Frequently Asked Questions on the University of Sheffield's Research Ethics Policy

The document outlines some of the frequently asked questions about the University of Sheffield's Research Ethics Policy. This document has been endorsed by the University Research Ethics Committee but is not a substitute for the full University Research Ethics Policy. There is a url at the end of each paragraph which links to the relevant point in the full Policy for further information.

Why is ethical review needed? Ethical review aims to protect participants' welfare, dignity and rights. Researchers should reflect on the ethical issues that are raised by their research and be able to justify, in ethical terms, the practices and procedures that they intend to adopt during their research. See: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/rs/ethicsandintegrity/ethicspolicy/general-principles/homepage

Which projects need to be ethically reviewed? Any research activities which are undertaken by University staff or students, or individuals using University premises or facilities, involving human participants, personal data or human tissue, need to be ethically reviewed. See: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/rs/ethicsandintegrity/ethicspolicy/general-principles/homepage

Which activities are defined as research? The University defines research as all investigation undertaken in order to acquire knowledge and understanding. Service evaluation and audit do not require ethical review. See: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/rs/ethicsandintegrity/ethicspolicy/general-principles/homepage

How are projects ethically reviewed? How projects are ethically reviewed, and who reviews the projects depends upon the nature of the research. The lead researcher (e.g. PI or supervisor) is responsible for deciding if ethical review is needed and which review procedure is applicable. See: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/rs/ethicsandintegrity/ethicspolicy/approval-procedure/routes

How does the University of Sheffield ethics review procedure work? The University of Sheffield has a devolved ethics review procedure. Each academic department is responsible for carrying out the review of its research projects. To support this, each department has a Principal Ethics Contact, Ethics Administrator and a pool of ethics reviewers. There is a central University Research Ethics Committee (UREC) which has oversight of research ethics in the University. See: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/rs/ethicsandintegrity/ethicspolicy/approval-procedure/overview

How many people need to review projects under the University ethics review procedure? This depends upon the type of project:

- Staff and postgraduate research (PGR) projects must be reviewed by at least three people (a PGR student's supervisor may not be one of the reviewers). These projects are generally more intensive and hence require a greater number of reviewers.
- Undergraduate and postgraduate-taught projects can follow a 'low/high risk procedure'.
    - 'Low risk' projects must be reviewed by at least one person (who can be the student's supervisor).
    - Potentially-high risk' projects must be reviewed by at least two people (one of which can be the student's supervisor).
- Generic research ethics applications can be made by a course module leader where a number of undergraduate or postgraduate-taught students will be conducting research that is of a sufficiently similar nature to be reviewed together. These must be reviewed by at least three reviewers. Generic applications should be reviewed on an annual basis (if they are to be repeated) and renewed every five years.
- ESRC-funded research and social care research which does not require NRES REC review must be reviewed by at least two reviewers from the project's host department, one lay reviewer from the UREC plus others, as needed, on a case-by-case basis. This is to adhere to the requirements of the ESRC *Framework for Research Ethics*.

See: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/rs/ethicsandintegrity/ethicspolicy/approval-procedure/proceduralelements

What constitutes a 'potentially high risk' project for undergraduate and postgraduate-taught research? Research that is 'potentially high risk' will involve 'particularly vulnerable participants' (e.g. who may not be able to exercise informed consent – such as children who cannot exercise unfettered informed consent – such as the researchers' family members; or whose circumstances may unduly influence their decision to consent – such as people who are in poor health) and/or 'highly sensitive topics' (e.g. ethnicity, political opinion, religion, health conditions, sexuality, violence). Researchers should reflect on the risk-level presented rather than viewing it as a 'box-ticking exercise'. Ethical research is about being risk aware – preparing for and managing risk – not risk averse. See Section 3.1.4 of The University Procedure in practice: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/rs/ethicsandintegrity/ethicspolicy/approval-procedure/proceduralelements

Does research which is undertaken abroad require ethical review? Yes. The researcher should ascertain if there is a suitable ethics review procedure in the country where they plan to undertake their research. The UREC will judge if the procedure is sufficiently robust and if so, the project will not need to be reviewed via the University's procedure as well. If it isn't suitably robust, the University's procedure will apply – although overseas review may also be needed. See: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/rs/ethicsandintegrity/ethicspolicy/approval-procedure/alternative

Does research which is undertaken with another UK university require approval via the University of Sheffield procedure? If the research is led by another UK university then the ethics review procedure in place within the other UK university should apply, rather than the University of Sheffield's procedure. However, as with research conducted overseas, this is subject to the condition that the other UK university's ethics review procedure is sufficiently robust. See: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/rs/ethicsandintegrity/ethicspolicy/approval-procedure/alternative

What documents are needed for ethical review? A researcher should submit a completed online ethics application form and submit any supporting documentation – such as participant information sheets and consent forms, which should be GDPR compliant See: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/rs/ethicsandintegrity/ethicspolicy/educationresources/onlinesystem

What level of detail should be included in the ethics application form? The ethics application form should contain sufficient detail for someone who is not familiar with the project to be able to fully understand the proposed project. This is important firstly for the reviewers to be able to make an informed judgement on the project, and secondly, so that there is clear evidence of a project's details and corresponding ethics approval in case of any complaints. See: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/rs/ethicsandintegrity/ethicspolicy/further-guidance/universityprocedure2/uerprocedurec

How is the outcome of ethical review recorded? Ethics reviewers comment on applications and record their decision on the project via the online system. See: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/rs/ethicsandintegrity/ethicspolicy/approval-procedure/proceduralelements

How long should ethics documentation be kept? Ethics documentation should be kept for up to one year following the completion of undergraduate and postgraduate-taught student projects and for up to three years following the completion of staff and postgraduate research student projects. Documents can either be kept in hard copy or electronically. It may be required by the funder or journal editors that ethics documentation is kept for a longer period of time. See: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/rs/ethicsandintegrity/ethicspolicy/further-guidance/universityprocedure2/administratorsc2

Where can I find out more about the University's Research Ethics Policy? The University's full Research Ethics Policy is available at: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/rs/ethicsandintegrity/ethicspolicy/index