

# Informed Consent

This guidance should be read in conjunction with the [LSE Research Ethics Policy and Procedures](#)

Informed consent is widely accepted as the cornerstone of ethical practice in research that involves human participants or personal data. 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. The informed consent process should stress that participation is voluntary and can be ended at any point during the research.

There may be some circumstances where gaining informed consent is not possible - for instance, in the case of some anthropological field work<sup>1</sup>, or some research in behavioural science - but in these cases the lack of informed consent should be specially argued.

## Written or Verbal?

**Written** consent should be sought wherever possible. Aside from its generally being a better guarantee that participants have indeed given their consent, written consent also provides an auditable record that will prove useful in the event of a dispute or questions arising later regarding the use or storage of data. Research that proposes to use only verbal consent will need to justify why written consent is inappropriate for the study.

For **online surveys** or other digital data collection, appropriate ways should be sought to ensure that participants *explicitly* signal their consent (e.g. by explicitly ticking an "I agree" box).

Researchers involved in collecting data from **social media** platforms should refer to appropriate guidance, for example: the [LSE Social Media, Personal Data and Research Guidance](#), the [Association of Internet Researchers' ethics guidance](#), or the [UKRIO 'Good practice in internet-mediated research'](#).

## Seeking informed and freely-given consent

Whichever method is adopted, researchers must make every effort to ensure that participants are *genuinely* informed about the study and that they have freely consented to take part. The

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<sup>1</sup> Researchers should refer to the Association of Social Anthropologists' ethical guidelines: <https://www.theasa.org/downloads/ASA%20ethics%20guidelines%202011.pdf>

usual method in the case of written consent is that a relatively (but not overly) detailed information-sheet should be given to participants along with a briefer consent form. On both, researchers should **avoid jargon** and use language that is appropriate for the intended participants.

## The information sheet

Except in exceptional circumstances (which will require special justification) the information sheet should cover the following topics:

- name of the project and purpose of the research, including:
  - the researcher's institution
  - funding source (if appropriate)
- what participation will involve (e.g. if interviews are proposed, how many and how long they will be and where they will be held)
- risks to participants and benefits to participants and others
- that participants are free to withdraw at any time without prejudice and without providing a reason
- that if the participant withdraws, they should be given the option to have any information they have provided thus far to be removed from the study<sup>2</sup>
- what usage will be made of the data: during the research itself (where data will be stored and who will have access to it); after the research (if/how the data will be published); whether the (anonymised) data will be used in possible future research or archived to meet funder requirements, and/or how and when the data will be destroyed
- strategies for maintaining confidentiality and anonymity
- contact details:
  - contact details for researchers
  - who to contact should they have a complaint (namely, [research.ethics@lse.ac.uk](mailto:research.ethics@lse.ac.uk))
  - how to request a copy of the data about themselves [glpd.info.rights@lse.ac.uk](mailto:glpd.info.rights@lse.ac.uk)

A sample participant Information Sheet and consent form is attached in appendix to this document; a Word version can be found [here](#). This, however, is simply intended as one possible way to produce a form that covers the important issues - researchers will, of course, produce their own forms tailored to the particular research context and participant groups involved in their research project (for instance, for online surveys, for research involving children, etc.). Other examples can be found at:

<https://www.ukdataservice.ac.uk/manage-data/legal-ethical/consent-data-sharing/overview>

It is important that arrangements are made for researchers carefully to talk through the information sheet and consent form with participants before they are asked to sign the form, and that appropriate time is allowed in order for participants to make this decision.

## Opt in/Opt Out

It is generally recognized that assuming that participants have given their consent on the basis that they have not taken an opportunity explicitly to opt out is very unsatisfactory. The General Data Protection Regulation and Data Protection Act 2018 states that "Silence, pre-ticked boxes or inactivity" is presumed inadequate to signal consent. The default assumption is, therefore, that all research carried out at LSE involves an 'opt in' consent procedure. There may, however,

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<sup>2</sup> Up until publication: if a participant withdraws after research results have been published, the publication does not need to be changed. However, the data should not be used for further research or publications.

be special circumstances in which 'opt out' may arguably be the only pragmatically feasible option (e.g. for large studies conducted in schools). Any such proposals should be submitted to the LSE Research Ethics Committee (REC) and will be subject to special scrutiny.

