationships with the communities you want to consult with because of the burden you are placing on them, and you haven't been able to demonstrate their impact from previous engagement

On the other hand, you should involve or engage the public if:

- you have a pressing question that you cannot or should not answer, either because you lack the necessary lived experience or because you are unable to make a balanced assessment of social acceptability of a course of action
- you want to build trust with particular communities by demonstrating that you are involving them and listening to them

The methods you use to involve or engage the public - and the resources you use - should also be proportionate to the scale of the question you are asking.

Consultations on wide-ranging questions or topics that require deep consideration need more time and resources than small queries about the wording or presentation of statistical outputs. For example, the England and Wales [Census 2021 consultation summary webpage](#) states that numerous activities occurred between 2013 and 2021 to seek public views on different aspects of the Census. In contrast, understanding attitudes towards small changes to a publication may only require a couple of days reviewing existing evidence and running a single engagement exercise to gather opinions about the specific output.

4. Use existing evidence and ask specific questions

General public attitudes research already tells us a lot about what the public think about data and statistics, but the context and details matter. The more concrete and specific your questions are, about areas where you genuinely want to better understand the public, the more useful their involvement is likely to be.

For example, Design Lab participants highlighted that, in general, people want statistics to:

- reflect and be relatable to their experience
- use plain English, and appropriate language and framing
- be easy to find and understand

and that this can involve:

- providing different levels of detail, and different output types (such as charts, tables and text) for statistics
- partnering with (news) media, influencers and other intermediaries to share statistics
- having a succinct methods and summary information rather than something too overwhelming

[Harmonised standards and guidance](#) provide a useful, well-researched baseline for data collection and presentation, but different statistics may need to reflect different experiences, use different language, and have different routes for discovery and

communication. These are the kinds of topics it is worth asking relevant publics about for particular statistics.

Similarly, the ONS has brought together [existing public attitudes research](#) on acceptable and unacceptable uses of and handling of data. The 2024 [Public attitudes to data and AI Tracker survey](#) states:

Increasingly, the public agrees that data use is beneficial to society and recognises the useful role data can play in designing products and services that benefit them. However, while public attitudes regarding the value and transparency of data use are becoming more positive, concerns around accountability persist. Anxieties are primarily rooted in data security, unauthorised sales of data, surveillance, and a lack of control over data sharing. These concerns are particularly prevalent among older individuals. Notably, these issues mirror the themes participants recalled hearing about in news stories.

But, again, different types of data and statistics will bring different benefits and risks to different publics, and varying levels of trust in the organisation collecting and analysing data can have a big impact on what is judged to be acceptable. The more context-specific the question, the less likely you are to get the answer “it depends”.

Highlighting the existing evidence you are building on when engaging with the public saves them from reiterating things you already know and helps them feel that the engagement is meaningful and additive.

5. Systematically record the evidence you gather about opinions, needs and preferences

Whether your insights come from reviewing existing evidence or engaging the public directly, a clear and agreed approach to recording opinions, needs and preferences is essential. Maintaining a clear record of this helps you demonstrate responsiveness, track how public voices have influenced your work, and provide transparency to the public and wider stakeholders. This record should be regularly reviewed and updated as new insights emerge, ensuring that public perspectives are not only heard but actively inform decision-making throughout the lifecycle of your statistical products. A clear record also supports the [“you said, we did” approach \(described in tip 10\)](#), helping to close the feedback loop and build trust.

There are numerous ways that you can record public perspectives, such as by following user or social research approaches to logging user needs:

- **Writing user needs statements:** Producing statements in a set format such as, ‘as a [characteristic], I need [something], so that [desire, outcome, or goal]’

- **Creating personas:** Developing fictional, evidence-based descriptions of a type of person or group that sets out who they are and explain needs, motivations and barriers
- **Journey mapping:** Visualising the experience a person has with a statistic, and setting out specific needs for each stage
- **Thematically analysing needs:** Grouping needs by themes, with information about who expressed them and where possible why

In some instances, it may be valuable to take your record of needs back to public contributors to get their perspective on how their views were captured and reflected in your output. Public contributors can also be involved in developing this record, for example through co-creation sessions where you work together to identify themes.

6. Work with others in your organisation for effective involvement and engagement

Involving or engaging with the public takes time, resources and expertise, and its scale should be relative to the impact and importance of the statistics. As a statistics producer, be practical about where those resources are most usefully spent and try to work with other people in your organisations around engagement.

