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Rapid Ethics Assessment and Learning (REAL) method in policy decision-making

Step-by-step guide to using the REAL method

Acknowledgements

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Glossary

Capabilities: People's abilities to attain wellbeing and have access to the means to a good life, such as access to education, social relationships, good health.²

Care: People's ability to meet the needs of others and maintain relationships that are central to their lives.

Equality: Experience of being treated in the same manner by the state and other citizens, despite one's differences.³

Freedom: An individual's ability to make decisions over their life without external constraints or other powers or undue influences.

Habits: Repetitive behaviours that dispose us to act in certain ways. Habits can have a significant impact on long-term health and wellbeing, and help us stay socially connected.

Harms: Negative outcome or damage, either physical, moral, financial, or any other type. Harm may arise at an individual, family, organisational, and societal level.

Intergenerational justice: Moral duties and obligations each generation has to others (preceding and succeeding generations), especially concerning access to natural resources, and harms to the environment.

Intersectionality: Recognition that different types of discrimination (e.g. based on sex and race) overlap with distinct and compounding impacts on individuals and society.

Justification: The act of providing reasons for certain decisions and actions.

Proportionality: Principle that suggests any action should be proportional to the intended outcome, and any harm done should be proportional to benefits achieved.

2 The approach is associated with work by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum on personal capacity to attain a good life ("beings and doings") in contrast of principle or value-based approaches to leading a good life. See Nussbaum, MC (2007) Capabilities as fundamental entitlements: Sen and social justice. In *Capabilities equality* (pp. 54-80). Routledge; Sen A (2005) Human rights and capabilities *Journal of human development* **6(2)**: 151-166.

3 Equality is different from equity, which considers the varying needs of people and calls for distributing resources not equally but based on these diverse needs. The Equality Act 2010 establishes protections from discrimination and harassment based on certain protected characteristics.

Reciprocal relationship: The relationship between citizens and the state that entails a balance of duties and rights on both parts. It also involves a sense of mutual obligation among citizens themselves, which can foster care, solidarity, and collective wellbeing.

Social cohesion: The level of trust and social connectedness at a societal level.

Social infrastructure: Institutions, organisations, and physical spaces that support wellbeing in society, including public transport, hospitals, parks, and alike.

Socio-economically disadvantaged groups: Groups that persistently have lower income, educational, health, and other wellbeing outcomes, often because of poverty and lack of access to services and employment.

Trade-offs: Situations where competing values and priorities have to be balanced and compromised, often by conceding on one or more of them.

Step-by-step guide to Rapid Ethics Assessment and Learning method

How do I use it?

The REAL method should be used when making important decisions and designing policy responses in crisis contexts. It also includes preparatory and training activities to help you embed it in your practices and organisational infrastructure. There are four steps to the REAL method, in addition to preparatory stage 0. The preparation stage is a key part of this, improving both personal and institutional capacity for ethics deliberation. Together, these stages aim to improve the robustness of decision making as part of strengthening overall anticipatory infrastructure.

We strongly recommend going through the materials as a team, (ideally, multi-skilled and cross-function teams such as taskforces), rather than individually, to ensure rich deliberation and scrutiny. We recommend starting with a **2-hour training session** on a previous project for users to familiarise themselves with different ethical domains. In a crisis situation, **stages 2-4 can be prioritised, making it usable within 1 hour or less**. As a leader of the team, you can review stage 0 before training or conduct planning activities with the team during the training session.

The stages of the REAL method are:

- **Stage 0:** Prepare and Anticipate
- **Stage 1:** Scope
- **Stage 2:** Identify and Assess
- **Stage 3:** Decide
- **Stage 4:** Learn and Revise

How does it link with existing processes?

The Assessment provides procedural guidance on how to attain an ethics-informed policy outcome, rather than guidance on the outcome itself. It supports users to identify potential ethical tensions and to create a transparent action plan to address these tensions.