## Sensitive issues

Where the research involves sensitive issues (such as questions of ethnicity, sexual behaviour, health, political beliefs, or illegal behaviour), then special attention should clearly be paid to ensuring that the participants are fully informed ahead of time of the nature of the research and are given ample time to think before deciding whether or not to become involved. They should also be reminded during the study that they are free to discontinue their participation at any point. Particular attention also needs to be paid to the confidentiality and [data management](#) of such data.

For further guidance on this we suggest referring to the book '[Undertaking Sensitive Research in the Health and Social Sciences](#)'. Hard and e-copies of this are available in the LSE Library.

## Research involving vulnerable participants or those with diminished capacity to give informed consent

Participants may be vulnerable for a number of reasons, for instance due to innate characteristics (such as age, in the case of children or the elderly, ethnicity, or sexuality), or due to physical impairment, learning disabilities, etc. Vulnerability may also be due to a participant's economic or political situation. Research involving vulnerable participants raises complex ethical issues concerning which it is difficult to formulate generally applicable rules. Researchers should consult relevant guidance and discuss their proposals with those with experience in conducting such research. Useful information on 'special cases' of consent can be found at <http://www.data-archive.ac.uk/create-manage/consent-ethics/consent?index=6>. All such research should be submitted to the [REC](#) who will give special scrutiny to the proposed procedures for informed consent in such cases.

## Data Protection and information security

An important part of informed consent is that participants should be aware of what will happen to the data that is collected during the study, what arrangements will be made to keep participants' identities secret and the data confidential. If it is proposed to share data with other researchers or bodies (or even if this is a possibility), participants must be fully informed. Researchers must ensure that they comply with the UK Data Protection Act. The Act allows special provisions for research, and researchers should consult the LSE guidance on [Data Protection and Research](#). Researchers should also consult the School's policies and guidance on Information Security, including encryption and audio and video recording. These are available at: <https://info.lse.ac.uk/staff/divisions/dts/about/policies>.

## Limits to Confidentiality

It is always recommended that participants' details are anonymised at the earliest opportunity and they are not named in research reports or publications. However, in some instances it may be impossible to guarantee that participants will not be identifiable. In such instances it may be better to discuss with participants whether they are happy to be named, and to agree - as part of the informed consent process/form - exactly how their data will be presented, and whether or not they

will be able to check transcripts of their interviews. This can raise a number of issues, and we recommend researchers refer to the following resources:

<http://www.ethicsguidebook.ac.uk/Limits-of-confidentiality-professional-and-elite-interviews-232>  
and <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13645579.2015.1123555?src=recsys>

Confidentiality may also need to be re-considered in cases where a participant discloses something in an interview that suggests that they or someone they mention is at serious risk of harm and unable to act for themselves. In such circumstances this may need to be reported to the relevant authorities – however the researcher should always first discuss this with their supervisor and/or line manager, and any breaking of confidentiality will need to be discussed with the participant.

If in any doubt, please refer to the Research Ethics Committee for guidance, via [research.ethics@lse.ac.uk](mailto:research.ethics@lse.ac.uk)

## Deception

Certain kinds of social research – particularly in psychology or the behavioural sciences – would be rendered pointless if participants were fully informed in advance of the details of that research. Where an element of deception is involved in a study, the Research Ethics Committee will want to feel assured

(a) that there is no other non-deceptive way of investigating the research problem at issue; **and that the case can be made that the study's prospective scientific (or applied) value outweighs the disvalue of the deception involved.**

(b) that, before data collection begins, participants are informed about the nature of the study as fully as is consistent with the scientific aims of the study;

(c) that the deception will be explained to the participants as early as possible – preferably at the conclusion of their participation, and certainly no later than the conclusion of the overall study's data collection; **and** that participants will be explicitly informed, at that point, that they may withdraw their data<sup>3</sup>;

(d) that the study does not involve the possibility of participants suffering any degree of pain or substantial emotional distress.