For example, can you get people running your surveys to ask a few additional questions of the people they are engaging with? If data is being collected through surveys administered by interviewers, you could ask those interviewers for their observations about which parts of the survey people struggle with. A similar approach could be used to gather information from call centre personnel supporting people to complete online forms.

Communication professionals may be able to support monitoring of conversations that are already happening that can inform statistics production. For example, they could help you understand what is needed and what public concerns are, by answering questions such as:

- What is being said in traditional and social media about the topic? What research and statistics are being cited? Who is using this information?
- What are common areas of misinformation and are fact checkers able to draw on statistics to support their activity?
- What are people saying directly to your public body, through online comments, requests or team inboxes, about your statistics?

That said, bear in mind that public discourse and individual comments may not be representative.

7. Build relationships with communities

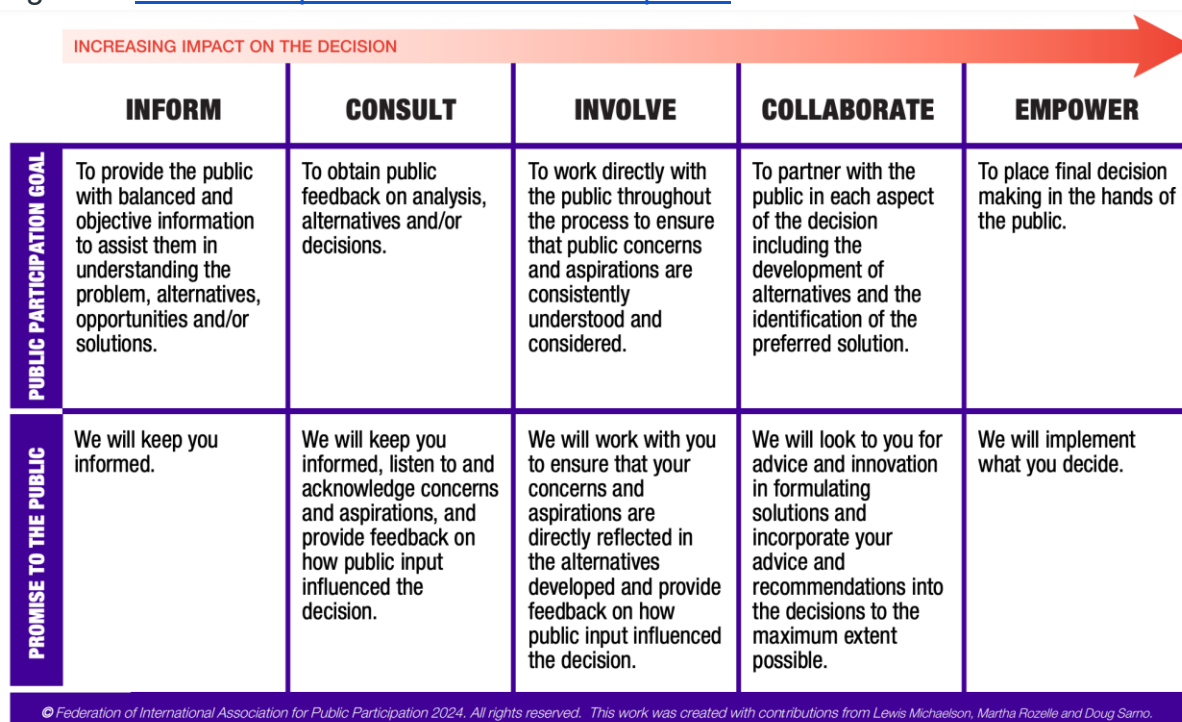
Building relationships with communities and civil society organisations over time can help to create understanding and trust that means questions can be answered or issues addressed quickly and effectively. Where there is clear benefit from involving members of the public in your work, or groups that represent the public, you might consider how you can enable enduring communication channels. This could be by expanding statistics user groups or running parallel groups that include survey respondents and those most likely to be affected by decision making informed by your statistics.

8. Be honest about the scope of public influence on your decisions

The public rarely has the final say over statistics, which also have to satisfy internal needs, constraints and limitations, as well as ministerial priorities. As outlined in the Code of Practice (particularly under principles 2: lead responsibly, and 8: be relevant) producers of statistics hold responsibility for making decisions that balance these requirements, and ensuring users are at the centre. To engage responsibly, it is important to clearly state which aspects of decision making the public can influence, and to explain why some elements are not open to input.

