

What is consent?

Consent has two different meanings. It covers both consent as it is defined in research ethics and as it is defined in data protection legislation.

In research, ‘informed consent’ is a cornerstone of good, ethical practice. It entails providing participants with clear information about the purpose of the study, what their participation will involve and how their data will be stored and used in the long-term, thereby allowing them to make their own, independent, fully informed decision as to whether or not to participate. The informed consent process should stress that participation is voluntary, and should clearly specify up to what point their data can be withdrawn.

Researchers often think that if they are using publicly available data (for instance social media data) then they don’t need consent. However, *legal* use and *ethical* use are not the same thing. In some circumstances you should still obtain consent for ethical reasons, or at least let people know that you are collecting the data and why.

For more information researchers should refer to the LSE [Informed Consent guidance](#).

In data protection consent is used differently. It is one of the lawful bases under which we can process personal data. However, using consent as the lawful basis for processing research data can be problematic, as this would mean that data could be withdrawn at any time in the research process up to and including post publication.

Where possible, personal data for research should be processed on the basis of “task in the public interest” or “legitimate interests”. The former covers any research funded directly by the School, by a Research Centre or by a UK government source. The latter works for research funded by a private company or organisation or if the research is being conducted for commercial purposes or where a student is conducting research as part of their course.

Ultimately though, the research ethics process requires informed consent for research involving human participants. So even though you may not need consent for processing the data, in most cases you will need it to be ethical.

If you have any queries relating to research ethics, contact Research.Ethics@lse.ac.uk. If you have any queries relating to data protection, contact glpd.info.rights@lse.ac.uk.