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Equality Impact Assessments

NIHR East of England ARC Inclusive Research Community of Practice

NOTE: Equality Impact Assessment has two commonly used abbreviations: EQIA and EIA. EQIA or EIA are used interchangeably to refer to “Equality Impact Assessments

Key Takeaway

- Equality Impact Assessments are practical tools that help researchers and organisations identify and address potential inequalities before decisions are made. They support legal obligations, improve inclusivity, strengthen research quality, and ensure that projects consider the needs of diverse populations from the earliest stages.
- Charlotte concluded that although they require time and careful reflection, they help researchers anticipate barriers, plan mitigation strategies, build evidence about underserved populations, and support future service and policy improvements. The greatest value comes when EIAs are treated as ongoing documents that inform the entire lifecycle of a project, rather than as a one-off requirement.
- Annalisa's main takeaway was that Equality Impact Assessments are valuable tools for identifying inclusion issues that may otherwise be overlooked. While useful at any stage of a project, she recommended completing them as early as possible, ideally when designing a study and preparing funding applications, so that inclusive approaches can be built into the research from the start.

Lucy’s Overview of Equality Impact Assessments* for Research

Lucy Gregory, a Senior Research Assistant in the Research Inclusion workstream, provided an introductory overview of Equality Impact Assessments (EIAs), explaining what they are, why they are important, and how they can be used in research and wider decision-making.

An Equality Impact Assessment is a tool designed to improve inclusivity and fairness by helping people identify how a project, policy, event, or piece of research might affect different groups of people. It encourages researchers and organisations to think broadly about accessibility, participation, and potential barriers, ensuring equal opportunities and reducing unintended discrimination.

Equality Impact Assessments focus on the nine protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010 whereas, Health Inequality Assessments, focus on factors such as Socioeconomic status, Income, Deprivation, Geography and other Access barriers.

Equality Impact Assessments are not limited to research studies involving participants. They can be applied to non-traditional research projects like Systematic reviews, as well as Policies, Service reviews, Events and functions, Organisational decision-making processes and any activity that may affect people differently can benefit from an EIA.

There is no single required EIA template. Different organisations often have their own versions, including Universities, Local councils and Integrated Care Boards (ICBs).

Researchers are encouraged to use the template most appropriate to their institution or project.

Resources and Support

- ARC East of England Inclusion Workstream webpage - https://arc-eoe.nihr.ac.uk/public-involvement-research-inclusion/research-inclusion/research-inclusion-resources
- ARC East of England Community of Practice webpage - https://arc-eoe.nihr.ac.uk/involving-people-and-communities/research-inclusion/inclusive-community-practice
- ARC East Midlands Equality Impact Assessment Toolkit: https://arc-em.nihr.ac.uk/arc-store-resources/equality-impact-assessment-eqia-toolkit
- Monthly ARC East Midlands webinars and drop-in sessions: These sessions are discussion-based rather than formal training workshops and are particularly useful once researchers have begun their assessment and have specific questions.

Researchers were also encouraged to contact the Research Inclusion Workstream Lead (nicole.jones@cpft.nhs.uk), herself (Lucy Gregory – l.gregory2@herts.ac.uk) and Annalisa Casarin (a.casarin@herts.ac.uk) for advice and support.

Charlotte Cooke's Experience Completing an Equality Impact Assessment

Charlotte Cooke, a Research and Evaluation Officer, described her experience completing an Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) for a research project exploring what research matters to people experiencing homelessness and multiple disadvantage. The project was part of a placement with NIHR and aimed to inform future public involvement and research priorities.

Why the EIA Was Conducted

The project required both university ethics approval and Hertfordshire County Council's internal review processes. At the time, completing an EIA was part of these requirements. Charlotte noted that guidance has since evolved, particularly for evaluation projects. Evaluators may not always need to complete an EIA before an evaluation begins, but findings

from evaluations can inform future EIAs when services, policies, or commissioning decisions are being changed.

Structure of the Assessment

The Hertfordshire County Council EIA begins with:

- An initial assessment of whether an EIA is required.
- Background information about the project.
- Identification of stakeholders.
- Consideration of each of the protected characteristics under the Equality Act.