It complements, rather than replaces, existing appraisal tools such as impact assessments, cost-benefit analyses, ethical, legal or social implications (ELSI) or risk assessments. It is designed to inform decision-making and action with ethics insights for better risk management.

There is some expected overlap with mandatory codes of practice such as professional ethics standards or research ethics protocols, however, the tool focuses on ethical dimensions of policy implications to target population groups, larger society, and the environment. The tool is not an 'ethics checklist' but a decision-making guide. It will help users to consider how and at what stage to bring ethics knowledge into existing processes.

In order to integrate this tool into your existing processes, please consider the following:

- Use the REAL method at **an early stage**, where it can help with problem-framing. Other, more extensive impact assessment tools may be more suitable at a later stage when policy choices are fully formed.
- Use the REAL method **as a prioritisation exercise**: it does not replace Equalities Impact Assessments or similar tools but helps to identify trade-offs and point to most relevant impact, and in turn to where more in-depth analysis is needed.
- Use the REAL method to **strengthen justification and record keeping** practices. As a governance and learning tool, it can not only improve justification to the public, but also help with operational continuity, by justifying decisions to your future selves or teams who may be continuing your work.
- **Modify the REAL method template** to add to your existing risk assessments or other impact monitoring tools.



Stage 0 Prepare and Anticipate

We suggest building up institutional readiness through preparatory activities that will support the Assessment when crisis or acute situations occur. However, don't wait until there is a crisis, as these activities can take some time. Forward thinking and strong communication channels and relationships with stakeholders, affected communities, and experts will improve ethical decision-making and implementation. The following steps aim to embed procedures into other stages of the Assessment and by doing so support decision-making. You may already be doing some of these steps and if so, revisit them to ensure they incorporate material linked to ethics.

Preparatory step	Prompt	Resources
1 Mapping the landscape	Undertake regular stakeholder mapping exercises to develop a clear picture of who may need to be involved in key decisions. Make sure to identify diverse population groups that may be affected by work done by your team.	[Insert local procedures, statutory requirements and resources here]
2 Knowledge integration	During crisis, we tend to rely on already established communication pathways. Identify diverse group of experts that can be useful to consult during times of crisis: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Consider organisations or individuals that are doing similar or related work and that might be able to advise you on ethical issues. Create a list of contacts so that you have it at hand.• Create networks before crisis hits. Organise engagement events, fellowships, and visitations to establish the network you can rely on later.• Develop terms of reference for consulting a range of experts and developing clear role descriptions.• Consider how you source evidence and how you'd establish evidence credibility during crisis.	[Insert local procedures, statutory requirements and resources here]

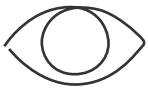
<p>3 Public engagement</p>	<p>Public engagement can contribute to robust and accountable decision-making practices and help identify otherwise hidden ethical tensions. Before a crisis hits, consider how to establish engagement pathways that you can rely on later:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are your options to conduct a short format consultation? • Do you work with suppliers who could support you to deliver engagement in a crisis situation? • Can you get insights into the needs and preferences of the public on the topic in question from existing evidence, including previous consultations, lived experience accounts, and other sources? • Can you develop meaningful, routinised consultations before crisis with communities who are most affected by your policy to understand their needs, preferences, diversities, and potential impact? 	<p>UK Government Consultation Principles</p> <p>Involve methods of public participation</p>
<p>4 Mobilise internal protocols and resources</p>	<p>To prepare for crisis situations, know how to mobilise your internal protocols and familiarise yourself with internal resources and statutory requirements, such as Equalities Assessments, and the Health Equity Assessment Tool (HEAT). The REAL method does not aim to replicate these but to provide a flexible and holistic framework that you can adapt.</p>	<p>[Insert local procedures, statutory requirements and resources here]</p>



Stage 1 Scope

This stage helps you to set out the remit of your ethics assessment in relation to your own role and responsibilities and the boundaries of your policy area. Defining the scope of ethical issues arising from a particular policy domain might already be part of your regular project management practices. This step will help you identify the scope and context of the problem at hand.

