

MESSAGE

Medical Science Sex and Gender Equity

Policy Lab 4

Measuring, sustaining and growing the impact of sex and gender policy changes



The George Institute
for Global Health

UK

IMPERIAL



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Executive Summary

On 1 October 2024, the MESSAGE project convened its fourth Policy Lab to explore

How to measure, sustain and grow the impact of sex and gender policy changes across the UK health and biomedical research ecosystem.

The Lab brought together stakeholders from funding bodies, regulatory and publishing organisations, research institutions, and patient and advocacy groups, with the aim of sharing learnings and identifying practical solutions to the challenges encountered since the initial implementation of sex and gender policies.

Discussions focused on common implementation issues, including the integration of sex and gender questions in funding application forms, raising awareness among peer reviewers, updating organisational guidance and digital platforms, and clarifying cost implications. Participants emphasised the need for a proportionate and iterative approach, grounded in shared principles but **adaptable to organisational context and capacity**.

Stakeholders highlighted the importance of **supporting external reviewers, many of whom remain under-equipped** to assess sex and gender integration in research proposals. Suggestions included triage models, improved guidance, harmonised language across the sector, and embedding expectations within application platforms. Participants also recommended identifying and prioritising webpages and documents for revision, and underscored the need for visible leadership to drive these changes forward.

The group discussed how best to **integrate sex and gender within wider equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) strategies**.

Delegates noted that siloes between EDI workstreams risk slowing progress, and called for greater collaboration between teams, stronger guidance for qualitative and participatory research, and recognition of lived experience as a form of expertise. **Support for early career researchers and clearer expectations around costing** were also raised as key enablers of sustained implementation.

A substantial portion of the Lab was devoted to designing a shared framework for monitoring and evaluation. Stakeholders proposed a **suite of core indicators**, including whether and how sex and/or gender are considered in applications, use of MESSAGE guidance, the quality of justifications when sex and gender are not addressed, and the extent to which applicants deliver on their stated plans. **Aspirational indicators** were also discussed, such as the quality of integration across disease areas, and long-term impact on clinical practice. MESSAGE was identified as well-placed to coordinate data collection and convene mid-point reviews to refine the framework.

In breakout groups, participants developed proposals to sustain progress over the long term. These included coordinated media engagement to raise awareness, developing a cross-sector network of sex and gender champions, and maintaining shared infrastructure to support learning and transparency. Participants also explored opportunities for **targeted funding, collaborative reviews, and condition-specific initiatives**, with the aim of embedding good practice in different disciplines and contexts.

This Policy Lab reaffirmed the importance of collective effort and **continued coordination** to ensure sex and gender considerations are meaningfully embedded across the research pipeline. MESSAGE will continue to act as a central convening body, supporting consistency, championing learning, and facilitating the next phase of implementation and evaluation.

1. Troubleshooting Implementation Challenges

Overall themes:

Throughout Policy Lab 4, several cross-cutting themes emerged as stakeholders reflected on the **challenges of implementing sex and gender policies in their organisations**. While the specific issues varied across settings, stakeholders identified a shared set of principles that should guide the sector's response:

- **Start where you are:** Many organisations expressed hesitation to act due to a perceived lack of existing evidence or precedent. Stakeholders emphasised that beginning the process is necessary to generate the evidence base for future revision and refinement.
- **Plan for iteration:** Implementation should be understood as gradual and evolving. Stakeholders recommended building in opportunities to learn, adjust, and improve over time, rather than aiming for perfection from the outset.
- **Align guidance and expectations:** Clear and consistent communication is needed across applicant materials, reviewer criteria and internal processes. Alignment reduces confusion and supports meaningful engagement with policy expectations.
- **Break down silos across EDI efforts:** Stakeholders emphasised the value of collaboration between different groups when working on equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) issues. Shared processes and joint learning will strengthen implementation and reduce duplication of efforts.
- **Recognise the shared ecosystem of reviewers:** The same individuals often serve as reviewers for both funders and journals. Enhancing awareness of sex and gender considerations across the research community as a whole will strengthen review processes and drive consistency.
- **Harmonise tools and messaging:** Using common wording, guidance and expectations across organisations will reduce the burden on applicants

and make it easier for researchers to meet requirements.

