

## Identifying and managing conflicts of interest in the work of CECAN

CECAN has a large number of people and organisations involved in its work through a variety of formal and informal relationships. There is a potential for conflicts of interest to occur. It is important for the success and reputation of CECAN that it manages, and is seen to manage, any potential conflicts of interest transparently, fairly and effectively.

This paper gives details of what a conflict of interest is and some examples of where they may occur in CECAN's work. It outlines a simple system for managing conflicts of interest. This paper has been discussed and approved by the CECAN Executive Group. **This system proposed for managing conflicts of interest is to be used by the all members of the CECAN team.**

This paper will be distributed to all members of the team and new members as they join CECAN whether staff, associates, fellows or partners. The CECAN Executive will take overall responsibility for ensuring the system is followed, promoting it with their colleagues, and with conflicts of interest being a standing agenda item at the Executive's monthly meetings.

### **What is a conflict of interest?**

A conflict of interest is defined by the National Audit Office as:

“A set of circumstances that creates a risk that an individual's ability to apply judgement or act in one role is, or could be, impaired or influenced by a secondary interest. It can occur in any situation where an individual or organisation (private or government) can exploit a professional or official role for personal or other benefit.”[1]

The National Audit Office also highlights that:

- Conflicts of interest are not solely based on whether an individual or organisation actually benefits from the conflict, but whether the *risk* they might benefit exists.
- The perception of a conflict of interest is enough to proceed on the basis that there is a conflict of interest.
- Conflicts might occur from, for example, a direct or indirect financial interest; non-financial or personal interests; or conflicts of loyalty where decision-makers have competing loyalties between an organisation they owe a primary duty to and some other person or entity.

[1] National Audit Office (2015) Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General Cross-government Conflicts of interest, HC 907 SESSION 2014-15, 27 JANUARY 2015. Available from <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Conflicts-of-interest.pdf>

- Conflicts of interest inevitably arise and therefore rather than trying to avoid them they need to be identified and managed appropriately.

### **Examples of potential conflicts of interest for CECAN**

Conflicts of interest can occur within CECAN between its team members, or between CECAN as a whole, or team members within it and external organisations.

Within CECAN conflicts of interest might occur when a CECAN team member is in a position to exploit knowledge or contacts gained from involvement in CECAN for their personal or institutional gain. An example would be, bidding for government evaluation contracts, or bidding for new research based on the work of CECAN. Withholding knowledge (without good reason) which others in the team might benefit from or be able to exploit is another example of how a potential conflict of interest could occur.

Externally, a conflict of interest might occur where CECAN members are put in a privileged position compared to those outside CECAN, due to the information they have received during the work of CECAN. This could include, for example, access to data, contacts, knowledge, and advance notice and details of forthcoming government tenders, which could be used in work outside CECAN.

The actions of others outside CECAN can also create conflicts of interest for CECAN or its team members. For example, where government departments are working with CECAN and involving third parties, such as consultants delivering evaluation contracts for the department. In some instances these third parties may be asked to share details of work they consider commercially sensitive with CECAN members, who could then utilise it to their advantage in their other roles.

These are just a few examples but many other possibilities for conflicts of interest could occur.

### **Managing conflicts of interest**

The National Audit Office suggests that:

“As a minimum, an organisation should have a system to identify and manage conflicts of interest rather than to eliminate them. The effect should be to make everyone aware of what to do if they suspect a conflict and ensure decision-making is efficient, transparent and fair. Rules should be clear and robust but not overly prescriptive or complex.”

The funded CECAN team of Principal Investigator, Co-Investigators, Researchers, Centre Managers and Knowledge Integrators are bound by the funding, collaboration and non-disclosure agreements. These cover the relationships between co-funders and CECAN team and are intended to ensure sensitive government information is not disclosed inappropriately. However, these documents are not explicit about how to manage conflicts of interest. A simple system for identifying and managing conflicts of interest is proposed below to be used by all members of the CECAN team.

## **CECAN System for Managing Conflicts of Interest**

1. All CECAN team members should be alert to the potential for conflicts of interest arising and act where they arise.
2. Many conflicts of interest can be managed just by being alert to their existence and behaving ethically in our dealings with others.
3. In the first instance advice should be sought from immediate colleagues to clarify the nature and significance of any potential conflict of interest and how to resolve it.
4. CECAN team members should notify the Surrey CECAN Management Team as soon as they think a significant real, or perceived, conflict of interest is likely to occur, or has occurred and/or the way to resolve it is not clear.
5. These notifications for significant conflicts of interest should be sent by email to the CECAN Managers ([cecan@surrey.ac.uk](mailto:cecan@surrey.ac.uk)) giving brief details of: the circumstances of the conflict of interest, those affected by it, its potential implications and risks, and actions required to manage it.
6. The CECAN Managers will maintain a central list of identified conflicts of interests. Conflicts of interest should be a standing agenda item of the meetings of the CECAN Executive. Notified conflicts of interests should be summarised briefly in a paper to the meeting for information and discussion as required. In particular, consideration should be given by the CECAN Executive to ensuring that the proposed actions to address the conflict are adequate.
7. Any members of the CECAN Executive involved in the potential conflict of the interest should leave the meeting during the discussion, other than if required to provide any clarifications to the Executive.
8. The discussion of each identified conflict of interest and additional actions to resolve it should be recorded in the minutes of the CECAN Executive meetings. Actions should be checked for completion at subsequent meetings.
9. Any conflicts of interest that cannot be satisfactorily resolved through this process should be reported to the Chair of the CECAN Co-funders Group by the CECAN Director for advice and action.
10. Specific instances where the potential for conflict of interest are likely to occur on a regular basis are and the action that should be taken are:
  - A. When a CECAN team member intends to bid for a government evaluation contract in the CECAN domain of work – the CECAN Managers should be notified as above.
  - B. When a CECAN team member starts work with a new government contact which will result in the sharing of restricted information within CECAN. The potential for conflicts of interest should be discussed with the government/agency contact at an early stage. The actions to avoid or

minimise any conflicts should be discussed and reported to the CECAN Managers as above.

- C. A specific instance related to b. above is where CECAN is working with a government department or agency, and third parties are involved, for example, consultants working under contract for the department/agency. The arrangements for avoiding conflicts of interest with these third parties should be put in place at an early stage and notified to the CECAN Managers as above. For example, consultants should be made aware during any tendering process, and before agreement of contract, of any requirements to share information beyond the government/agency client, such as with CECAN team members. Additional arrangements for sharing information which has been shared with the CECAN team, but is not in the public domain and could be used to gain an advantage in tendering processes, may be required by the contracting organisation. CECAN team members should alert co-funders to this issue at an early stage of discussions.

**CECAN**  
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