Question	Notes
<p>1 What is the nature of the crisis?</p> <p><i>Consider the timeframes and resources you have – this will help you think about your specific remit and where the boundaries lie.</i></p>	
<p>2 What population groups are you targeting?</p> <p><i>Think about individuals, social groups, communities of interest or of geographical area, presumed social groupings, population-level, non-human and environmental impacts.</i></p>	
<p>3 What is the public benefit you plan to bring with this policy? (for those groups and wider society).</p>	
<p>4 Who else needs to be involved or consulted?</p>	
<p>5 What are the knowledge gaps? What is it that you don't know (yet)?</p> <p><i>Consider what information you need, what you know, and don't know.</i></p>	



Stage 2 Identify and Assess

During research and consultations, we have identified a range of the most salient and relevant areas of ethical challenges and impacts. The Assessment captures a wide range of potential ethical impacts and groups them into four substantive domains:

- **Equal respect and dignity**
- **Freedoms and capabilities**
- **Social and natural infrastructures**
- **Relationships and care**

It also signposts to other relevant material and tools available. This stage allows you to describe and discern the most relevant ethical impact areas and identify tensions that are relevant to policy design and implementation. It also allows you to identify tensions and the weight of these impacts, to guide your action further.

Each ethical impact area poses a risk that unless the impact is mitigated or justified, a serious harm can occur. By not considering relevant impacts, you are missing out on an important dimension of how this policy will be operationalised.

The ultimate aim of this step is to develop justifications for your choice. This stage helps you demonstrate how your decisions follow the ethical principles and procedures that you have considered. It will also help you to keep records of the ethical dilemmas, and their relevance to your work – for accountability, future reference, or to ensure continuity and institutional memory. You can also use this Assessment to compare different policy options by mapping out potential impact during the options appraisal stage in the policy cycle.

Start by looking over all the ethical impact areas in the first column. Consider if they are relevant to your policy aims and scope and if relevant, make a mark in the corresponding box in the second column. After identifying relevant impacts, go line-by-line through each impact and consider their relevance to the question in the column:

- **What is the impact?:** For each line, consider if your policy plan has any impact on the area in the question. Consider if the envisaged benefits the policy brings are proportional to the possible and potential harms that result from it.
- **Intentionality:** Consider if impact in that area, for instance, individual freedoms, is a necessary part of the policy, or is it an unintended side-effect that can be mitigated?
- **Urgency:** Consider if impact in that area is likely to happen imminently or long-term, and how this may affect your response to the policy problem.
- **Uncertainty:** Consider how likely the effects in this area are to occur; is it something nearly inevitable with only a small chance of occurring?

Domain 1: Equal Respect and Dignity

Consider everyone's needs equally and respect their need to be informed about decisions that impact them.



Ethical impact and screening question	Red flags <i>Are there reasons why this policy may be unacceptable or irrelevant?</i>	What is the impact? <i>How does your policy intervention affect this area? What values are at stake?</i>	Intentionality <i>Is the impact a necessary part of the policy, or is it an unintended side-effect? How can side-effects be mitigated?</i>	Urgency <i>When are the effects likely to happen in the area?</i>	Uncertainty <i>How likely are the effects in this area?</i>	Suggested resources to help decide on justification and action
<p>1.1 Equality and Equity</p> <p><i>Does your policy affect the equitable distribution of resources, or benefits for any groups protected by equalities legislation or their intersections?</i></p>						<p>Conduct local Equalities Impact Assessment (EIA).</p> <p>Good practice examples of EIA from Tower Hamlets local authority, and Local Government Association</p>
<p>1.2 Low income groups</p> <p><i>Does this policy reduce access to public services or goods for groups that are otherwise not covered in equalities legislation, e.g. low income, unequal access to transport, digital technologies, urban/rural communities?</i></p>						<p>UK Pandemic Ethics Accelerator on intersectionality and which equalities matter</p>
<p>1.3 Transparency</p> <p><i>Do you keep the relevant public groups informed about the policy and its rationale in a way that is accessible for them to access this information?</i></p>						<p>Guidance on public involvement from Involve UK and guidance on Lived Experience in Policy Making from Policy Lab</p>
<p>1.4 Data ethics</p> <p><i>Do your data collection and retention processes maintain people's right to privacy and control of their data?</i></p>						<p>Follow local data ethics procedures.</p> <p>See a range of data ethics guidance from Government Digital Service</p>

