



Practical approaches to engaging the public in your research project

- The ICES Public Advisory Council (PAC) is comprised of members of the public from across Ontario and provides a public voice to ICES activities and projects. PAC members wanted to find out how people use mental health services based on where they live, their income and other social factors.
- ICES' Applied Health Research Question (AHRQ) program is funded by the Ontario Ministry of Health and enables organizations to request data and analytics that help inform improvements to their services or policies. **In 2020, the PAC proposed an idea to conduct their own AHRQ.** It's rare for members of the public to play a lead role in analyses with large datasets, but the ICES PAC was involved at every stage of this analysis project.

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We realized early in the project that the goal was not to turn the public into scientists and not to turn scientists into the public. Both insights were unique and important to driving the work forward.

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The PAC co-designed four recurring approaches that guided the process: Providing ongoing education and guidance on ICES data and the analysis process, engaging in shared and guided brainstorming, building consensus during each step of the project, and ongoing opportunities for feedback and evaluation.

Through full participation in this project, the ICES PAC showed that public perspectives can add value at many different time points in project development and shed light on issues that may not be well understood by researchers. We learned many lessons throughout this project, including:



Use **multiple public engagement approaches** suitable for different stages of the project lifecycle.



Form a **dedicated team and supportive organizational structures** to promote buy-in and maintain accountability.



Hold public interest and engagement via **sustained communication, a transparent and flexible timeline, and real-time responsiveness** to process feedback.



Share power to build trust.



Make space for public insight during **data interpretation and analysis**.



Carefully consider the advantages of **“diversity”** and **“representation.”**