## Further information

This policy document cannot cover every type of research context. Where there is any uncertainty, please contact the Research Governance Manager via [research.ethics@lse.ac.uk](mailto:research.ethics@lse.ac.uk). Please also refer to the School's [Research Ethics Policy and guidance](#).

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<sup>3</sup> This is in line with the advice given on deception by relevant professional bodies – see, e.g., the American Psychological Association's [Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct](#) (2016) Ethical Standard 8.07

# Appendix: Sample Information sheet and consent form

*This is a sample template - you must adapt this template to the requirements of your particular study.<sup>4</sup>*

## **[Title of research study]**

**Name of researcher:**

Department/Centre, LSE

## **Information for participants**

Thank you for considering participating in this study which will take place *[insert approximate dates]*. This information sheet outlines the purpose of the study and provides a description of your involvement and rights as a participant, if you agree to take part.

### **1. What is the research about?**

*[Set out the aim of this project/research, and also the methods to be used to collect information. Use language that will be understood by your intended participants. If applicable, state who the funder of the research is.]*

### **2. Do I have to take part?**

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. You do not have to take part if you do not want to. If you do decide to take part *[I/we]* will ask you to sign a consent form which you can sign and return in advance of the *[interview/focus group meeting]* or sign at the meeting.

### **3. What will my involvement be?**

*[Be clear about what participation will involve and how long this might take. E.g. ‘You will be asked to take part in an interview/focus group/survey about your experience/knowledge of... It should take approximately...’]*

### **4. How do I withdraw from the study?**

You can withdraw at any point of the study, without having to give a reason. If any questions during the *[interview/focus group]* make you feel uncomfortable, you do not have to answer them. Withdrawing from the study will have no effect on you. If you withdraw from the study we will not retain the information you have given thus far, unless you are happy for us to do so.

### **5. What will my information be used for?**

*[I/we]* will use the collected information for.... *[a research project, academic paper, future research, etc.]*

### **6. Will my taking part and my data be kept confidential? Will it be anonymised?**

The records from this study will be kept as confidential as possible. Only *[myself and my supervisor]* will have access to the files and any audio tapes. Your data will be anonymised – your name will not be used in any reports or publications resulting from the study.<sup>5</sup> All digital files, transcripts and summaries will be given codes and stored separately from any names or other direct identification of participants. Any hard copies of research information will be kept in locked files at all times.

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<sup>4</sup> A Word version of this template can be downloaded from: <https://info.lse.ac.uk/staff/divisions/research-and-innovation/research/Assets/Documents/Word/info-consent-LSEsample.docx>

<sup>5</sup> There are some circumstances in which you may – with their agreement – name your participants in your research; however, caution should be exercised, and you are advised to discuss this with either your supervisor or the REC via [research.ethics@lse.ac.uk](mailto:research.ethics@lse.ac.uk)

**Limits to confidentiality:** confidentiality will be maintained as far as it is possible, unless you tell us something which implies that you or someone you mention might be in significant danger of harm and unable to act for themselves; in this case, we may have to inform the relevant agencies of this, but we would discuss this with you first.

## **7. Data Protection Privacy Notice**

The LSE Research Privacy Policy can be found at: <https://info.lse.ac.uk/staff/divisions/Secretarys-Division/Assets/Documents/Information-Records-Management/Privacy-Notice-for-Research-v1.1.pdf>

The legal basis used to process your personal data will be *[Please select one of the following: Staff “Public Task”; Students “Legitimate interests”]*. The legal basis used to process special category personal data (e.g. data that reveals racial or ethnic origin, political opinions, religious or philosophical beliefs, trade union membership, health, sex life or sexual orientation, genetic or biometric data) will be for scientific and historical research or statistical purposes.

