

## OpenSAFELY Public Advisory Group Digital Critical Friends Terms of Reference

Version control log	
Current version and date updated	V2: Updated version July-August 2025 Ratified by DCFs and PPIE Team September 2025
Date of next review	August 2026

### 1. Document purpose

- a. This document presents reference points for the OpenSAFELY Public Advisory Group (PAG), also known as the Digital Critical Friend group (DCF group).
- b. These Terms of Reference will be reviewed at least annually by the OpenSAFELY Patient and Public Involvement and Engagement (PPIE) Team and the DCF group members to ensure they remain fit for purpose.

### 2. Purpose of the Digital Critical Friend group

- a. The DCF group's purpose is to provide support, a lay perspective and a critical voice to the OpenSAFELY platform development and associated workstreams. By doing so, it helps facilitate high-quality and safe health research leading to improved health outcomes and contributes to the platform being run in a transparent and accountable manner.
- b. Provide input into the development of a PPIE strategy and plan and monitor progress in implementation.

### 3. Background

- a. OpenSAFELY is a secure, transparent, open-source software platform that provides researchers with a safe and secure means of analysing health record data. OpenSAFELY has been created, with public and charitable funding. The OpenSAFELY platform is built, managed and maintained by a team at the Bennett Institute for Applied Data Science ("the Bennett Institute"), University of Oxford.
- b. The DCF group was established in April 2022 as part of Bennett Institute's PPIE activities.

### 4. Role and activities

- a. Supporting the OpenSAFELY platform design and development via workshops and remote input:
  - i. Regular monthly meetings, with additional ad hoc meetings as required - facilitated by the Bennett Institute PPIE Lead with support from external consultants.
    1. The regular monthly meetings will prioritise OpenSAFELY platform and workstream considerations. The agenda for each meeting will be set by the

PPIE/OpenSAFELY service team, incorporating suggestions from the DCF group. They will typically run between 1.5-2 hours.

2. Smaller working groups may be set up to progress time-limited/focused pieces of work. Group size may be limited due to resource constraints and/or where the focus is on specialist/community expertise. Details regarding the number of members and roles and experience required will be communicated in advance.
3. If there are Bennett Institute projects or other related projects (such as specific research projects) that require public involvement, the DCF group may be asked to provide input where it is appropriate. If there is not enough time during the regular monthly meetings, these projects will be discussed in ad hoc meetings that will be arranged at a time suitable for project leads and DCF group members.
  - ii. Provide input into OpenSAFELY communications and materials design.
  - iii. Co-design public involvement and engagement mechanisms to support OpenSAFELY, the Bennett Institute, and related projects as appropriate.
  - iv. Review and provide input into the research project approvals process in collaboration with the organisations with responsibility for data access decisions (e.g. NHS England).
- b. DCF members may also be invited to events organised by the Bennett Institute or funders. A randomised selection will be applied unless otherwise stated.

All participation is voluntary and there are not obligations to attend workshops or engage in other activities.

## 5. Scope of influence

- a. The DCF group plays an important role in OpenSAFELY platform governance by providing feedback and advice from the perspective of patients and the public.
- b. The Bennett Institute recognises the DCF group as an advisory group that complements the Oversight Group as key advisory mechanisms to support the Bennett Institute and OpenSAFELY funders.
- c. Feedback is captured during the regular meetings, workshops, and remote review tasks and shared directly with the relevant lead(s)/personnel. The PPIE Lead also reflects feedback in the Bennett Institute Management Board and NHS England OpenSAFELY Service meetings.
- d. Although the DCF group is welcome to offer suggestions and advice, the final decision-making authority lies with the Bennett Institute Senior Leadership Team and/or platform funders where appropriate (e.g NHS England). The assumption or default is that DCF advice is followed unless there is a good reason not to and this will be relayed back to the group.
- e. It is the responsibility of funders and the Bennett Institute, to make decisions on the deliberative dialogue process, materials, and dissemination of the outcomes, taking into account the advice provided by the DCF group.

## 6. Membership

- a. The group will consist of 8-12 Digital Critical Friends.

- b. The members will be invited through public recruitment drives (recruitment adverts in public forum spaces, networks, and channels).
- c. We will aim to ensure that the group contains people who come from a variety of social and ethnic backgrounds so the group discussion contains differing perspectives. The group cannot and does not aim to be fully representative of the UK population. The demographic make up of the group is diverse and diversity of members will continue to be a principle through ongoing recruitment.
- d. Membership will be voluntary
  - i. There will be no obligations or responsibilities to complete work, and membership is not employment.
- e. All DCFs will be asked to declare conflicts of interest in line with the [University of Oxford policy](#).
- f. All DCFs will be given training from the PPIE Team and OpenSAFELY service teams to ensure reasonable baseline knowledge and build confidence in discussing digital and data concepts, as well as what it means to be a “Critical Friend” .
- g. A review of the membership will take place each year to ensure that the group remains appropriate, in terms of size and engagement, for the programme of work required. Membership in the group does not mean membership for life. A tenure policy is being considered and discussed and will be reviewed Sept 2026.

## 7. Resources

- a. The resources required to support the DCF group will be provided by the Bennett Institute and OpenSAFELY funders.
- b. Expenses for participation in meetings and remote review tasks can be claimed from the Bennett Institute through an agreed process and to the agreed limits (unless otherwise discussed and agreed with the PPIE Team).

