Written evidence submitted by Dr Paul Marchant (RES0042)

Following my earlier submission RIN0083, this addendum expands on the problems posed by claims of confidentiality. This has the potential to conflict with the equally important duty, on the part of researchers and research funders, to facilitate actively clear sharing of information to maximise the value of data. [Some context to this is provided in paras 34 to 36 in my main submission].

There is a legal and ethical duty of confidentiality in some cases. Whilst respecting this, the following suggestions reduce the risk of confidentiality being used as a justification to avoid sharing of data, collected at public expense.

1. All research protocols should include a review of the anticipated restrictions on data sharing arising from a duty of confidentiality within the relevant legislative frameworks. The researchers should, at this early stage, be required to itemise the steps they have taken to minimise any limitations to full data sharing.

2. Where the funding is from public bodies, the funders should be obliged to ensure this requirement is adhered to before the funding is signed off. If the funding is private, funders should be reminded of the benefits of best ethical process in terms of openness and transparency. Any restrictions proposed by researchers should be checked to ensure that they are indeed necessary.

3. If it is thought to be necessary, later during the research process, to impose further restrictions, the researchers should justify these. (It would perhaps be beneficial to have an independent body, to arbitrate and to allow if necessary, because there could be a concern that the body funding the research might feel pressured to prioritise short-term throughput of projects rather than longer-term access to data.) If the request to allow additional restrictions were to be granted, the appropriate protocol update would be recorded and dated.

4. It is important that the data, collected at public expense, is kept, along with its metadata, safely and securely in its full form for examination at some future date. It is the public’s data after all.

The danger of allowing confidentiality to be simply imposed by the research team, without process and scrutiny, is that it is too easy to prevent checking and extension of the work. (It may be that researchers want only to grant access to partial data. This would severely limit examination and might not even allow the original results to be reproduced, using the original methods.) It is very important to be sure that additional restrictions have not been imposed after the result of the study had become clear.

An article of mine on the reliability of claims in research into public lighting has been published, subsequent to my original submission to the Committee’s Research Integrity Inquiry. Its reference is Marchant P: (2017) International Journal of Sustainable Lighting, 19, 69-74 http://www.lightingjournal.org/index.php/path/article/view/71/79. It fits well with the subject of the Committee’s Inquiry.

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