Domain 2: Freedoms and Capabilities

Consider how your intervention will impact people's ability to carry on with their lives and have control over their choices.



Ethical impact and screening question	Red flags <i>Are there reasons why this policy may be unacceptable or irrelevant?</i>	What is the impact? <i>How does your policy intervention affect this area? What values are at stake?</i>	Intentionality <i>Is the impact a necessary part of the policy, or is it an unintended side-effect? How can side-effects be mitigated?</i>	Urgency <i>When are the effects likely to happen in the area?</i>	Uncertainty <i>How likely are the effects in this area?</i>	Suggested resources to help decide on justification and action
<p>2.1 Individual freedoms</p> <p><i>Does your decision affect individuals' freedom to make decisions about their lives? Will people's daily activities be restricted more than usual, e.g. movement to and back from work or education, access to services and community spaces?</i></p>						<p>Consider NCOB's Intervention Ladder</p>
<p>2.2 Habits</p> <p><i>Does this policy encourage the public to adopt habits and behaviours that support their health and the environment?</i></p>						
<p>2.3 Capabilities</p> <p><i>Is this policy likely to affect individuals' abilities to care for themselves, their households, and dependents, for example, maintaining income, securing food, or having a home?</i></p>						
<p>2.4 Harms to health</p> <p><i>Are there potential harms to individuals', population's or population groups' physical and mental health that might result from this intervention?</i></p>						<p>Consider Scottish Government's four harms framework for decision-making</p>

Domain 3: Social and Natural Infrastructure

Consider how your intervention affects social infrastructure, natural world, and animals.



Ethical impact and screening question	Red flags <i>Are there reasons why this policy may be unacceptable or irrelevant?</i>	What is the impact? <i>How does your policy intervention affect this area? What values are at stake?</i>	Intentionality <i>Is the impact a necessary part of the policy, or is it an unintended side-effect? How can side-effects be mitigated?</i>	Urgency <i>When are the effects likely to happen in the area?</i>	Uncertainty <i>How likely are the effects in this area?</i>	Suggested resources to help decide on justification and action
<p>3.1 Social infrastructure</p> <p><i>Is your intervention likely to impact any infrastructure or access to it, now or in the future, such as housing, education, transport, health services, democratic institutions or media?</i></p>						<p>Consider example of exacerbating housing inequalities during Covid-19 pandemic</p>
<p>3.2 Environment and non-human animals</p> <p><i>Is your policy likely to have an impact on environment and/or non-human animals?</i></p>						<p>Conduct Local Environment Impact Assessment.</p> <p>See Government's guidance on assessing environmental impact, on creating net positive for biodiversity</p>

Domain 4: Relationships and Care

Consider the reciprocal relationship between citizens and the state, and uneven burden some groups carry during times of crisis.



