

how to...

...conduct an ethical evaluation

Aimhigher Greater Merseyside is committed to conducting all evaluations with an ethic of respect for the participants, and ensuring the findings are as robust and unbiased as possible. The British Educational Research Association's *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research* are a good guide in this area. A copy of the guidelines is included in this section of the toolkit. They cover researchers' responsibilities to participants, sponsors and other researchers. The main points from the *Responsibility to participants* section is summarised here. Please note that all of the points will not apply to every evaluation!

- Evaluators should operate within an ethic of respect for anyone involved directly or indirectly in the evaluation, regardless of their background, beliefs or lifestyle.
- Evaluators must take steps to ensure that participants understand the purpose of the evaluation, and what the information will be used for.
- All participants must understand and agree to their participation without being pressured to participate. This is known as 'voluntary informed consent'.
- If a participant chooses to complete a questionnaire, this can be considered as their consent if the questionnaire clearly states the purpose of collecting the information. For interviews and focus groups, participants should be asked to sign to indicate their consent (see the evaluation instruments section for example consent forms).
- Normally, consent should be given before the evaluation research is conducted, i.e. at the start of an interview rather than the end.
- Participants have a right to withdraw their comments from the evaluation at any time.
- Evaluators must ensure that they comply with legal requirements in relation to working with young people or vulnerable adults.
- Children should be facilitated to give voluntary informed consent.
- Evaluators should recognise that participants may experience distress or discomfort during research, and all necessary steps must be taken to reduce the sense of intrusion.
- Evaluators must seek to minimise the impact of their research on the workloads of participants.
- Evaluators must act responsibly when offering incentives to encourage participation in the research, e.g. considering the health aspects of offering sweets to young children. They must also acknowledge ways in which offering incentives may introduce bias in samples.
- Researchers must advise participants of any expected negative effects of participation in advance, and if any unexpected negative effects become apparent, participants should be informed immediately.
- Evaluators must recognise the participants' entitlement to privacy. All participants' input must be reported anonymously and treated confidentially, unless the participant explicitly waives that right (and it's best to have the waiver in writing if this is the case).
- Evaluators must comply with the Data Protection Act (1998) and not disclose any information that could identify individuals without permission. All such disclosures should be recorded, and individuals have the right to access any information held about them.
- Evaluators should ensure that data is kept securely and that no publication will directly or indirectly lead to a breach of agreed confidentiality or anonymity.
- It is considered good practice to debrief participants of the outcomes of the research, and to provide them with copies of reports etc. that were produced following their participation.