## 8. Communications

- a. The DCF group members will ordinarily communicate with the Bennett Institute/OpenSAFELY service team through the PPIE Team who will act as the primary point of contact.
  - i. Where appropriate, other representatives of the Bennett Institute, OpenSAFELY service team and funders may attend meetings and communicate with the group.
- b. The PPIE Team may ask the DCF group members to share communications materials with their networks.

## 9. Governance

- a. The DCF group is an advisory group providing advice to the Bennett Institute and OpenSAFELY funders. Key aspects of its governance are:
  - i. Advisory role: The DCF group provides advice to the Bennett Institute and OpenSAFELY funders. The Chair acts as an impartial facilitator, ensuring that discussions remain constructive and on-track.

- ii. Agenda setting: Meeting agendas are shaped by the strategic and operational priorities of both the OpenSAFELY service and the Bennett Institute, with input from the DCF group itself.
- iii. Representation in OpenSAFELY formal governance: The DCFs are represented in relevant formal governance forums:
  - 1. One DCF member represents the group on the OpenSAFELY Oversight Group; and
  - 2. Two DCF members serve as lay representatives on the NHS England OpenSAFELY Steering Group.
  - 3. No member of the DCFs can be a member of both formal governance forums
  - 4. In each forum, the representatives:
    - a. Attend as full members.
    - b. Report DCF recommendations via the Bennett Institute PPIE Lead.
    - c. Report back key updates from other governance groups to the DCF group members

## 10. Behavioural Conduct

- a. Members of the Digital Critical Friend group are expected to foster a respectful, safe and confidential environment. Key principles include:
  - i. Respectful engagement:
    - 1. Treat all contributions with courtesy and openness, allowing everyone to express views without interruption or putting people down (e.g. not making fun of other members).
    - 2. Listen actively and seek to understand diverse perspectives.
  - ii. Attendance and contributions:
    - 1. Members are expected and encouraged to contribute to discussions in a medium that works best for them (e.g. verbally, using the online chat function, or emails/chats between sessions) and sessions will be designed by the PPIE team to best capture the feedback/discussions. There is an expectation for all DCFs to make some kind of contribution during or after the meetings. As public funding pays for DCF expenses, the project team are required to ensure good use of spending public funds. If group members repeatedly do not answer to verbal or written questions in the group meetings or do not provide contributions of sharing their perspectives in or after meetings then the PPIE team may need to ask the person to leave the group. This would only be done after 2 dedicated 1:1 discussions.
    - 2. While engagement is voluntary, if members have not attended 3 consecutive meetings then the PPIE Team will reach out and offer support to ensure that members are still able to participate.
  - iii. Confidentiality:
    - 1. Do not share any personal data (e.g. names, contact details) or material designated confidential by the Bennett Institute - including sensitive verbal or written information, recordings, or restricted OpenSAFELY/NHSE/Bennett Institute data.

2. If information is **not** explicitly marked confidential, assume it is public unless advised otherwise.
- iv. Chatham House Rule:
  1. This is “when a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed.”
  2. In other words, discussions may be freely reported, but attribution is prohibited: you may share *what* was said, but not *who* said it.
- v. Safe space:
  1. Speak up if you feel uncomfortable or witness behaviour that undermines the group’s integrity. Concerns may be raised with the PPIE Team at any time.
- vi. Escalation and conflict resolution:
  1. The PPIE Team will seek to resolve any member concerns or conflicts informally. If a resolution cannot be reached, the matter will be escalated to the Bennett Institute Senior Leadership Team for final determination.
- b. By adhering to these principles, we ensure open, honest and secure dialogue that strengthens our collective advice.
- c. If a member repeatedly behaves contrary to the expected conduct as described by the principles above (in section 10a i-vi), they may be removed from the group at the discretion of the PPIE Team and the Chair.

**11. What you can expect from us and what we can expect from you**

- From us
  - Mandatory Critical Friend training, and ad-hoc training as identified by members and/or the PPIE Team, the Bennett Institute, or funders.
  - Timely payment at the rate of £25p/h for online meetings. For in-person events, we also cover reasonable travel and accommodation as outlined in our expenses policy.
  - Resources, pre-reading circulated a minimum of 10 working days prior to meeting/deadline (unless last minute documents clearly marked)
  - Support during and outside of meetings from the Chair and Secretariat when needed
- From you
  - Providing perspectives and feedback on specific issues
  - Actively contribute and participate in discussions using a mechanism that works best for you

**12. Summary of Roles and responsibilities**

Role	Responsibilities
Chair	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Setting an inclusive tone and guiding the agenda</li> <li>- Tracks discussion points, emerging recommendations, and ensures clarity on next steps.</li> </ul>

Members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Providing perspectives and feedback on specific issues</li> <li>- Role and scope as defined in sections 3 and 4</li> </ul>
Secretariat (provided by the PPIE Team)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Meeting organisation</li> <li>- Capturing actions</li> <li>- Tracking impact and sharing of feedback</li> <li>- Prepares clear, accessible materials (slides, briefing notes) to support topic understanding</li> </ul>
PPIE Team	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Consists of the Bennett Institute PPIE Lead and external PPIE Consultants</li> <li>- Group facilitation and coordination</li> </ul>