

NSPCC RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

Guidance for applicants

The NSPCC research ethics policy is based on the ESRC Framework for Research Ethics (FRE)¹ and the Government Social Research Unit (GSRU) professional guidance². This guide for applications sets out the key principles contained in those frameworks and provides practical guidance about implementing them in the NSPCC context.

However, this document is not a substitute for the ESRC Framework or the GSRU guidance, and applicants should ensure they are familiar with both documents before applying for research ethics approval.

Governance

The aim of the NSPCC ethical review process is to provide a thorough, impartial examination of the ethical issues in a collaborative, pragmatic and proportionate way. In formal terms, the NSPCC research ethics committee (NSPCC REC) is an advisory body with an external chair and a majority of external members, which makes recommendations to the organisation, with the ultimate decision and responsibility resting with Director of Strategy, Policy and Evidence, as the representative of the senior management team and of the trustees. In practice, applicants are expected to follow the NSPCC REC's recommendations and to

¹ www.esrc.ac.uk/about-esrc/information/research-ethics.aspx

² <http://www.civilservice.gov.uk/networks/gsr/publications>

work with the NSPCC REC to adapt proposals so that they satisfy the committee that they are in accordance with the principles set out in the GSRU and ESRC frameworks. In extremis, where an applicant and the NSPCC REC cannot agree, a decision about whether the research can proceed and on what basis will be taken by the Director of Strategy, Policy and Evidence. However, before this can happen, the Director must be satisfied that all possible ways of finding an agreed way forward have been exhausted. Applicants should also remember that ultimate responsibility for studies being conducted in an ethical way rests solely with individual researchers and their managers.

Research within the remit of the NSPCC REC

Research in the NSPCC is defined as ‘the systematic application of qualitative and quantitative methods to investigate issues affecting children, young people and others, including the problem of child maltreatment and how it can be overcome’. The outcome of research is knowledge, contributing to the evidence we need to end child cruelty and to promote the rights of children and young people. Although ‘research’ includes desk based scholarship and the secondary analysis of existing research findings, most of the research within the NSPCC is empirical work based on information gained from people through surveys, case file analysis, focus groups, interviews or observations and controlled trials. ‘NSPCC research’ includes research undertaken by staff working in the evaluation department and strategy unit. Interventions that are the subject of evaluations will not themselves be ethically reviewed.

Anyone carrying out research within or on behalf of the NSPCC must consider whether their study needs to be approved by the NSPCC REC. They should use the following guidelines to decide whether (a) it should come to the NSPCC REC (b) it should be submitted to another REC or (c) whether it is exempt from requiring ethical approval. **Note that most research will need to be approved by the NSPCC REC.** If there is uncertainty about the need to apply to the NSPCC REC (or indeed which other REC might be appropriate), the chair and deputy chair of the NSPCC REC can provide advice.

Research involving NSPCC staff or service users

All research involving NSPCC staff or service users must receive ethical approval from the NSPCC REC **unless** it is a study which is required to seek approval from NRES (National Research Ethics Service- NHS Applications) or SCIE (Social Care Research Ethics Committee) through IRAS (Integrated Research Application System). This applies both to research being led either by NSPCC staff or by external organisations or academics.

- If a study is being submitted to NRES or SCIE, the application needs to be reviewed (prior to submission through IRAS) by a designated NSPCC officer to ensure they comply with the organisation's child protection and safeguarding policies.
- Where research has been approved by NRES or SCIE, the NSPCC REC should be provided with a copy of the application and all correspondence.

Research studies (involving NSPCC staff or service users) being submitted to a university REC or other external REC (for instance where the work is in conjunction with an external academic partner) **should also come to the NSPCC REC for approval**. Applicants with research studies of this nature should discuss with the NSPCC REC chair or deputy chair whether a full application to the NSPCC REC is required, and whether it is most appropriate to seek approval from the NSPCC REC prior or subsequent to submitting the application to the external REC. In some cases, a 'light touch' approval from the NSPCC REC may be given in light of approval from the external REC.

Other research carried out within or on behalf of the NSPCC

The following types of research **conducted by NSPCC staff** are exempt from requiring ethical approval –

- Market research with the general public on non-sensitive subjects (for example views of marketing campaigns) conducted by the communications and marketing departments.
- Research using data routinely collected as part of the provision of services by the NSPCC, provided it has been anonymised, not shared with third parties and handled in strict accordance with the Data Protection Act.