- **Embed lived experience and interdisciplinarity:** Including people with lived experience, as well as qualitative and participatory researchers, will strengthen policy implementation and ensure that research better reflects real-world diversity and complexity.

1.1 Raising awareness among, and providing training to, external peer reviewers of funding applications and papers

Stakeholders highlighted the challenges that funders face in engaging external peer reviewers on issues relating to sex and gender. Securing reviewers is already difficult, and there was a shared concern that requesting additional time and expertise, particularly from unpaid reviewers, may further discourage participation. This tension has made funders cautious about increasing expectations on reviewers.

There was **notable variation reported by stakeholders in how engaged reviewers currently are** with sex and gender issues, and in their ability to assess these components of funding applications with confidence and accuracy. Inconsistent assessments were flagged as a significant concern, especially in light of the decentralised way that review committees are run, which limits opportunities for coordinated communication and training.

To address this, some stakeholders proposed a triage model in which trained staff internal to a research funder assess whether applications appropriately account for sex and gender before they are sent to external reviewers. This approach would reduce reliance on external parties in the early stages and contribute to a gradual strategy to increase reviewer engagement over time. Importantly, it would help establish the salience of sex and gender in determining an application's overall quality.

The group stressed the value of publishing examples of both strong and weak reviewing practice, drawn from real applications and reviewer comments, to help establish clear expectations. They also underlined that building awareness and skills across the wider research community - of which peer reviewers are part - would naturally enhance the capacity of reviewers over time. As reviewers often serve multiple organisations, consistent training materials grounded in MESSAGE's shared standards would be particularly beneficial.

Stakeholders noted that journals - many of which already offer training - could incorporate a short module on sex and gender as part of existing guidance. **Maintaining simplicity in the expectations of reviewers** was considered essential; clear and concise guidance would support better engagement and uptake. **Aligning applicant and reviewer guidance** was also seen as key, and embedding guidance directly into application platforms rather than hosting guidance in separate documents was recommended to ensure it is seen and used.

1.2 Identifying the policies, processes and webpages which need to be amended to reflect changes

Stakeholders noted that organisational webpages and policy documents are often managed in a decentralised manner, particularly within larger institutions. This can make it **difficult and time-consuming internally to identify which teams are responsible** for specific content and to navigate the processes required for updates. It can also be difficult for applicants to determine which areas are applicable to them. The lack of a centralised system was seen as a practical barrier to implementation.

To manage this, stakeholders recommended prioritising key webpages for revision, particularly

those related to funding opportunities and application guidance, where messaging about sex and gender expectations would have the most immediate impact. Funding teams were seen as best placed to own and update these areas, and this activity could be aligned with broader updates to reflect the organisation's wider EDI commitments.

Leadership involvement was considered crucial. Senior ownership of and buy-in to the update process would provide necessary authority, resources and strategic oversight to optimise progress. A scoping exercise to map out the scale of the task and identify affected content was also recommended.

To support the update process, **stakeholders suggested exploring the use of digital tools to assist**. This included integrating AI to help identify relevant webpages and embedding a Q&A chatbot to offer applicants on-demand guidance about new expectations relating to sex and gender, along with other policies.

1.3 Including a question on sex/gender in the application form while keeping forms short

Stakeholders reflected on the challenge of encouraging applicants to meaningfully address sex and gender in their proposals, while also responding to wider efforts to reduce the length and complexity of application forms. **This tension was particularly noted in smaller funding schemes, where the perceived return on time investment may be low.** One stakeholder observed that the additional effort required to address a new question might not feel worthwhile for applicants competing for relatively smaller grants, potentially deterring them from applying.

The group agreed that clarity around minimum and aspirational expectations would be beneficial.

Distinguishing between what is essential and what represents best practice could help researchers engage proportionately, and take a stepwise approach to their own upskilling. Harmonising sex and gender questions and definitions across funders was also highlighted as a way to ease the administrative burden, and MESSAGE guidance was identified as a useful reference point for setting a shared standard.

Stakeholders recommended using a single, free-text question to allow applicants to explain how sex and gender are being considered in their study. They noted that the placement of this question within the application form should be deliberate—potentially aligning with sections on study design, purpose, or methodological clarity.