Ethical impact and screening question	Red flags <i>Are there reasons why this policy may be unacceptable or irrelevant?</i>	What is the impact? <i>How does your policy intervention affect this area? What values are at stake?</i>	Intentionality <i>Is the impact a necessary part of the policy, or is it an unintended side-effect? How can side-effects be mitigated?</i>	Urgency <i>When are the effects likely to happen in the area?</i>	Uncertainty <i>How likely are the effects in this area?</i>	Suggested resources to help decide on justification and action
<p>4.1 Impact on care and healthcare workers</p> <p><i>Does this policy intervention require substantial change in how key workers provide services?</i></p>						<p>See guidance on supporting professionalism among health and social care professions</p>
<p>4.2 Impact on future generations</p> <p><i>Are you moving any costs or harms to the future? Will future generations face reduced access to natural resources or other essential goods because of this policy?</i></p>						<p>Consider resources on intergenerational fairness from Future Generations Commissioner for Wales</p>
<p>4.3 Social cohesion</p> <p><i>Is this intervention likely to affect perception of any groups within the population? Is it likely to reinforce stereotypes about particular groups?</i></p>						<p>Consider resources on social cohesion from Belong – the Cohesion and Integration Network</p>



Stage 3 Decide

Use the considerations in Stage 3 to inform the discussion covering the following questions:

- **Proportionality:** How do the benefits brought by this intervention measure against the harms and negative impacts?
- **Trade-offs:** Which relevant domains and impacts does this category clash with? What values are in conflict?
- **Further consultation:** Is further consultation with relevant experience and those groups that are most impacted needed and possible in the future?

The discussion should lead to one of the following decisions:

Action A Investigate further

There is too much uncertainty and lack of evidence – policy needs to be more informed by stakeholders’ engagement before proceeding

- Do you need further engagement with affected population groups?
- Do you need further consultation with an expert? If you are unsure of the impact, consider contacting an ethics advisor or advisor committee.

Action B Revise

You have identified ethical impacts and the policy needs substantial changes

- What do different people on the team think about it? Discuss and revise until you have a clear statement of what makes this option preferable
- What actions or policies could mitigate potential harms and risks?
- What other existing resources and protocols can be mobilised to reconsider your policy?

Action C Justify and proceed with caution

The policy has some ethical impacts but can proceed with caution

- How can you justify potential risks and harms that may result from your policy?
- What actions or policies could mitigate potential harms and risks?
- Have you kept a paper trail of discussions and justifications?
- How are you going to communicate these decisions and risks to the public, if needed?

Action D Proceed

The policy does not have significant ethical impacts

- Have you kept a written record of discussions and justifications?
- Where should this be stored and how will you ensure version control?



Stage 4 Learn and Revise

After you have developed justification, risks, and mitigations, make sure they are recorded and embedded. Then, think of this Assessment as a cycle and adapt a recursive mindset. Come back to the assessment as needed, particularly when:

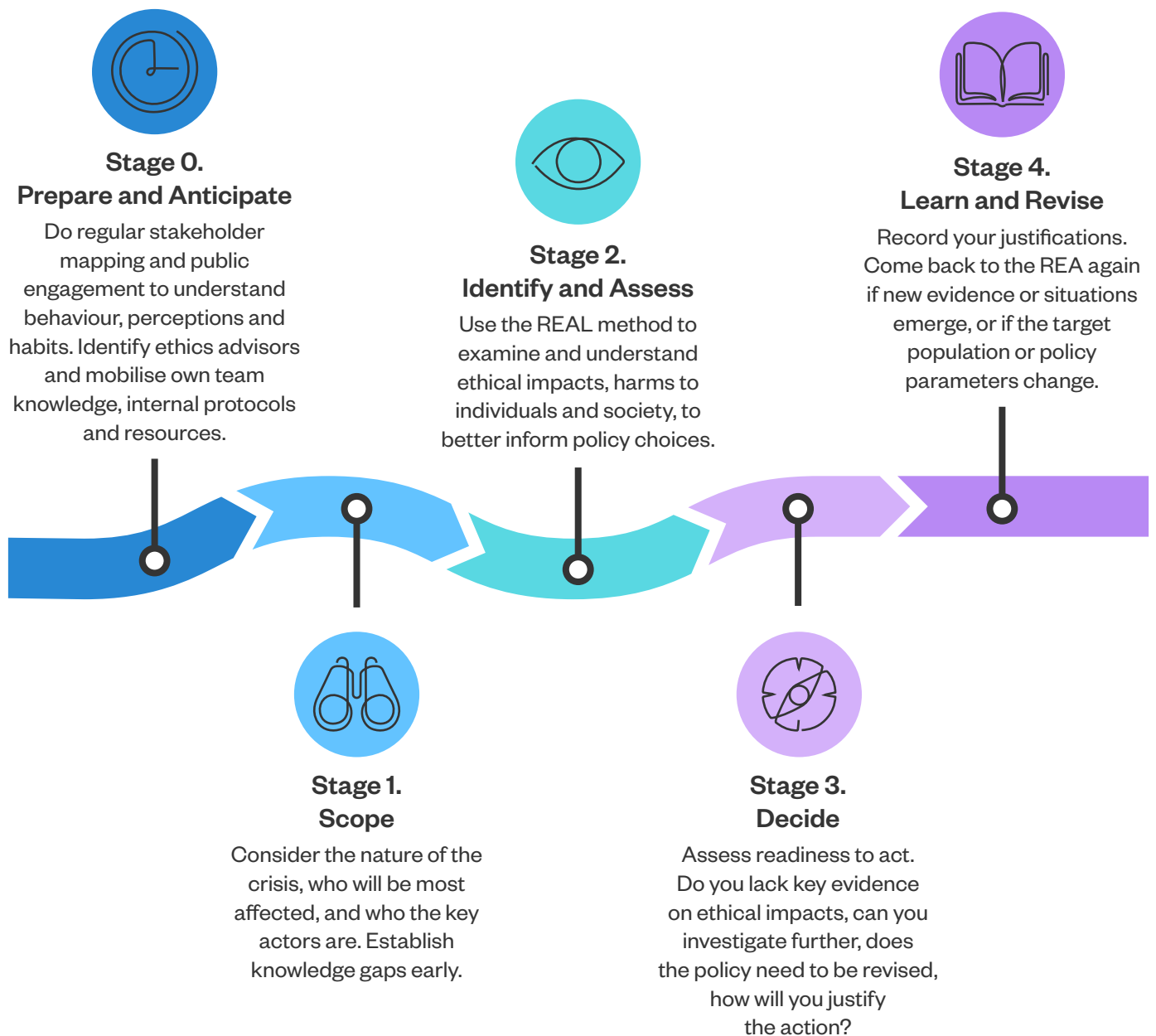
- New evidence emerges.
- The audience of the policy changes.
- Parameters of the policy change.
- Context or external parameters changes, for instance, a new event.

Decide in advance on at least one other point in time to **go back and use the Assessment again** (this is of particular importance when new evidence is emerging that could affect policy design). Update the following:

- Update your stakeholders list.
- Review the Assessment when the purpose or remit of the project changes, e.g. with narrower focus or fewer people affected, the policy may not deliver enough value to outweigh its harms.
- Adjust your communication plan and messages accordingly.
- Monitor outcomes and processes.
- Get feedback – internal and external.
- Refine your plans and the assessment tool in light of your learning.
- Carry out public engagement to deepen ethics assessment where time and resources allow for it.
- Respect the public's right to be informed – update messaging and communications accordingly in a way that is accessible to diverse audiences over the lifetime of the policy.

Visualisations of the REAL method

Step-by-step guide to the Rapid Ethics Assessment and Learning method



Ethics domains and impacts

Ethics Domains

Ethics Impacts



Equal Respect and Dignity

- Equality and Equity
- Low income groups
- Transparency
- Data ethics



Freedom and Capabilities

- Individual freedoms
- Habits
- Capabilities
- Harms to health



Social and Natural Infrastructure

- Social infrastructure
- Environment and non-human animals



Relationships and Care

- Impact on care and healthcare
- Impact on future generations, social cohesion



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