

FST REC Guide for Projects During Pandemic

Guidance on ethical issues to consider when conducting/re-designing research projects during the pandemic

This document has been prepared to offer guidance for applicants and reviewers.

Some points to keep in mind are as follows:

- **Research in healthcare or social care settings.** Some applicants' research may involve interviewing people who are now considered "key workers" on the frontline of the COVID-19 crisis. It is important to consider if participation in such research, even when it is remote, might divert those workers' time, attention and cognitive resources from the coronavirus response work at hand. FST REC operates independently of the NHS' ethics review system, but we should nonetheless be guided by the [NHS Health Research Authority](#) which says that in proposed amendments to existing studies "[s]ponsors must not make any such changes that would create additional burden to NHS staff or resources." Similarly it is important to consider these issues for new applications focused in healthcare/social care settings.
- **Research in other public sector and frontline settings.** Other parts of the public and private sectors providing and supporting key frontline services are under increased pressure at this time. Examples range from criminal justice personnel, civil servants, and infrastructure workers, to supermarket employees, delivery drivers, and those providing support services to other frontline industries and service providers. Many of these are facing increased demand to be delivered under highly restrictive conditions with workforces depleted by sickness. Researchers should consider the impact their research may have under these circumstances and seek to minimise or avoid adding to the burden of workers or disrupting the delivery of services in such settings.
- **Research and the digital divide.** When designing new research with remote data collection or if you are proposing to switch from face-to-face to remote data collection, please consider issues of the [digital divide](#), that is the technology, skill and infrastructure needed for participants effectively to engage with the researcher's project. What are the means whereby the researcher proposes to contact participants? Will going online have financial implications for participants? For example, will they have to use their own mobile data plans or pay as you go plans? How much thought has the applicant given to this, what measures are put in place to avoid disadvantaging participants? Will engaging in remote data collection place undue pressure and strain on participants, for example those who are also looking after children or elderly people?
- **Sensitive topics.** A change to the research protocol from face-to-face interviews might alter the level of risk to the participant if the researcher intends to ask questions on a sensitive topic. Conducting research remotely might remove the safeguard of the researcher being able to detect distress and the mitigation of referring to an appropriately trained person. It will also be important to ensure the appropriateness of conducting research remotely with participants who are likely to be at home (during self isolation, government measures to stay at home) both in relation to the content and to the process. For example will participants need to have privacy and be able to access privacy when engaging in this research? Will

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conducting research with participants in their own home place them at risk, for example they may not want to disclose their participation to other family members?

- **Privacy and data protection.** Researchers should consider the privacy and security implications of conducting and (especially) recording interviews conducted remotely via the Internet/social media instead of face-to-face. The university recommends Teams, but this may not always be possible or preferable for research participants. Check the privacy statements and reputations of software and service providers. Discuss any risks and precautions being taken with participants (and in PIS) to ensure informed consent.

To note, if you already have ethical approval for your project before implementing any changes you will need to submit an amendment to FST REC. Take the approved final version of the application and highlight in **yellow** any changes you make. Then send the amended application it to the Research Ethics Officer.

Guidance on research conducted during the pandemic needs to be followed, which is accessible [here](#) .