Finally, stakeholders underlined the importance of **designing the question to generate data that can be monitored and evaluated**. This includes ensuring that accompanying guidance for applicants aligns directly with how responses will be assessed by reviewers.

1.4 Harmonising sex and gender policy activities with guidance for other EDI characteristics

Stakeholders reflected on the challenge of embedding sex and gender considerations within the broader landscape of EDI in research. A key barrier to engagement was the perception that there is limited data to guide practice. In this context, researchers may feel uncertain or overwhelmed when asked to account for multiple diversity characteristics simultaneously.

There was broad agreement that it is preferable to account for a smaller number of characteristics in a meaningful way, rather than engaging superficially with many. stakeholders noted that groups working on different characteristics—such as sex and gender, or race and ethnicity—often operate in silos, limiting opportunities for collaboration and shared learning.

For example, while sex may be a relevant variable in pre-clinical research, other characteristics such as gender do not apply in the same context.

To support better integration, **stakeholders recommended appointing an EDI champion within each organisation** to help break down silos and provide tailored support to researchers. In the longer term, organisations should aim to develop intersectional inclusion strategies that articulate core principles and minimum expectations, while recognising that good practice will vary by study.

One funder shared plans to develop a standalone sex and gender policy, situated within a wider inclusion strategy. stakeholders endorsed this approach, noting that designated sex and gender guidance is still necessary to ensure visibility and specificity.

The group emphasised the importance of taking an iterative approach to evidence and expectations. Rather than waiting for perfect data, organisations should begin implementation and use that process to generate learning. Trust in the research community was seen as essential—encouraging researchers to explain their decision-making, rather than prescribing rigid criteria, was viewed as a more constructive and empowering approach.

There was strong support for familiarising early career researchers with sex and gender concepts and methods and providing training, as well as for greater recognition of qualitative and social science contributions to this work. The value of participatory research was also underlined, not only in study design, but in peer review processes where lived experience perspectives could be weighted more equally, or in certain circumstances more heavily, than traditional academic expertise. Building trust with stakeholders and fostering relationship-based rather than extractive approaches were identified as central to meaningful engagement.

1.5 Managing Limited Staff Capacity to Lead on Policy Rollout

Stakeholders highlighted the difficulty of implementing sex and gender policy changes within resource-constrained environments, particularly for charitable funders. This reinforced the importance of ensuring such work is not positioned as an 'extra' task which merely adds to existing workloads, but instead is adequately embedded into core roles and job plans with dedicated time allocated. Without this, staff risk being expected to deliver change through unpaid or additional hours.

There was recognition that **work in this space can be emotionally and psychologically taxing**, particularly when paired with a perceived lack of knowledge or confidence amongst colleagues on the topic. **Visible buy-in from senior leadership was identified as key**, both in signalling authentic institutional support and for overseeing timelines and workloads to ensure delivery is feasible. **Peer learning from others in the sector**, including through the MESSAGE network, was also seen as a valuable way to share solutions and reduce duplication of effort.

Stakeholders stressed that senior staff should commit time and resources to support learning and skills development among their teams. **Framing sex and gender policy as a strategic and operational priority** was seen as essential to securing traction with senior stakeholders within their respective organisations. In parallel, communicating regularly with staff across the organisation through channels such as internal newsletters can help build understanding about the rationale and impact of changes. Using plain language and avoiding jargon in these communications was seen as essential.

1.6 Enhancing Guidance for Qualitative Research

The **need for improved guidance regarding sex and gender considerations in qualitative research was a recurring theme**. Stakeholders described how qualitative approaches are often undervalued or seen as supplementary, with many researchers lacking familiarity and training in appropriate methods. There was also a **need to distinguish between co-production and participatory research**, which are frequently conflated, as well as the problematic assumption that they are straightforward to deliver without specific training.

Interdisciplinary teams, bringing together social scientists and biomedical researchers, were identified as a key enabler of stronger practice. Rather than developing new materials in isolation, stakeholders recommended drawing on resources from other disciplines to support the creation of sex and gender-sensitive guidance. **Clear explanations about which types of qualitative methods are best suited to different contexts** and how these methods strengthen study outcomes would be beneficial.