For each characteristic, users must provide evidence about the relevant population and assess whether the project could have positive or negative impacts.

Challenges Encountered

A key difficulty was that the assessment considers each protected characteristic separately. Because Charlotte's research focused on multiple disadvantage, where people often experience several overlapping characteristics and support needs simultaneously, it was challenging to separate these factors into distinct categories.

She also found it difficult at times to identify evidence that related solely to one characteristic, rather than recognising the complex interactions between multiple forms of disadvantage.

Using the EIA to Improve Inclusion

The assessment encouraged Charlotte to think carefully about how different groups might engage with the research and what barriers they could face.

Examples included:

- Learning disabilities and learning difficulties: She incorporated inclusive research methods, accessible communication, suitable venues, and practical considerations such as food and support from service staff.
- Gender identity: She considered how previous negative experiences with services might discourage participation among transgender and gender-diverse individuals and explored ways to create a more welcoming environment.
- Race and ethnicity: The EIA highlighted the need to consider language barriers, cultural differences, and culturally appropriate engagement methods.
- Sex: Recognising that homelessness services often have more male than female service users, she reflected on how future research might require women-only focus groups to better understand women's experiences.

The process helped identify ways to reduce barriers and improve participation across diverse groups.

Assessment Outcomes and Expert Review

After completion, the EIA generated an automatic risk rating (RAG rating) and summarised proposed mitigation actions.

Charlotte then shared the assessment with the council's Diversity and Inclusion Lead. She found this external review particularly valuable, as the lead brought a different perspective and identified issues that she herself had overlooked. This reinforced the importance of involving diversity and inclusion specialists in the review process.

Importance of Ongoing Review

One of Charlotte's key messages was that an EIA should not be treated as a "one-and-done" document. Instead, it should remain a **living action plan** that is revisited throughout a project as circumstances change and new issues emerge.

Benefits and Limitations

Benefits:

- Encourages researchers to think systematically about inclusion.
- Helps identify potential impacts on different groups.
- Documents mitigation strategies.
- Strengthens the evidence base for future service or policy changes.
- Can support longer-term efforts to address inequalities.

Limitations:

- Time-consuming to complete.
- Some overlap with ethics application requirements.
- Can be difficult to apply when characteristics intersect.
- Structural inequalities, such as those linked to homelessness, can be challenging to address through project-level actions alone.

Annalisa's Experience Completing an Equality Impact Assessment

Annalisa, a Senior Research Fellow at the University of Hertfordshire, shared her experience of completing an Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) for an NIHR-funded research project. She explained that inclusion is now a key requirement for NIHR-funded studies, alongside Patient and Public Involvement and Engagement (PPIE).

Purpose of the Assessment

Annalisa used the EIA to better understand how her research might affect different population groups, particularly people who may not have been fully considered during the

initial study design. Completing the assessment helped identify potential gaps in inclusion and encouraged broader thinking about who could be affected by the research.

Reflections on Timing

One of her main observations was that she completed the assessment six to eight months after the study had started. While the exercise was valuable and eye-opening, she felt it would have been even more beneficial during the planning and funding application stage, as it highlighted groups that could have been considered earlier in the project design.

The Assessment Tool

She used an EIA form developed by the Centre for Ethnic Health Research. Compared with some other templates, it was relatively straightforward and less detailed. However, she found the PDF format restrictive because responses had to be entered into fixed-size text boxes, limiting the amount of detail that could be included.

Applying the Assessment to Her Research

The project focuses on rare diseases and inequalities in access to care. Annalisa described how people with rare diseases can experience delays in diagnosis and treatment, often resulting in poorer outcomes because their conditions may not be recognised early enough.

When completing the assessment, she drew on existing evidence showing that access to care can vary across different ethnic groups, including findings relating to people of African and Sudanese heritage. This helped identify race and ethnicity as important factors to consider.