However, **research that has been commissioned by the NSPCC** (that does not involve NSPCC staff or service users) will be expected to seek ethical approval through the commissioned institution's or organisation's own system. If the organisation does not have an ethical review system in place (using recognised ESRC or GSR guidelines), they should make an application to the NSPCC REC. Copies of the application and correspondence should be sent to the REC chair.

The NSPCC REC reserves the right to review any application made to an external REC if it considers it is justified in doing so.

The chair and deputy chair of the NSPCC REC can provide advice to applicants if they are not clear which REC they should apply to.

Procedures

All internal research and evaluation must be subjected to an initial risk assessment to be conducted by the lead researcher or project manager. Projects regarded as presenting more than 'minimal risk', as defined by the FRE guidance (FRE, p8) will be formally reviewed, in practice this means that any research involving sensitive issues or vulnerable individuals will need to be formally reviewed either by the NSPCC REC or NRES/SCIE. For formal review the NSPCC REC requires applicants to fill out the NSPCC application for ethical review and submit it for consideration, before any research can be undertaken. Research being reviewed by other RECs (other than NRES/SCIE) must also be submitted to the NSPCC REC. A summary report of studies judged to present only minimal risk should be sent to the NSPCC REC. The relevant head of department will review the project manager's decision on the degree of risk a project presents, and confirm whether or not a study requires formal review.

External researchers who believe that their study does not require formal review should still complete the application form, ticking the relevant box and justifying why it does not need review, and then submit the application to the NSPCC REC.

For research that requires formal review, a NSPCC REC application should be completed and submitted along with supporting documents two weeks before the NSPCC REC meeting. The NSPCC REC will want to see information leaflets and consent forms, and a description of the main topics covered in qualitative interviews and bespoke surveys. For standardized measures, the REC will want to know the main topics covered by the measure, the age range it has been developed for and standardized on and an overview of how common its use is and in what contexts. The NSPCC REC will not necessarily need to see the instruments themselves unless they are unusual or very new, however, it would be useful to provide web-links to the instruments for the committee. The application will then be discussed at the meeting, and the applicants invited into the meeting to discuss any issues that have been raised by the application. The aim of the discussion will be that the applicant and NSPCC REC agree a way forward so that the research or evaluation can progress. If appropriate, both parties can agree a date when the application will be reviewed again by the NSPCC REC. It is hoped that most applications will not need to return to an NSPCC REC meeting. The intention is that, where possible, applicants should be clear at the end of the discussion whether the recommendation is:

- that the study goes ahead as planned;
- that the study should go ahead but that a number of amendments should be made, to the satisfaction of the NSPCC REC before the study commences;
- that the study should not go ahead as it stands, but should be re-submitted to the REC once its concerns have been addressed.

A letter confirming the committee's recommendations will be sent to the applicant after the meeting. Issues arising from the implementation of the agreed measures can be discussed with the chair and deputy chair outside the REC, who can decide whether the issues need to be discussed further at a full REC meeting. The chair and deputy chair can also be informed of subsequent changes to the design, and advise on whether the changes are substantial enough to require further REC review.

Correspondence with the REC, the chair and deputy chair will be through the committee's administrator- Patricia Bojang patricia.bojang@nspcc.org.uk
020 7825 7445

Principles and practice

The aim of the ethical review process is to facilitate high quality, ethical research. The NSPCC REC is committed to working in a collaborative way; it is not trying to 'catch out' applicants but instead is aiming to help researchers think through the ethical issues and find appropriate solutions. The assumption will be that all applicants are intending to conduct their research ethically, even if in some cases the committee and the researchers need to discuss the best way of doing that. Views on how the ethical principles listed below should be implemented will differ from researcher to researcher, and committee member to committee member, and there is no absolute right way or wrong approach. While the committee will want to make sure that the principles are adhered to – for example making sure that informed consent is sought – in the main it will be looking for evidence that the researchers have carefully considered the issues and come to reasonable conclusions. The committee will also want to satisfy itself that the researchers understand the need to keep ethical principles in mind throughout the study and be confident that should ethical issues arise that the researchers will act in an appropriate way. Therefore, it is important that applicants discuss the reasoning behind their decisions as well as describing the systems and processes they have put into place to ensure well conducted ethical research.