Over-promising about the influence the public has undermines trust. Use the spectrum of public participation (Figure 1) to identify your goal in involving the public and what promise you are making to them about the consequences of that involvement. You may find you need to engage people earlier in the process to have their input be more meaningful within it. This will require factoring in time for people to share their thoughts, as well as ensuring there is time for you to act on the feedback you receive.

Figure 1: [The IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation](#)



	INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	EMPOWER
PUBLIC PARTICIPATION GOAL	To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	To place final decision making in the hands of the public.
PROMISE TO THE PUBLIC	We will keep you informed.	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will look to you for advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.	We will implement what you decide.

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Members of the public may not always be fully aware of the complexities, constraints, and trade-offs involved in producing official statistics. Rather than viewing this as a barrier to, or a reason to substantially limit the scope of, engagement, there can be value in open conversation about the dilemmas you face. By unpacking these issues transparently (such as through deliberative approaches) you can facilitate a better understanding of the compromises and competing priorities that shape decisions. Such engagement enables contributors to appreciate the realities behind statistics production, fostering trust and encouraging more constructive discussion around the balances that must be struck between different stakeholder interests.

9. Be aware of the burden of consultation

Different people have different awareness, capabilities, motivations and constraints on their engagement with public bodies. For example, even the timing of engagement activities (e.g. during working hours, or at school-pick-up time) can limit who can be involved. Every method for engagement has limitations; aim to be as inclusive as possible and consider using a mix of approaches to fill the gaps.

Efforts to be inclusive can mean that some groups shoulder a proportionally greater burden around consultation, leading to consultation fatigue. For example, it is important to engage with disabled communities to ensure statistics reflect their experience and are accessible for them, but this also means disabled communities are called on more than others. You should have an answer when they ask, “what is in it for me?” Remuneration for time spent providing input might be one answer. Ensuring consultation is meaningful, so inputs supplement, rather than replicate,

existing evidence and make a difference rather than being tick-box exercises, might be another.

10. Demonstrate “you said, we did”

Try to follow up with people and groups who have provided input and feedback to explain what you have done as a result. This helps people feel heard and that their time and effort to engage with you was worthwhile. There are numerous ways in which you can communicate this information, for example through:

- E-mail updates or project newsletters
- Published reports
- Blog posts
- Follow-up meetings or workshops.

You could also consider publishing “you said, we did” information so that participants can find it even if you lose touch. This also helps other members of the public to understand how the public was involved in your decision making.

In explaining what you did after your engagement, you may choose to set out the criteria that was used in your decision making (such as feasibility, impact, or alignment with strategic goals) and who was involved in the process (such as advisory panels, internal teams, or external experts). This will help to show the part in the process that the participants played, and make it clearer why their suggestions were or were not taken forward.

You do not have to have done everything people said to provide information about how their involvement influenced what you did. There might have been other considerations, such as resource constraints or requirements from other stakeholders, that meant you could not do everything they wanted. Explaining the full decision making process can help to demonstrate the constraints and trade-offs that led to this outcome; these constraints should also be explained during your engagement activities with them. In these situations, reflecting what you heard from participants, and why you chose to do what you did, is enough. If appropriate, you may also wish to explain that the suggestions could be revisited in the future, or to invite the contributors to engage in future activities.

Often when you use external companies to recruit people to take part in your public involvement and engagement activities, you won't have direct access to them after that activity, to enable follow up. Think about the full cycle of involvement, including follow-up, when you are putting together requirements from external recruitment firms.

Public involvement and engagement plan – Box 3

Answer the following questions to ensure that your public involvement and engagement is effective. You should describe for each question both what you are currently doing and what you intend to do in the future.

- What information do you publish about statistics production, and what routes are there for feedback about your statistics or production processes?
- What feedback and input have you already received about your statistics, and how have you responded to it?
- What research about public attitudes or user needs are you already aware of and how can you use it to shape your statistics production?
- How might you find and use other existing evidence to understand public views about your statistics?
- What questions (if any) still need public input, and what level of public participation will you be engaging in around them?
- Which people, communities, civil society groups or other intermediaries do you routinely engage with (if any) and how?
- What steps are you taking to ensure public involvement and engagement is inclusive and worth participants' time and effort?
- Which other teams do you work with to help you involve and engage with the public and how?

