



University
of Glasgow

Language Use in Community-Engaged Research: A Govan- Based Perspective



Purpose

To raise awareness and propose alternative language for research terminology when engaging with community members, schools, and youth groups.

Context

The University of Glasgow's community engagement efforts in Govan and across Glasgow involve working closely with schools, community groups, and residents on health and wellbeing initiatives. However, language such as "clinical trials" or "clinical research" often causes concern or misunderstanding, especially when used in early-stage conversations with teachers, youth workers, or parents. This can create barriers to participation, trust, and long-term partnership.

Community stakeholders may associate these terms with:

- Medical experimentation
- Involuntary or risky participation
- Hospital-based interventions or illness
- A lack of transparency or control

Community members have also expressed concerns about who has access to personal information gathered during research, particularly in relation to health conditions, income, or immigration status. There is often anxiety that participation could affect eligibility for benefits, access to services, or lead to unintended scrutiny. This reinforces the need for clear, transparent, and community-sensitive communication.

Recent conversations and workshops with residents and local partners in Govan and surrounding areas highlighted concerns about inconsistent communication and follow-up from academic teams. These reflections shaped this guidance.

Community Recommendations

To encourage trust, inclusivity, and better communication with community partners and reflecting feedback shared directly through local discussions with community members and representatives we recommend moving to more accessible and participatory language in community engagement phases without compromising academic integrity.

- Clearly communicate who will have access to any information shared, and how it will be used, especially in relation to sensitive issues like health status, income, or personal circumstances.
- Reassure participants that involvement will not impact immigration or legal status, or access to services, and that data protection is taken seriously. Make clear that researchers have no authority to influence or support immigration processes, cannot assist with immigration applications, and cannot provide reference letters for asylum or legal claims.
- Consider co-developing trust-building messages with local organisations and advisors.
- Provide a neutral and transparent explanation about participation and welfare benefits: if relevant, you may explain that time spent attending research sessions could be recorded as part of a participant's regular activities for Universal Credit reporting but emphasise that this depends on the individual's own circumstances and must be agreed with their work coach, not with researchers. Participation should always be voluntary, and researchers should not present the study to meet Jobcentre or benefit-reporting requirements. Researchers can provide an attendance record if requested but must take care to avoid creating pressure or expectations.

- Acknowledge that some communities may have concerns shaped by the historical and colonial legacy of medical and health research. Researchers should familiarise themselves with this history, including past examples where consent was disputed or absent and understand how such legacies continue to influence trust today. Recognising historical abuses and legacy issues is respectful of communities lived experiences and helps avoid repeating past mistakes or reinforcing mistrust. This awareness should shape how studies are introduced, discussed, and co-designed with communities.

Suggested alternatives to research jargon:

Instead of...	Consider using...
Clinical research	Health research with people
Clinical trial	Health study or project
Participant recruitment	Inviting people to contribute/ take part
Study subjects	Participants
Research engagement	Conversations about health and wellbeing
Intervention	Health activity or support programme

These terms can be adapted depending on the audience and context.

Equity, Representation, and Sensitive Use of Language in Health Research

In many communities, conversations about health and research sit within a much wider history of how people's bodies have been described, studied, or valued. Because of this, some terms that feel routine in scientific settings, such as "errors," "abnormalities," or "faults" in someone's genetic "code" can land quite differently in community contexts. Without meaning to this language can echo older narratives that positioned certain groups as "less healthy" or "less normal."

This doesn't mean researchers should avoid these terms altogether, but it does mean it can help to explain what you do mean. Communities often appreciate hearing the distinction between:

- Natural genetic variation.
- Differences in how people are treated or diagnosed.
- Effect of environmental and social factors.
- Areas where certain groups have historically been under-researched.

Shaping things in this way can make conversations feel more grounded, respectful, and collaborative.

It's also helpful for researchers to reflect on who is and isn't represented within studies. Communities notice when most trials historically involved white or male or white male participants, and they may wonder whether new treatments or technologies will ultimately benefit them as well. Being open about these limitations, and about the efforts to address them, can go a long way in building trust.

Finally, some health technologies have well-documented limitations that affect different groups in different ways. For example, pulse oximeters are now known to overestimate oxygen levels in people with darker skin tones, something that became particularly visible during COVID-19. When engaging with diverse communities, acknowledging these kinds of issues is not about placing blame, it's about showing awareness, listening to lived experience, and demonstrating that researchers take equity seriously.

Overall, the goal is not to avoid difficult conversations, but to approach them with openness, context, and care while recognising the strengths communities bring, and the importance of meeting people where they are.

In summary

Aligning language and communication practices with community values helps to:

- Strengthen trust and transparency
- Increase meaningful participation and co-production
- Reduce misconceptions and ethical concerns
- Support the university's commitments to health equity and socially accountable research

This document was co-designed with the following organisations:

- Govan Community Project
- Gilded Lily Inspiring Enterprise Cic
- Govan Youth Information Project
- Govan Men's Shed

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