To request a copy of the data held about you please contact: [glpd.info.rights@lse.ac.uk](mailto:glpd.info.rights@lse.ac.uk)

## **8. What if I have a question or complaint?**

If you have any questions regarding this study please contact the researcher, [X], on [email address].

If you have any concerns or complaints regarding the conduct of this research, please contact the LSE Research Governance Manager via [research.ethics@lse.ac.uk](mailto:research.ethics@lse.ac.uk).

If you are happy to take part in this study, please sign the consent sheet attached.

**CONSENT FORM<sup>6</sup>****[Title of research study]****Name of researcher:****PARTICIPATION IN THIS RESEARCH STUDY IS VOLUNTARY**

I have read and understood the study information dated [DD/MM/YY], or it has been read to me. I have been able to ask questions about the study and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.	YES / NO
I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study and understand that I can refuse to answer questions and I can withdraw from the study at any time, without having to give a reason.	YES / NO
I agree to the [interview/focus group] being audio recorded <i>[delete if not being audio recorded]</i>	YES / NO
<i>Add additional statements for e.g. video recording, photographs, etc. if relevant</i>	YES / NO
I understand that the information I provide will be used for <i>[my dissertation, thesis, research publication, etc.]</i> and that the information will be anonymised.	YES / NO
<i>If you want to use quotes in research outputs, add:</i> I agree that my information can be quoted in research outputs.	YES / NO
<i>If you want to use named quotes, add:</i> I agree that my real name can be used for quotes.	YES / NO
<i>If written information is provided by the participant (e.g. diary), add:</i> I agree to joint copyright of the [specify the data] to [name of researcher].	YES / NO
I understand that any personal information that can identify me – such as my name, address, will be kept confidential and not shared with anyone <i>[other than myself / beyond the study team]</i> .	YES / NO
I give permission for the (anonymised) information I provide to be deposited in a data archive so that it may be used for future research. <i>[Note that for some funders it is a requirement to ask participants this]</i>	YES / NO

Please retain a copy of this consent form.

Participant name:

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewer name:

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

For information please contact: &lt;&lt;name and email address of researcher&gt;&gt;

<sup>6</sup> Based on UK Data Service model consent form April 2018. <http://data-archive.ac.uk/media/210661/ukdamodelconsent.doc>

## Review schedule

Review interval	Next review due by	Next review start
3 years	AY 2020-21	October 2020

## Version history

Version	Date	Approved by	Notes
2	1/11/2017	Research Committee	
2.1	25/6/2018	Lyn Grove	p.2: Insertion of 'and Data Protection Act 2018' and removal of 'coming into force May 2018'
2.2	26/09/2018	RC Chair's action	Further minor revisions to ensure compliance with DPA/GDPR 2018 plus Research Council requirements vis a vis archiving of data
2.3	09/04/19	RC, 27/03/19	Minor revisions, including addition of limits to confidentiality

## Links

Reference	Link
Research Ethics Policy and guidance	<a href="https://info.lse.ac.uk/staff/services/Policies-and-procedures/Assets/Documents/resEthPolPro.pdf">https://info.lse.ac.uk/staff/services/Policies-and-procedures/Assets/Documents/resEthPolPro.pdf</a>

## Contacts

Position	Name	Email	Notes
Research Governance Manager	Lyn Grove	<a href="mailto:l.grove@lse.ac.uk">l.grove@lse.ac.uk</a>	Co-author (with REC)

## Communications and Training

Will this document be publicised through Internal Communications?	<b>Yes</b>
Will training needs arise from this policy	<b>Yes/ No</b>
If Yes, please give details Staff/students should contact <a href="mailto:research.ethics@lse.ac.uk">research.ethics@lse.ac.uk</a> if they have any queries regarding training needs.	