NIHR | National Institute for Health and Care Research

Code of Conduct for Public Contributors (ARC North West Coast)

1. Background

Public Contributors (PCs) play a core role in the National Institute for Health and Care Research Applied Research Collaboration North West Coast (forthwith NIHR ARC NWC). are part of research and cross-cutting theme leadership teams, thus contributing to theme planning, strategic discussions, partner meetings, public involvement structures, dissemination, implementation and wider ARC NWC activity and memberships.

2. Role of the Public Contributor

PCs play a central role providing input across all ARC NWC activities. Appointed and/or nominated PCs have an active role on the majority of committees which hold accountability.

3. Conduct in meetings

PCs should remember that, in strategic spaces, they may be seen as representing ARC NWC public involvement more broadly. When attending ARC NWC-related meetings or associated activities, Public Contributors are expected to:

- Contribute constructively
- Make space for others to contribute
- Respectfully listen to different views
- Keep discussion relevant to the agenda
- Respect the role of the chair/facilitator and other attendees
- Respectfully, proportionately and constructively challenge where needed
- Avoid behaviour that could reasonably make others feel intimidated, dismissed, silenced or unable to contribute

PCs should only speak or write on behalf of ARC NWC, the Public Contributor Forum or a public involvement structure where this has been agreed.

4. Political views, campaigning and personal agendas

ARC NWC recognises that people bring different experiences, beliefs and perspectives to public involvement. PCs must remain politically impartial within ARC NWC activities.

PC spaces must not be used for:

- Party-political campaigning
- Promoting a political party or candidate
- Repeatedly advancing a personal campaign that is not relevant to the ARC NWC work being discussed
- Pressuring others to agree
- Presenting personal political views as ARC NWC views

This does not prevent PCs from raising issues about inequalities, policy, services, lived experience, community priorities or public concerns where these are relevant to ARC NWC activities.

5. Confidentiality and public communication

PCs must not share confidential information outside the group unless this has been agreed. PCs should also take care when using social media or other public platforms. They should not share confidential information, unpublished findings, private meeting discussions,

personal information, or comments that could identify others without permission.
PCs may also be required to work with confidential data, whereby adherence to ethical guidance is mandatory. Where PCs are unsure what can be shared, they should ask the PPIE Manager or Academic Lead before sharing.

In the unlikely event that concerns about a PC's conduct is raised, the following process will be followed.

6. Examples of conduct concerns
The following may be considered conduct concerns, depending on context, seriousness and frequency:

- Repeatedly dominating meetings
- Interrupting others or preventing others from contributing
- Dismissive, aggressive or intimidating tone
- Repeated failure to stay within the purpose of the meeting
- Using ARC NWC spaces to promote party-political views or unrelated personal campaigns
- Presenting personal views as ARC NWC views
- Sharing confidential information without permission
- Approaching external partners as an ARC NWC representative without agreement
- Making inaccurate claims for payment or expenses
- Discriminatory, bullying or harassing behaviour
- Behaviour that damages trust in ARC NWC public involvement processes
- Repeated refusal to respond to reasonable feedback about conduct
- Behaviour that leaves others feeling unable to contribute safely or confidently
- Breaching research data confidentiality and/or breaching ethical guidelines

7. Raising concerns about a Public Contributor
Concerns about a PC should be raised with the individual concerned if appropriate. Depending on the nature of the concern, you may escalate to the PPIE Manager/Academic Lead. Concerns will be handled sensitively and fairly. People should be able to raise concerns without fear of being dismissed or penalised. Where possible, concerns should be addressed early, before patterns of behaviour become routine. Any concerns raised should remain confidential especially during any investigations.

8. Responding to conduct concerns
ARC NWC will respond to conduct concerns fairly, proportionately and transparently.
The response will depend on the seriousness of the concern and if:

- Anyone felt unsafe, intimidated, excluded or distressed
- Confidentiality was breached
- Conduct affected ARC NWC's relationship with partners or contributors
- Concern is isolated or repeated
- Further support, clarification or training could address the issue

9. Staged response to conduct concerns
Where concerns have been raised, the following approach will be followed:

Stage 1: Informal clarification
For minor or early concerns, the theme lead, PPIE Manager or Academic Lead will speak with the PC informally to:

- Explain the concern
- Remind the PC of the Code of Conduct
- Agree what needs to change
- Identify any support or adjustments needed
- Agree how the PC will be supported to continue in the role

A confidential record will be kept (see section 11).

Stage 2: Formal conduct conversation
If the concern is more serious, repeated, or has affected others, ARC NWC will arrange a formal conduct conversation to discuss:

- What the concern is
- Which part of the Code may have been breached
- PC response
- Possible outcomes of the formal conduct conversation (e.g. written reminder of expectations, additional training or mentoring or change in role or responsibilities

A confidential record will be kept (see section 11).

Stage 3: Role restriction, suspension or removal
Where there is a serious concern, repeated breach, refusal to follow agreed expectations, or risk to others or ARC NWC's work, ARC NWC may restrict, pause or end the PC role.
This may include:

- Removing the PC from a specific meeting or activity
- Pausing their PC role while concerns are reviewed
- Transitioning into a different PC role
- Ending their PC role
- Ending involvement with ARC NWC where the breach is serious enough

Examples of situations that may justify immediate restriction, suspension or removal include:

- Bullying, harassment or discrimination
- Serious breach of confidentiality or research ethics, data disclosure or other data security/data guideline breaches
- Behaviour that makes others feel unsafe or unable to participate
- Serious reputational risk to ARC NWC
- Claiming to represent ARC NWC without permission
- Repeated conduct concerns after previous feedback and support
- Abusive, threatening or aggressive behaviour

10. Fairness and right to respond
Before a PC is removed from a role, ARC NWC will provide:

- A clear explanation of the concern
- An opportunity to respond
- A chance to explain any relevant context
- Information about the decision-making process
- A clear outcome in writing

11. Record keeping
The PPIE Manager/Academic Lead will keep a confidential record of conduct concerns and actions taken. This will include:

- The nature of the concern
- Who raised it
- Any immediate action taken
- The PC's response
- Agreed actions or support
- Review dates where relevant
- The final outcome

Records will be handled in line with ARC NWC information governance and confidentiality expectations.

12. Support for people affected
Where conduct concerns affect other contributors, staff, researchers or partners, ARC NWC should consider what support is needed. This will include checking in with those affected and offering a debrief. Actions and outcomes will be shared with the individual who initially raised the concern.

13. Summary statement for Public Contributors
PCs are highly valued because they bring public, community and lived experience insight into ARC NWC's strategic work. The role works best when PCs are able to listen, challenge constructively, support inclusion, respect confidentiality, work collaboratively with themes and partners, and be clear about when they are speaking personally and when they are representing an agreed ARC NWC position.

Where these expectations are not met, ARC NWC will respond fairly and proportionately. Serious or repeated breaches may result in the PC role being restricted, paused or ended.