Case examples of strong qualitative research that advanced sex and gender objectives were seen as helpful. Journals could play a role by providing guidance on how qualitative evidence, regarding sex and gender specifically, can enhance the value and rigour of studies.

Stakeholders noted that qualitative research is particularly valuable for exploring areas where quantitative data is lacking, which includes helping to shape the right research questions. **Guidance on participatory research methods that engage people with lived experience in a sensitive and inclusive manner** was also highlighted as an important area for development. Ideally, such guidance would itself be co-designed with relevant communities and stakeholders.

1.7 Improving Clarity on Costings

Uncertainty about the financial implications of implementing sex and gender policies was a concern across multiple organisations. Stakeholders identified potential cost drivers including infrastructure changes such as additional animal housing to support sex-disaggregated research and training for peer reviewers.

There was concern that new policy requirements could reduce the number of projects funded, even where proposals are of high quality. This raised a broader strategic question for funders about whether to prioritise quantity of projects funded or invest in fewer but higher-quality studies. However, the siloed nature of many organisations' operations makes it difficult to estimate total cost implications with confidence in advance.

Stakeholders suggested that **evidence on cost-effectiveness should be generated through implementation**, for example by embedding evaluation into early rollouts of new funder policies. Decisions around costs should remain flexible and responsive to context, recognising that large and small funders will face different resource challenges.

Several practical proposals were raised. These included **creating ring-fenced funding pots for sex and gender-related costs**; embedding such costs within overheads; or allowing more flexible costing models within grant applications. Running projects in parallel, and sharing learning early, was also suggested as a way to reduce duplication and costs over time.

Some stakeholders raised concerns about the potential for new policies to affect donor perceptions and reduce charitable giving. In response, collaboration between funders, particularly with larger funders supporting smaller organisations, was seen as a way to share resources and reduce risk, such as unintentional miscommunication, across the sector.

2. Creating a Vision for Monitoring and Evaluating Policy Impact

Stakeholders discussed how the research sector might understand outcomes, monitor progress, and sustain momentum around improving integration of sex and gender in research. There was agreement that coordinated indicators, consistent expectations and shared infrastructure are essential to build a robust and meaningful approach to monitoring.

2.1 Baseline and core indicators are essential to track progress

Establishing a baseline was seen as a necessary first step. Stakeholders emphasised that this should draw on data from a recent non-COVID year to reflect typical research patterns and performance. Crucially, they recommended involving patients and research communities in shaping what variables are measured, to ensure indicators are meaningful to those most affected.

Core indicators should capture whether sex and/or gender are considered, and how thoroughly/well they have been considered. Stakeholders proposed tracking how many applications in a funding cycle account for sex and gender, whether applicants provide justifications when they do not account for sex and gender, and the quality of those justifications. They also suggested measuring engagement, such as through the length or phrasing of responses, and assessing whether applicants accurately distinguish between sex and gender. Stakeholders noted that funders should monitor the proportion of successful applications that meaningfully address sex and gender, as well as how these components are scored during review. **Comparing scores between applications that did and did not address these factors could offer useful insight.** Reviewing rejected applications could also help identify common and recurring gaps in understanding or approaches.

Suggested Core Indicators

- Whether sex and/or gender are considered,
- How thoroughly/well sex and/or gender have been considered
- How many applications in a funding cycle account for sex and gender,
- Whether applicants provide justifications when they do not account for sex and gender, and the quality of those justifications.
- Assessing whether applicants accurately distinguish between sex and gender.
- Measuring engagement, such as through the length or phrasing of responses,
- Monitoring the proportion of successful applications that meaningfully address sex and gender, as well as how these components are scored during review
- Comparing scores between applications that did and did not address these factors
- Reviewing rejected applications to identify common and recurring gaps

2.2 Monitoring delivery and rewarding follow-through

Stakeholders stressed that monitoring should not end at the application stage. **Funders should assess whether researchers deliver on their commitments**, including meeting recruitment targets, disaggregating data and reflecting on any barriers they encounter in the process. **Comparing final research outputs** (including publications) with features proposed in funding applications was considered an important accountability measure.