The five principles underlying the NSPCC's ethical policy are set out below, along with a discussion of some of the considerations that need to be taken into account in order to put these principles in practice. This should not be considered comprehensive; instead it is intended to highlight some of the main points that are likely to come up for discussion by the NSPCC REC.

Principle 1: Voluntary participation based on valid informed consent.

For the vast majority of projects a key principle of ethical research is that the subjects of the research should agree to participate voluntarily on the basis of adequate information. It is important to remember that this is not a one-off decision, but an ongoing process and researchers need to have appropriate checks to make sure that an individual is still happy to participate. For instance, if some time has passed between a first and second interview, it is appropriate to check that the participant is happy to take part in the second interview, even if formal consent for the whole process had been sought and given at the beginning. Similarly, it should be made clear to participants that even if they have given consent at the beginning of the process, they are entitled to decline to answer any particular questions without giving a reason and are entitled to decide not to take part at any point, again without giving a reason, and can ask for their data to be removed from the study where practical.

Thought must also be given to the capacity of a participant to consent; this will depend on their level of understanding and the potential risks and benefits of taking part in research. In most instances consent should be sought from young people and children and consent also obtained from a parent, guardian, carer or other appropriate adult having a duty of care toward the child. For younger children it is appropriate to gain consent from their parent, guardian, carer or other appropriate adult with a duty of care toward the child and then obtain assent from the child. In general the following guidance may be helpful, but in all cases the researcher should justify the approach to consent:

- For young people aged 16 and over it is appropriate to gain their consent and it may be unnecessary to obtain consent from the parent, guardian, carer or other appropriate adult with a duty care, however the situation needs to be carefully considered and justified by the researcher.
- For young people aged between 12 and 15, consent should be sought from the young person and the parent, guardian, carer or other appropriate adult with a duty of care. If the young person has accessed a service being evaluated or researched, independently then it may be appropriate to seek the young person's consent only. Researchers will have to justify this and also establish that the young person is competent and has enough information to make this decision; as part of this process researcher will have to satisfy them that the young person is "Gillick" competent and follow Frazer Guidelines.
- For children less than 12, consent should be sought from the parent, guardian, carer or other appropriate adult with a duty of care; assent should also be sought from the child. In research the child's wishes should be paramount, therefore if a child does not assent to participate this overrides the consent from the parent, guardian, carer or other appropriate adult with a duty of care.

Disclosure

Whilst maintaining confidentiality is a priority, one of the key issues for research conducted within the context of the NSPCC is around the issue of the disclosure of child protection concerns, or other safeguarding issues relating to adults, by children or by adults recruited into a research study. The NSPCC's policy is that if researchers become aware of such concerns, then they have a responsibility to act on the information and pass it on to a relevant organisation, which in most cases will be the NSPCC adult helpline. It is vital, of course, that this is made clear to participants as part of the consent process, so that participants know what the boundaries of confidentiality are. Researchers should also have clear protocols around when confidentiality may be broken, including guidance about what constitutes information that should be discussed with a third party, what the researcher should do within a data collection setting if they become aware of information that should be passed on, who they should report the information to and what the process for deciding whether the information should be passed on.

Researchers conducting studies involving practitioners should also consider what should happen in cases where poor practice comes to light. Whatever approach is chosen, this should be included in the information given to participants when they are asked for consent to participate, in order that consent to participate is informed.

Please also see the section below on publication for a further discussion of issues relating to confidentiality.

Consent process

Another important issue the REC will consider is the process by which consent is obtained, including who asks for it and how and when they ask, as well as any materials given to participants to support the process. It is normal practice to provide information leaflets about the research, and these need to be tailored so that they are appropriate to the participant, in an easily understandable form that uses lay language rather than technical terms and jargon. In some cases this will mean it is necessary to produce several versions of an information leaflet, for example when the research involves children and young people with a wide variety of ages or cognitive abilities. Similarly, consent forms, where they are used, need to be tailored to the participant group.

The appropriateness or otherwise of obtaining written versus oral consent is likely to vary between projects³. Researchers should assess which method is most appropriate for their project, and clearly justify the proposed approach to obtaining consent in the ethics application form. Please note that, for studies being assessed by an external REC such as NRES rather than the NSPCC REC, researchers should comply with the expectations for that REC in terms of obtaining consent.