Consideration of Protected Characteristics

The EIA required consideration of the protected characteristics under the Equality Act. Annalisa reflected on how these applied to her study population:

- Age was identified as a relevant factor because, although rare diseases are often associated with children and genetic conditions, her study population was predominantly older adults. The research aimed to address age-related inequalities in access to care.
- Disability was also considered a potentially relevant characteristic.
- Race and ethnicity were recognised as significant due to existing evidence of inequalities in healthcare access.
- For characteristics such as gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, and pregnancy and maternity, the team found no known direct impact within their project at that time.

Importantly, the focus was not only on identifying possible negative impacts but also on how the research could contribute positively by reducing existing inequalities.

Action Planning and Monitoring

The assessment included:

- A summary of the key equality issues identified.
- Plans for monitoring impacts throughout the study.

An action plan detailing:

- What actions would be taken.
- How impacts on protected characteristics would be demonstrated.
- Who would be responsible for implementation and monitoring.
- The expected outcomes.

Summary of the Discussion Following the Presentations

After the three presentations, participants discussed the practical use of Equality Impact Assessments (EqIAs) in research, evaluation, public involvement, and service development. The conversation focused on implementation challenges, good practice, and how EqIAs can be used as meaningful tools rather than administrative exercises.

1. *EqIAs should be living documents*

   Participants agreed that EqIAs are most valuable when reviewed throughout a project's lifecycle, rather than completed once and filed away. They can act as ongoing action plans, helping teams identify barriers, consider who may be excluded, and record limitations that can inform future work. The value lies in the reflective process as much as the completed document.

2. *Review frequency should be proportionate*

   There was no consensus on a fixed review schedule. Suggestions included reviewing EqIAs approximately every six months and whenever significant project changes occur. The frequency should reflect the size, complexity, and risk level of the project.

3. *Governance requirements vary*

   Requirements differ between organisations and may depend on sponsor expectations, university policies, NHS governance processes, regulatory requirements, and project risk. Researchers should understand how EqIAs fit alongside existing ethics and governance documentation and whether they are mandatory or supplementary.

4. *Public contributors play an important role*

   Participants emphasised that EqIAs should be developed collaboratively. People with lived experience can identify issues researchers may overlook and suggest practical ways to improve inclusion and accessibility.

5. *Transparency and accountability matter*

   It was suggested that public contributors should feel able to ask whether an EqIA has been completed. This could help strengthen transparency and encourage organisations to apply equality processes consistently.

6. *Intersectionality must be considered*

   A major theme was the importance of recognising that people often belong to multiple groups simultaneously. Participants noted that characteristics such as age, disability, ethnicity, socioeconomic disadvantage, gender identity, and caring responsibilities frequently overlap, creating compounded barriers that may be missed when characteristics are considered separately.

7. *Researchers also have lived experience*

   The discussion highlighted that lived experience is not limited to public contributors. Researchers themselves may belong to protected groups or have experiences that provide valuable insight, and these perspectives should also be recognised.

8. *Challenges around pre-award involvement*

   Participants noted that EqIAs are most useful during the development of funding applications, yet meaningful public involvement at this stage can be difficult because funding is often unavailable until grants are awarded.

9. *Learning from local government*

   Local authority and public health settings were identified as environments where EqIAs have long been embedded in decision-making, service planning, and policy development. Participants felt there was much that research teams could learn from these established approaches.

10. *EqIAs support inclusive research design*

    Many attendees viewed EqIAs as a practical framework for considering inclusion throughout the research process, including recruitment, intervention design, accessibility, dissemination, implementation, and long-term impact.

11. *Greater consideration of children and young people*

    The discussion highlighted the need to ensure children and young people are not overlooked in inclusion planning. Particular attention should be given to involvement opportunities, age-related barriers, and consent processes for groups who may have additional vulnerabilities.

12. *EqIA documents must be accessible*

Participants also reflected on the accessibility of EqIA templates themselves. Concerns included technical language, complex forms, digital barriers, and the lack of accessible formats. There was agreement that EqIAs should be written in clear, accessible language to enable meaningful participation from a wider range of people.

Overall Conclusion

Participants agreed that Equality Impact Assessments can be valuable tools for improving inclusive practice when used as ongoing, collaborative processes. Effective EqIAs encourage reflection, support better decision-making, and help researchers and organisations identify and address potential inequalities throughout the life of a project.