There was also discussion of what funders might do when researchers' commitments are not met. Stakeholders recommended thinking carefully about what **forms of encouragement or enforcement** might be appropriate, and applying these consistently. Recognising a researcher's track record in this area, either through scoring or eligibility, was seen as a practical way to reward good practice.

Public or sector-facing recognition could also help raise the profile of researchers integrating sex and gender well, and signal the importance of these considerations.

2.3 Aspirational indicators can raise ambition and support sector-wide learning

Beyond core expectations, stakeholders identified aspirational indicators for sex and gender integration to contribute to a clearer picture of sector progress. These included assessing the proportion of applications which show high-quality, rather than just satisfactory, integration of sex and gender, and exploring how focus on specific population groups (such as women, men, or trans and non-binary stakeholders) relates to likelihood of funding success.

Stakeholders suggested tracking how the sex and gender component is **scored by different actors**, such as peer reviewers, funding panels and lay reviewers, and whether researchers were asked to revise and resubmit this section. **Variation across disease areas and disciplines** was also noted as a revealing focus of study, to understand where challenges are most acute and where progress is being made.

The role of funder policies in shifting researcher behaviour was also raised. **Tracking whether researchers use MESSAGE guidance** or similar sex and gender resources could offer insight into the reach of sector tools. Stakeholders were also interested in whether applicant gender correlates with the strength of sex and gender integration, and whether researchers are actively addressing historic underrepresentation, such as by over-recruiting from

underserved groups. Ultimately, the most ambitious indicator would be **whether policy changes are improving clinical practice and health outcomes**, recognising this will take many years.

Suggested Aspirational Indicators

- Assessing the proportion of applications which show high-quality, rather than just satisfactory, integration of sex and gender,
- Exploring how focus on specific population groups (such as women, men, or trans and non-binary stakeholders) relates to likelihood of funding success.
- Tracking how the sex and gender component is scored by different actors, such as peer reviewers, funding panels and lay reviewers, and whether researchers were asked to revise and resubmit this section.
- Variation across disease areas and disciplines
- Tracking whether researchers use MESSAGE guidance or similar sex and gender resources
- Whether applicant gender correlates with the strength of sex and gender integration,
- Whether researchers are actively addressing historic underrepresentation, such as by over-recruiting from underserved groups.
- Ultimately, whether policy changes are improving clinical practice and health outcomes.

2.4 Aligning systems and touchpoints across the research pipeline

Stakeholders emphasised that **alignment between funders, publishers and regulators** is key to making data collection and analysis work across the research system.

Trial registration was seen as an opportunity to embed sex and gender reflection early in the research lifecycle for clinical trials—for example, by requiring researchers to complete a stakeholder characteristics profile which could be made public and used in future meta-analyses.

Publishers were identified as another critical touchpoint. Stakeholders recommended that **researchers be asked to reflect on sex and gender in the limitations section of publications** as a minimum standard, and that editors of journals review outputs compared to funding applications. Journals could also play a leading role in standardising expectations by adopting tools like checklists or submission tick-boxes aligned with MESSAGE guidance and funder expectations.

Several practical ideas were shared, including using AI tools to triage submissions for sex and gender integration, and tracking how many journals have adopted the [SAGER guidelines](#) (a framework for reporting sex and gender in health research to improve transparency and equity) or made them mandatory. **Publishing baseline data on journals' current practices** regarding how many papers are including sex and gender disaggregated analysis, or sex and gender considerations, was recommended as a way to demonstrate commitment and start changing norms.

2.5 MESSAGE can coordinate shared indicators and mid-point reviews

Stakeholders agreed that **data collection should be coordinated across the sector using a mix of mechanisms**, such as the Association of Medical Research Charities (AMRC) reporting, ResearchFish (an existing system for researchers to report outcomes and impacts of research to funders), and direct reporting to MESSAGE. MESSAGE was considered well placed to **pilot indicators, gather feedback in a centralised hub and share what works between stakeholders**. Mid-point reviews ahead of a five-year assessment would help refine indicators and keep implementation on track.

Consistency was agreed to be crucial. Organisations should commit to tracking the same core data to build a meaningful evidence base. Tools such as the Open Researcher and Contributor ID tool (ORCID) could support **linking data across organisations and funders**. Stakeholders also suggested collecting short case studies and stories from researchers about what changed, practically and/or conceptually, when they disaggregated data by sex and/or gender, to identify lessons that metrics alone might not capture.