³ These guidelines draw on a discussion of informed consent within NatCen Social Research's internal research ethics guidelines.

Written consent provides researchers with some assurance against accusations of failing to secure informed consent, see the Social Research Association (SRA) guidance⁴. For this reason, it has become relatively common practice, perhaps more so in qualitative research rather than in surveys. However, it should be noted that written consent is not always a necessary requirement for ethical research, though typically it is expected. In some cases it could be seen to undermine the ongoing process of ensuring consent. This happens if people feel that by signing a consent form they are ‘obliged’ to continue to take part or answer particular questions when they are not comfortable doing so⁵. It may have the unintended consequence of placing barriers to participation for those with literacy problems or those finding the process of written consent too ‘official’. And, of course, for some interview modes for example by telephone, written consent raises a series of practical difficulties.

If researchers opt for verbal consent, they should consider whether it is appropriate to put in place mechanisms for recording that verbal consent has been given. Where interviews are being recorded, verbal consent can be recorded; for survey interviews, researchers or interviewers can be prompted to code that consent has been sought, and if appropriate, to code that leaflets have been given, etc. Of course, this is not ‘proof’ of consent, but rather helps to ensure that the researcher or interviewer is prompted to make all appropriate steps to explain and obtain consent, and record that they have done so. It may be of particular importance where the researcher may not be carrying out all the interviews themselves.

Likewise, where researchers opt for written consent, it is important that they consider how to ensure that the process does not compromise the process of ongoing consent or place barriers to participation.

It is also important to consider the timing of gaining consent and to make efforts to ensure that participants have the time and space to reflect on whether they want to take part.

Gatekeepers

It is often necessary and appropriate for researchers to make contact with participants through ‘gatekeepers’ who have immediate access to the research subjects. The role and position of gatekeepers can vary enormously, from a personal assistant of a busy professional, to teachers in schools and prison officers. In managing these varying situations, researchers need to consider the particular relationship between the gatekeeper and the individual being recruited. Where a gatekeeper is in a position of power with respect to the potential research participants, a teacher for example, a situation might arise where potential participants feel coerced or at least pressurised to take part in research. Another potential problem is that gatekeepers may not explain

4 <http://www.the-sra.org.uk/documents/pdfs/ethics03.pdf>

5 The Department of Health guidelines highlight the limitations of assuming that written consent equates with fully informed consent – www.dh.gov.uk/assetRoot/04/01/90/79/04019079.pdf

the research to potential participants very well, so the initial decision to take part in a study is not based on a fully informed basis. Researchers will need to consider how best to ensure that the potential participant does understand what taking part involves, and that they have done so freely by going through a thorough process to ensure consent is informed and voluntary before the study commences. The researchers will also need to consider how continuing consent or assent is obtained and how withdrawal from the study is facilitated. A particular issue that will need to be addressed when gatekeepers are service providers is to ensure that potential participants do not think that the service they will receive will be affected by whether or not they agree to take part in the research or evaluation.

Incentives

The NSPCC's position is that the use of incentives, including financial incentives is legitimate. This is particularly so when participation might be considered onerous, for instance a long interview or questionnaire that would average more than 45–60 minutes or participation in qualitative research involving interviews and focus groups. Incentives should not normally be paid to individuals who are responding in a professional capacity. Payment of costs incurred by participants such as travel and subsistence may be reimbursed in all circumstances.

The Department of Work and Pensions⁶ guidance indicates that small one-off payments to participants are treated as capital and should not affect their benefit entitlements unless the participant's personal capital is greater than £3000. If you are using participant researchers you should ensure that they are aware that any incentive or payment to them might affect any benefit entitlement they may have, as this might constitute remunerative work, given the higher level of incentive that would be offered (in the £100s). This may also potentially count as unavailability for work, which could also affect benefits. Participants must be made aware of these potential issues in the participant information sheet.

Details of incentives must also appear in the participant information sheet and should be made known to potential participants before they consent to take part. One off incentives must not be dependent upon completing their participation in the research, so that they would still receive the incentive if they were to withdraw early from the study.

Ideally incentives should be in the form of high street vouchers and not money, unless this can be specifically justified.

