

Policy for research requiring face-to-face contact with participants August 2020, v1.

Background

At the onset of lockdown, the University Incident Management Team, through the R&I sub-group advised all research involving data collection through face-to-face contact should be paused.

This guidance remains in place. There are some studies going on through the NHS which are Covid-related, but where they involve human participants, there will be NHS ethics and procedures in place.

As Government guidance starts to relax lockdown, researchers are starting to ask whether they can resume research which requires face-to-face contact. Acknowledging that some research is very difficult to carry out using remote methods, that remote methods may limit the communities which can be engaged or may lead to bias in the results, it seems like the right time to consider what guidance we might provide to academic and postgraduate researchers.

Principles

These principles are applicable for research conducted by University of Sheffield staff and PGRs.

1. That for the duration of the current pandemic, qualitative research that involves human participants should, in most cases, continue to be undertaken remotely. This reduces the likelihood of transmission for both researchers and participants. This has significant implications for the design of research studies, but there is an increasing body of literature to support this.
2. Where a researcher believes that there is a clear case for conducting their research in person with participants, they should first discuss this with their DRI (for staff) or supervisor (for PGRs). PGR supervisors should also discuss the PGR's project with their DRI if they believe there is a clear case for it to go ahead in person.
3. Where it is agreed that the research requires face-to-face contact with participants, the departmental ethics coordinator should be asked to assess an application. They will take the following considerations into account in assessing the risks involved:
 - Is there a clear reason for proceeding with the research and having face-to-face contact at this time and does it have a sound ethical basis
 - Does the proposed research put the participant or researcher at greater risk than they would otherwise face in their daily life (considering the most up to date restrictions in place)

- Will participants be asked to declare in writing that they do not have Covid symptoms or have not knowingly been in contact with anyone with symptoms in the last 14 days?
- Are any of the participants particularly vulnerable to Covid. For example, do they have an underlying condition which makes them particularly vulnerable?
<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/people-at-higher-risk/whos-at-higher-risk-from-coronavirus/> If this is the case, it raises serious questions as to whether the face-to-face contact should proceed at the present time.
- Is the researcher able to conduct the research according to the most up-to-date Government [rules](#) regarding social distancing and other measures? Is there anything about the location, setting, group size or other aspects which could be adjusted to reduce risk?
- Whether PPE, such as a face covering, is appropriate - for researchers and/or participants.
- Has the researcher considered the associated risks of participating in research at the current time for both researcher and participants, such as additional anxiety or emotional stress. Appropriate signposting to information and support systems and other mitigation should be in place.

For paused face-to-face research projects with existing ethical approval, these considerations should be undertaken via an amendment to the existing ethical approval. Such amendments will be reviewed by either the Lead Reviewer for the original application, or by the Principal Ethics Contact - or by both if the situation is particularly complex and two reviews of the proposed amendment are deemed necessary.