3. Proposals for Sustaining Progress and Momentum: Breakout Group Insights

In the final part of the Policy Lab, stakeholders moved into breakout groups to further develop ideas that had been generated through discussion earlier in the day. These smaller group sessions focused on identifying the most important, actionable, and promising areas for sustaining and growing the impact of sex and gender policies across the research ecosystem in the UK. The sections that follow summarise key proposals from these discussions.

All Breakout Groups

1. Promoting sex and gender integration through coordinated media engagement



2. Building community through engagement with researchers, advocacy groups and the public



3. Sustaining the stakeholder group through shared infrastructure and ongoing coordination



4. Building a cross-sector network of champions and messengers



5. Identifying funding opportunities and focus areas for future MESSAGE activity



3.1 Promoting sex and gender integration through coordinated media engagement

Stakeholders identified **strategic media engagement** as a key lever to promote the value of integrating sex and gender into research. The primary objective would be to raise awareness and build momentum for change, encouraging researchers to account for sex and gender in their work, and prompting research institutions to invest in and incentivise improving practice.

Clear communication about *why* sex and gender matter in research was seen as essential. Stakeholders proposed developing tailored slide decks and outreach materials designed to persuade and inform, tailored to different audiences, including researchers, institutional leaders, policymakers, advocacy groups and civil society organisations.

Education and storytelling were highlighted as central tools to take audiences “on a journey” and build understanding.

These multiple **approaches should build on previous shifts in research culture**, such as institutional responses to Athena Swan, a UK charter promoting gender equality in higher education and research, and efforts to improve research assessment. **Opportunities to connect this agenda to existing frameworks**, such as the Research Excellence Framework (REF) and institutional rankings, were also raised.

Stakeholders suggested that **MESSAGE could coordinate the development and dissemination of these outreach materials**, working in collaboration with funders, learned societies, royal colleges and university leadership teams. Leveraging these organisations, existing dissemination networks would support wide reach and consistency, and funders could play a visible role by sharing resources as new requirements are introduced.

3.2 Building community through engagement with researchers, advocacy groups and the public

Stakeholders explored the role MESSAGE could play in strengthening engagement with researchers, research groups, and advocacy organisations. A recurring theme in discussion was **the value of coordinated communications and storytelling to make sex and gender issues in research more visible**, relatable and actionable across different audiences.

MESSAGE was seen as well placed to coordinate **a community-wide communications effort**, supporting organisations to raise awareness, share learning and promote good practice. Practical suggestions included embedding MESSAGE content within funder newsletters, issuing press releases for new or upcoming research, and acting as a trusted media advisor on sensitive issues. Stakeholders noted that media engagement may require dedicated PR support, with a clear and consistent communications plan in place to guide responses and mitigate risks.

Building connections across networks which focus on women's health and trans health was encouraged, alongside the idea of **launching a sector-wide award to recognise funders who support research in these areas**. Highlighting and showcasing important research examples was seen as a key way to shift norms and expectations over time.

Stakeholders also discussed the role of MESSAGE in helping organisations talk confidently about complex and contentious topics—particularly those related to trans inclusion. Suggestions **included developing toolkits to help organisations respond to complex questions**, address myths and misconceptions, and engage hesitant or under-informed funders. A focus on clear definitions, practical examples and inclusive messaging would support wider uptake and reduce anxiety around engagement.

Storytelling was highlighted as a powerful way to bring the relevance of sex and gender to life. Sharing real-world stories, such as the gendered implications of cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) training or the impact of data gaps in clinical care, could help people understand why this work matters to others and to them. Stakeholders recommended framing messages in ways that connect with both women and men, as well as gender minorities, and **using public figures or ambassadors**, such as comedians, athletes or doctors, to help reach different and broader audiences.

There was interest in running campaigns or themed events to build visibility and momentum. Suggestions included **creating a recognisable brand or visual identity**, offering prizes or recognition, and launching a month of coordinated activities (for example a "Gender November"). Activities could include workshops, community events and educational sessions aimed at deepening public understanding about how sex and gender influence the research process and its outcomes.