Further guidance is available from the Department of Work & Pensions (see footnote)

6 Doing the Right Thing: Outlining the DWP's approach to ethical and legal issues in social research. Working Paper No. 11. Bacon J & Olsen K. Department of work & Pensions, July 2003, London. <http://statistics.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/WP11.pdf>

Deception and obtaining consent after data collection has started

For some studies, most often observational studies, it is not possible to obtain consent prior to participation without compromising the quality of the research. An example of this is an evaluation where an integral part of the study is to observe what happens during the course of the intervention (e.g. a training programme), necessarily without the professional and/or the participants being aware that they are being observed.

For these studies, researchers need to explain clearly in the ethics application form why prior consent is not possible, why the research still needs to go ahead and how the issue will be dealt with after data collection. In these cases, it is vital to explain how the research will comply with the data protection act.

In some cases, it may be feasible to obtain consent from some parties (e.g. the professionals) and not others (e.g. the participants). If so, consent should be sought from whoever it is feasible to do so. Where it is not possible to obtain informed consent before data collection, it is normally possible to obtain it afterwards and, if so, this should be done immediately. Mechanisms should be put in place to remove someone's data if they retrospectively decline to give their consent.

The British Psychological Society (BPS)⁷ and Social Research Association (SRA)⁸ ethical guidance outline measures that must be considered within research designs where observation of participants is taking place without their prior consent or knowledge. These include: restricting observations to situations where the people being studied would reasonably expect to be observed by strangers, always considering the local cultural values and privacy of individuals, and placing clear and legible signs in the area observation is taking place.

If using covert observation, researchers should familiarise themselves with the Human Rights Act 1998⁹, of particular relevance is Article 8 concerning the right to respect for private and family life¹⁰.

Principle 2: Enabling participation where possible and avoiding the systematic exclusion of particular sections of society

While not every study can include all sections of society, consideration should be given to reasonable steps to facilitate participation, such as translating research tools and supporting documents, for non-English speakers, though researchers should also be aware that the use of interpreters, for example, can greatly add to the burden for a participant as such interviews may take much longer, so this will need to be considered. Researchers should also consider access issues for individuals with mobility issues and take into account potential literacy problems or learning difficulties for example.

⁷ www.bps.org.uk

⁸ www.the-sra.org.uk/documents/pdfs/ethics03.pdf

⁹ www.dca.gov.uk/hract

¹⁰ www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts1998/19980042.htm

In addition to these issues, there are more subtle ways in which people with particular social, educational or cultural backgrounds can be excluded, and researchers should be alert to this and devise appropriate strategies to overcome these obstacles.

Principle 3: Avoidance of personal and social harm to participants and researchers

Avoiding personal and social harm to participants and researchers is the key aim of the ethical principles and guidelines. However, the REC recognises that the *risk* of causing harm or upset can never be entirely mitigated. Therefore the committee will be looking for evidence that researchers have reduced the risk as much as possible and that the remaining risk is justified given the research question and research design. In addition, the REC will want to know what measures have been put into place to address the impact of any harm or upset, for example through the provision of support services or advice.

For social research, the main risk to participants is causing emotional or psychological distress. This can be linked to a number of issues, including:

- vulnerable individuals can find participating in research stressful per se ;
- the research may ‘reawaken’ old feelings or memories;
- the research may uncover hidden or suppressed feelings;
- the research may create additional concerns;
- the participant may be concerned about what they have shared.

While there are a range of ways in which research can cause distress, it does not mean that the distress is necessarily harmful, indeed such research opens up the possibility of identifying issues which can be addressed to the participant’s benefit. Challenging situations are also not exclusive to research, and may not involve any greater stress than is commonly experienced in day-to-day life or in the interventions which are being evaluated. If the questions being asked are appropriate for the research, and the stress or distress that is likely to be experienced as a result of the research is not excessive, and the participant has given their informed consent then it would normally be considered ethical to ask them.

Participants may also become upset when discussing difficult or sensitive issues, but nevertheless feel that the research is important and even part of the process of coming to terms with the issue on a personal level. It is also important that participants are allowed to contribute to research that may benefit others rather than directly benefiting themselves, if they do so in an informed and voluntary manner, through a proper process of consent. Therefore, the possibility of someone becoming upset or the fact of a participant actually becoming upset does not necessarily mean the research should not go ahead or should stop as long as the participant is clear that they wish to continue and the situation is handled sensitively and appropriate support is in place. In some cases shutting down appropriate expressions of emotion can also have a negative impact on participants.