Resources and learning

This section of the toolkit provides links to [resources](#) to help you engage the public in your work, and [learning](#) to increase your confidence and skills in public involvement and engagement.

Resources

To support you in implementing our toolkit, we have identified a selection of resources to aid statistics producers in how they involve and engage the public:

[User engagement support and good practice – Government Analysis Function](#)

Summary: Offers practical guidance and case studies to help you plan and deliver effective user engagement. It outlines principles for understanding users, improving accessibility, and adapting statistical products with user engagement.

Use when: You are designing or reviewing engagement strategies, especially when aiming to improve the relevance and usability of statistical outputs.

[Methods - Involve](#)

Summary: Provides a comprehensive overview of participatory methods for public engagement. It includes tools for approaches such as public dialogue, citizen advisory groups, and appreciative enquiry, helping statistics producers choose appropriate approaches based on their goals and audiences.

Use when: You need help selecting or designing engagement methods tailored to your audience or project goals.

[Tools and guidance hub - PEDRI](#)

Summary: A suite of resources and publications from a range of organisations, collated by the Public Engagement in Data Research Initiative (PEDRI). These resources include frameworks, templates, examples of previous research and practical advice for engaging the public in data-or statistics- related research.

Use when: You are planning public involvement and engagement activities and want examples of what other people have done previously, or to find resources you can apply.

[Good practice standards for public engagement in data for research and statistics - PEDRI \(PDF\)](#)

Summary: Outlines six key standards for meaningful public engagement, along with information on how they may be achieved. These standards help ensure that engagement activities are purposeful, respectful, and contribute to better data use and policy outcomes.

Use when: You are setting up or evaluating engagement activities and want to ensure they meet recognised standards of good practice.

[A guide to public engagement in practice - ADR UK](#)

Summary: A practical guide from Administrative Data Research UK (ADR UK) showcasing real-world examples of public engagement in data research. It sets out principles ADR UK follows for public engagement, followed by ways to engage the public, and case studies.

Use when: You are seeking inspiration or practical examples of successful public engagement in data research.

[Considering public views and engagement regarding the use of data for research and statistics – UK Statistics Authority](#)

Summary: Sets out why public views on the use of data are important, and how they can be considered in different situations. Particularly valuable in this publication is guidance around reviewing existing literature before undertaking new engagement.

Use when: You want to understand public perspectives and are at an early stage of establishing plans to gather insights, including deciding whether or not new engagement is appropriate.

As described in the above guidance on [considering public views and engagement regarding the use of data for research and statistics](#), when exploring public views the first stage ought to be understanding prior work in the area. To support you with this, we have identified existing public attitudes research on the use of data in statistics:

- [Public attitudes to data and AI: Tracker survey \(Wave 4\) - GOV.UK](#): Presents findings from a longitudinal survey tracking public perceptions of data use and artificial intelligence
- [What we know from engaging with the public on data: January 2025 - Office for National Statistics](#): Synthesises lessons learned from ONS's public engagement activities
- [A UK-wide public dialogue exploring what the public perceive as 'public good' use of data for research and statistics – Office for Statistics Regulation and ADR UK](#): Reports on a national dialogue exploring views around 'public good' in the context of data use

Learning

Successful public involvement and engagement requires skills that develop and strengthen with experience; the more you undertake these activities, the more confident you will become. PIE training is available from external providers, but individuals can undertake other activities to develop skills as well:

Participating in relevant professional communities

Joining networks such as Apolitical's Citizen Engagement and Technology community can provide access to resources, free training opportunities, and peer support through discussion forums.

Attending free public engagement events

Organisations such as Connected by Data and PEDRI regularly host free online events covering a wide range of public engagement topics.

Shadowing Government Social Researchers (GSR)

Shadowing GSR colleagues as they conduct focus groups or other public-facing activities can help develop understanding of effective facilitation and inclusive engagement techniques.

Collaborating with the Government Communications Service (GCS)

Working with GCS professionals can support the development of clear, accessible materials by helping to reduce technical language and tailor content for public audiences.

Collecting and reflecting on feedback

After each engagement activity, seek feedback from participants to identify what worked well and where improvements can be made.

Undertaking training for core skills

PIE requires skills in areas such as written and verbal communication, facilitation, stakeholder engagement, and project management. Therefore, undertaking training on any of these topics can strengthen your ability to meaningfully engage members of the public.