Stakeholders noted that this work should centre on education and curiosity, helping people understand how research decisions are made, and where opportunities exist to improve. **Broadening the diversity of who is at the table, especially in publishing and the peer review process**, was seen as crucial to sustaining change and embedding impact across the system.

3.3 Sustaining the stakeholder group through shared infrastructure and ongoing coordination

Stakeholders discussed how to sustain the MESSAGE stakeholder group over time, both to maintain momentum and to support organisations through the next stages of policy implementation. There was strong support for maintaining regular contact across the group, creating light-touch coordination mechanisms, and building accessible infrastructure to enable shared learning.

Suggestions for asynchronous (offline) engagement included continuing the MESSAGE website and **launching a member-access portal, where organisations could access updates, track progress, and view examples of good practice.** A shared progress tracker, potentially in a format similar to the implementation matrix, could help stakeholders map activity, identify points of contact across organisations and flag effective approaches. This could include points of contact for organisations that have already implemented changes successfully, as a way to promote peer learning.

Stakeholders saw value in each organisation **nominating a representative to act as a liaison with the wider stakeholder group.** These nominated people could support informal communication between members, including off-the-record chats, shared email threads or follow-ups after events. However, several stakeholders emphasised the importance of avoiding information overload, recommending short, focused updates that minimise duplication and respect capacity constraints.

There was also interest in piloting light-touch tools such as Yammer or Teams chats, potentially tailored by sector (e.g. funders, publishers etc). A **shared database of good practice** could be curated with discretion, ensuring examples are inspiring but not overwhelming. Stakeholders noted the need to strike a **balance between celebrating innovation and keeping engagement accessible**, particularly for organisations just beginning their journey.

To support more structured connection, stakeholders proposed regular online catch-ups or “steering committee” style meetings, particularly in the early stages. These could help identify shared challenges, understand wider sector activity (e.g. at NICE or DHSC), and update stakeholders on progress in areas such as literature reviews, policy gap analysis or independent evaluations. A **quarterly cadence** was suggested, with the option to reduce frequency over time.

These convenings could be built around timely themes, short presentations and focused case studies. Bringing researchers into the conversation was seen as a valuable way to ground abstract discussions in lived experience of implementation. stakeholders also suggested **using the sessions to share “good news” stories**, highlight progress, and update on MESSAGE’s own activities.

Across all formats, **clarity of purpose was viewed as critical.** stakeholders recommended articulating the aims of the group, its links to MESSAGE’s broader network of champions, and the specific resources available, such as toolkits, troubleshooting support and helpline-style contacts. Ensuring transparency about who is coordinating this work, and how decentralised models might function (especially for smaller or more agile organisations), was also highlighted as important.

There was particular interest in supporting organisations with reputational risk and inclusion-related concerns. **Stakeholders proposed developing standard “lines to take,”** linked to inclusion strategies or public statements, to help organisations respond to sensitive issues. Some suggested exploring accreditation-style models or other incentives.

Finally, the group discussed opportunities to **collect and share data in more systematic ways.** This could include cohort-level information about research participants, how sex and gender are being addressed in implementation, and what outcomes are being measured. Stakeholders saw value in creating infrastructure that allows the sector to understand the research population, and in making that information public, wherever possible, to build trust and promote accountability.

Stakeholder engagement should include cross-sector participation from funders, publishers, and regulators. Stakeholders emphasised the importance of a visible, shared commitment to transparency and public involvement in this work, and recommended that **future coordination efforts prioritise openness, clarity and collective action.**

3.4 Building a cross-sector network of champions and messengers

Stakeholders proposed **establishing a network of champion - or “messengers” - to raise awareness, share expertise, and support implementation** of sex and gender policies across the research ecosystem. This network would be composed of individuals who are engaged, knowledgeable, and motivated to work across disciplines and sectors, including funders, researchers, journal editors, subject matter experts and representatives of patient and advocacy groups. Champions would act as key points of contact within their organisations, offering informal advice, responding to questions and contributing to a wider community of practice. These individuals could support their peers by sharing insights, raising awareness through existing networks, and helping translate guidance into action. Over time, they could become embedded into existing communities or forums, serving as organisational representatives within a broader MESSAGE-led network.