Assessing and managing risk

In order to assess the risk of participants becoming distressed and the risk that the distress results in harm, researchers will need to consider how vulnerable participants are likely to be, how sensitive the research topic is, the appropriateness and acceptability of the research instruments and how much burden the data collection is likely to place on the participant given the context in which it is occurring. In order to help mitigate the risk, researchers should consider how they can make sure participants are prepared for participation (as part of the informed consent process), how data collection can be minimised to reduce distress (for example through taking appropriate breaks or leaving gaps between episodes of data collection) and providing support services or contact information, depending on the likelihood and degree of distress caused. If support or helpline numbers are being provided, researchers will need to make sure interviews are scheduled at a time when the services will be available after the interview. Often, this will mean avoiding conducting interviews on Friday afternoons, as many services are closed at the weekends. Consideration should also be given to where it may be appropriate to provide information or encourage participants to seek help in the case where an unmet need is disclosed, for example a mental health need such as depression. Researchers should also consider the venue where the research will take place, and the impact this may have on mitigating or exacerbating any distress that participants may feel.

It is good policy to consider debriefing participants at the end of the study or stressful situations, in order to identify any participant needs and refer them to appropriate help or allay fears. A “Thank you leaflet” containing information and contact details on help and support is particularly useful and should be given to all participants.

Qualitative research

While all of these issues apply to both quantitative and qualitative research, qualitative research brings additional risks because of the nature of the data collection. This is because qualitative research will often go into more depth than an equivalent quantitative approach and there is more scope for discussing issues that have not been anticipated by either the researcher or participant. There are two key ways in which this additional risk can be minimised. The first is by structuring interview schedules or topic guides so that the more sensitive material is in the middle of the interview, and participants are given a chance to return to a more ‘normal’ level of conversation at the end of the interview. The second is by ensuring that the interview remains focussed on the research topic. Participants who are allowed to discuss sensitive or traumatic issues that are not related to the topic of the research often feel embarrassed and distressed afterwards at having inappropriately disclosed. Researchers conducting qualitative interviews also need to make sure that the boundary between a research interview and counselling is rigorously maintained, even when the researcher is also a trained counsellor. However, a debrief with the participant after the interview can be an appropriate way of helping to manage any feelings prompted by the interview and for the researcher to gauge whether additional information or support would be appropriate.

A final point worth noting about harm to participants is that while gaining informed consent is crucial, this does not absolve researchers from considering the risk of harm. In some cases, particularly for children or very vulnerable individuals, the researcher may have a better understanding of what is likely to cause harm than the participant. In these cases, researchers are required to act on that knowledge, irrespective of whether the participant has agreed to take part in the research.

Risk to researchers

The main risks to researchers in conducting research are that they can become distressed or upset (in the most extreme cases they can suffer from vicarious trauma), that they suffer physical injury or financial loss, or that they are at risk of legal action being brought against them through being placed in compromising situations. These risks are present during a research encounter, but potentially also on the journey to and from the location where the research is to take place. The main ways in which this risk is mitigated, is through having a robust risk assessment process that involves on-going risk assessment by the researcher, and by ensuring that an appropriate and adequate level of internal or external support is available for the researcher before, during and after the data collection.

Researchers should also consider their own physical safety, especially when working outside of the workplace or at unsocial times. The Social Research Association has a Code of Practice for the Safety of Researchers¹¹ and The Suzy Lamplugh Trust¹² is a good place to start for advice on ensuring the safety of lone workers. Both sets of guidance should consult when completing the research ethics application.

Principle 4: Non-disclosure of identity and personal information

Although there are limits to confidentiality, in particular in the case of child protection issues, in general a participant's personal information and their identity should not be disclosed. This confidentiality should operate on at least two levels: within an organisation, only those people who need to know a participant's identity and personal information should do so, normally only those within the immediate research team; beyond the organisation conducting the research, findings that are published or made available to others will need to be written in such a way as to ensure that personal information and identities are not disclosed. Where this is not possible, for example in the case where there are a small number of potential participants who could have taken part in the research, the limits to confidentiality should be made clear to participants before they participate and the proposed dissemination approach discussed. Researchers should also have appropriate processes and procedures in place to ensure data security in line with the Data Protection Act.