Stakeholders suggested that **each participating organisation could nominate a champion to join a wider platform or forum.** This group would connect with others incorporating sex and gender considerations into their work, whether in research, advocacy, policy, or communications. A board of representatives could help guide activities, with sub-groups organised around shared themes, methods or topics.

To support communication and coordination, stakeholders proposed the use of platforms such as SharePoint or Microsoft Teams, **drawing on models already used by groups like AMRC or Wellcome.** These platforms could host ongoing discussions, Q&As, and the sharing of good practice, while also serving as a repository for updated guidance, metrics, and key documents. A **central online presence**, whether through the MESSAGE website or a linked microsite, could provide a public-facing hub for resources, announcements and events.

Incentives and recognition were identified as important for sustaining engagement. stakeholders suggested that **Champions could be given an official badge or title that holds cross-sector credibility**, and that their contributions could be recognised through visible roles at events or in communications. A central MESSAGE coordinator could support the network by collating feedback, organising training, and maintaining the overall platform.

To ensure sustainability, stakeholders explored long-term governance options. One proposal was to combine the initiative with an organisation that has infrastructure and capacity, such as AMRC, if MESSAGE is not resourced to host the network indefinitely. **Membership models could also be explored**, including tiered options for organisations, students, patients and individuals.

Stakeholders proposed that activities for champions and messengers could include “lunch and learn” sessions, rolling webinars, and regular opportunities to collate challenges, feedback and questions. This **feedback could then be used to inform policy updates and future guidance.** Events could also align with key milestones in the sector’s uptake of sex and gender policies, for example new requirements from funders or publishers, ensuring the network remains responsive and relevant.

Finally, stakeholders acknowledged that setting up such a network would come with challenges. **Funding, coordination, communications and sustainability were all identified as key areas of focus.** Questions were also raised about how to manage intellectual property, define roles and ensure recognition of contributors' time and effort, particularly where 'Champions' contribute in a voluntary capacity. **Addressing potential conflicts of interest and clarifying expectations** will be essential to maintain trust and effectiveness as the network evolves.

3.5 Identifying funding opportunities and focus areas for future MESSAGE activity

Stakeholders explored ways to sustain and grow the MESSAGE project through targeted funding mechanisms and partnerships. **A key recommendation was for MESSAGE to support topic-specific workstreams** rather than branching into independent, standalone initiatives (e.g. "MESSAGE Maternity"). Focusing on condition-specific or disciplinary conversations—where context-specific details can be addressed, was seen as a way to maintain coherence while supporting depth.

One area of opportunity lies in **supporting systematic reviews to explore sex differences in particular conditions.** Stakeholders highlighted the potential for MESSAGE to commission or collaborate on Cochrane reviews or similar evidence syntheses, building the evidence base for more informed research and policy decisions. Trial data which accounts for sex already exists in many areas, but the data is often not disaggregated by sex or gender. Stakeholders suggested that important insights could be gained simply by re-analysing this existing data, including data from completed trials or so-called "null" trials, where sex-specific effects may have been missed due to aggregated analysis.

Engaging with pharmaceutical companies to access and revisit such data could yield new findings while also enhancing industry reputation, particularly when framed as both a scientific and social justice imperative.

Stakeholders also discussed potential **funding mechanisms to support focused sub-projects within larger research grants.** For example, **Study Within A Trial (SWAT) models could be adapted,** offering additional funding (e.g. £50,000–£70,000) to embed sex and gender analysis in eligible studies. Other suggestions included ring-fenced funding within broader grants, or **targeted partnerships with royal colleges,** professional societies or patient networks to stimulate interest and co-design.

Institutions' existing EDI strategies could offer another entry point. Stakeholders suggested that funding stipulations requiring attention to sex and gender could be aligned with broader EDI priorities, and that policies could be developed to encourage additional funding for work that includes other under-addressed characteristics such as race and ethnicity.

Looking ahead, **stakeholders encouraged MESSAGE to take a convening role,** identifying opportunities, building partnerships, and linking researchers with funders to support collaborative development of this agenda. **National datasets, such as the NHS Joint Registry,** were identified as promising examples of where MESSAGE could support efforts to analyse outcomes by sex and gender, ensuring that valuable insights already present within existing datasets are not overlooked.

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