¹¹ www.the-sra.org.uk/guidelines.htm#safe

¹² www.suzylamplugh.org

Principle 5: Ethical application and conduct of research methods

While the scholarly or scientific standards or merits of the research are not the responsibility of the NSPCC REC, some methodological issues can have an ethical dimension and these should be considered. Designs that are fatally flawed or that contain an inherent bias to the extent that the research would be misleading or damaging, imply that any risk of harm or upset is not justified, and would therefore not be approved. Researchers should demonstrate in their applications how their research will make a contribution to gaps in the scholarly literature. Researchers also need to justify their research design and demonstrate that it is suitable and robust for the issues under research.

Complaints procedure: In addition to complying with the above principles, procedures should be in place to facilitate participants making complaints about the research in general or a researcher in particular. Ideally, the arrangements should include the ability to talk to someone not connected with the research or the organisation that is the subject of the research. Consideration should also be given to facilitating children to make complaints, by identifying an appropriate adult (for example carer, teacher, or social worker) with a good relationship to the child and discussing the issue with them so that children can talk to them if they are concerned.

The following form of words should appear on the participant information sheet–

If you would like to complain about any aspect of the study, the NSPCC has established a complaints procedure. To complain about the study, you can do so to any NSPCC member of staff, volunteer, or local office. Alternatively, please email comments@nspcc.org.uk, or call **020 7825 2500** and ask to speak to Patricia Bojang and inform them that the name of the project is: _____

To help us respond to your comment or complaint effectively, please tell us which of our studies it relates to. Also, please include your full name, contact details, and let us know how you would like us to contact you.

You could also write to the NSPCC Information Service at:

Weston House
42 Curtain Road
London
EC2A 3NH

Further details of our complaints procedures can be found here:
www.nspcc.org.uk/fighting-for-childhood/about-us/contact-us#complaints

Publication

From an ethical stand point the Committee would normally expect all research to be placed in the public domain and published, unless there is a very strong argument against. It is important that research is disseminated so that practitioners and policy makers can adapt their policies and work practices in the light of the best available evidence, and other researchers can build upon previous work rather than repeating work that has already been done but which they are unaware of.

It is essential that the anonymity and confidentiality of participants is protected during publication of research, where this has been promised as part of the informed consent procedure. Withholding names may not be sufficient and researchers should be aware that no attributes should be reported that might allow someone to work out the identity of a participant, for example in the use of case studies. In some situations the confidentiality of participants may be impossible to ensure in publication, or it may be desirable to identify individuals, especially senior people in policy making roles for example. In such cases prior consent for this must be sought and it is appropriate that participants are consulted on publication drafts and the final report and have the opportunity to comment and challenge what is presented. It is important that any rights participants may have with respect to sight of drafts and rights over excluding material are addressed in the participant information sheet and are clear and explicit.

Researchers should also ensure that they have the agreement of the Director of Strategy and Development before publication or dissemination of study results and findings.

Child protection

The NSPCC believes the principles outlined above are entirely compatible with its child protection and safe-guarding policies. However, if situations arise where there is a conflict between these, the child protection and safe-guarding policies take precedence.

NSPCC REC Membership

- Dr Nick Drey, Chair, external member- Senior Lecturer in Health Services Research, City University London.
- Caroline Bryson, Deputy Chair, external member- Partner, Bryson Purdon Social Research.
- Joyce Epstein, External member- Retired as Director, Foundation for the Study of Infant Deaths.
- Dr Cheryl Adams, External member, Independent Advisor in Health Visiting & Community Health Policy & Practice.
- Gwynne Rayns, Internal member.
- Matt Barnard, Internal member.
- Lisa Harker, Internal member.

Further Guidance

In due course further guidance on the capacity to consent, safeguarding in a research context, how to deal with disclosures of poor practice, defining research that needs ethical scrutiny and templates for consent and information sheets will be forthcoming.

Additional information and guidance on the ethics of carrying out research can be obtained from following organisations.

- The National Children's Bureau (www.ncb.org.uk)
- The British Psychological Society (www.bps.org.uk)
- The Social Research Association (www.the-sra.org.uk)
- The British Sociological Association (www.britisoc.co.uk)
- The Market Research Society (www.mrs.org.uk)
- The Medical Research Council (www.mrc.ac.uk)