

Framework for research ethics

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Introduction

The Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse expects research that it supports to be conducted to high ethical standards; whether the research is conducted by partners within the Centre, commissioned or funded via phase 1 Evaluation Fund: ‘Supporting services to build their evaluation capacity: evaluation grants for the child sexual abuse and exploitation sector’. The Framework for Research Ethics (FRE) establishes our commitment to ethical standards in what is a highly sensitive area of research.

This document establishes the key principles and minimum standards required and sets out what we regard as good practice when researching child sexual abuse. It is mandatory for all of the research and evaluation studies that we support to have regard for the principles and minimum standards set out in the FRE.

The Centre’s ethical principles are based on those developed within the [ESRC Framework for Research Ethics](#) but tailored to the specific challenges facing researchers within the area of child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation. It also draws on ethical guidance from the following associations: [Social Research Association](#); [British Sociological Association](#), [British Psychological Society](#) and [UK Evaluation Society](#).

The ethical framework is designed to inform the design and implementation of research, ensuring that the needs and safety of children and young people are paramount. It is understood that researchers may be faced with difficult, changing and unclear situations that can bring new and unexpected ethical dilemmas. The framework, along with the more detailed guidance in existing frameworks just cited, forms the basis for consideration of dilemmas and will be viewed as an integral part of research and evaluation supervision, on-going learning and review.

What does research mean for us?

The Centre undertakes commissions and funds the following main research types:

Research

Research provided, commissioned or funded by the Centre is defined as the systematic investigation into issues that impact children and young people at risk of and affected by child sexual abuse. Research attempts to generate new knowledge and should promote positive impacts for children and young people. Research may cover a broad range of methods, including direct empirical data collection, desk-based scholarship including research reviews, and secondary analysis of research findings, depending on the research questions asked.

Service evaluation

Service evaluations aim to judge the effectiveness of a service through systematic assessment of its aims, objectives, activities, outcomes, and sometimes wider impact or costs. They are ‘designed and conducted solely to define or judge current care’ (Health Research Authority 2016). The purpose of service evaluations is to understand better the mechanisms through which the service is effective and ask questions like: “What have been the results for children and young people of using this service?” They usually involve collection and analysis of data gathered as part of the work of the service and may include use of interviews or questionnaires to assess service success.

For more information on research types, please refer to the Health Research Authority’s (HRA) document [Defining Research](#).

Ethical principles and expectations for ethical research

There are six key principles of ethical research that we expect to be addressed:

- Research and evaluation should be purposeful and designed to improve understanding and awareness of the scale and nature of child sexual abuse and support development of effective service responses for children and young people at risk of or affected by child sexual abuse.
- Researchers should ensure that the benefits of the research or evaluation should outweigh any risk of harm to participants or research staff. Risk may include both psychological and physical harm, including the risk of exposure to further violence and abuse. All potential risk should be mitigated by robust transparent and up-to-date safeguarding procedures and practice, including vetting of staff.
- Consent should be informed and research participants should take part voluntarily, free from any coercion or undue influence. Research staff and participants should be given appropriate information about the purpose, methods and intended uses of the research; what their participation involves; and what risks and benefits are involved. This is particularly important where participants are at risk of or affected by child sexual abuse or where the perspectives of individuals who have sexually exploited children are being sought.
- Anonymity should be protected and participants made aware that the confidential nature of information and personal data will be respected. However, participants should be made aware of the boundaries to confidentiality in line with safeguarding policies and procedures, including what will happen in the event of a disclosure of abuse.
- Research should be designed, undertaken and reviewed to ensure recognised standards of research integrity are in place and quality and transparency are assured. This includes the competency of the research team and any changes made to staffing or approach during the research.
- The independence of the research should be clear and any conflicts of interest or partiality should be explicit.

Trauma-informed approach

The Centre's ethical principles are founded on a trauma-informed approach to child sexual abuse. This requires a sound understanding of the prevalence and nature of trauma arising from sexual violence and its impacts on other areas of people's lives (Quadara and Hunter 2016). Since the early 2000s, there has been growing pressure on public services to develop a better understanding and organisational response to trauma – that is, to become trauma-informed (Harris and Fallott, 2001a, 2001b). In research terms, a *trauma-informed* approach requires researchers to recognise, reduce and respond to the potential to re-traumatise participants.

In practice, this means researchers must be alert to any potentially re-traumatising aspects of the research process, reviewing the purpose of their research, and its design and implementation to both recognise the pervading impact of trauma and avoid unnecessarily intrusive research that may serve to reinforce rather than support recovery from trauma. This approach applies especially to research with victim-survivors: attention should be paid to differentiating their needs by age, gender, ethnicity, disability and sexual orientation, and appropriate supports put in place to manage any potential distress. Where research involves individuals who have sexually exploited children, sensitivity to rehabilitation is required and steps should be taken to avoid contributing towards any potential for relapse.

Regarding research with general populations, such as in schools, careful thought should be given to how best to mitigate any potential to re-traumatise known and unknown victim-survivors. This also applies to the possibility of encountering concerning or sexually harmful behaviour by children and young people, many of whom may have their own support needs and vulnerabilities (Hackett 2004).

For more information on trauma-informed approaches, please read the discussion paper produced by the Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, [Trauma-informed approaches to child sexual abuse](#).

How will the Centre ensure compliance with the Framework for Research Ethics?

- The Centre will only commission or fund organisations and partners that can demonstrate they have clear processes in place to meet the principles and minimum requirements as set out in the Framework for Research Ethics.
- Actual and potential ethical issues should be identified in the research proposal. While there is no expectation that an ethics review has been submitted prior to proposal, researchers are expected to have considered the ethical implications of their research and provide details of steps taken to address any potential issues.
- The Centre will review all proposals and consider whether ethical issues have been adequately anticipated, surfaced and addressed. If reviewers disagree with the proposed approach, this will be discussed with researchers, and where appropriate, a conditional offer made subject to further amendments. If reviewers question researcher competence to address ethical issues, this will be grounds to reject a proposal.
- All research commissioned by the Centre involving vulnerable people and personal data will be subject to ethical scrutiny by the Centre's Research Ethics Committee (REC). Service evaluation will generally not be subject to ethics review, unless new methods of data collection involving people or personal data are proposed. Approval by the Centre's REC must be in place prior to commencement of research. If the REC requires major changes that will substantially alter the research, approval of funds can be suspended. However, given that proposals have already been reviewed, this is likely to be a rare occurrence.
- Breach of compliance with the Centre's FRE will be treated seriously. Where breaches occur, this will be discussed with researchers and if necessary, actions taken. If the breach is deemed serious enough, for example, where children or young people have been put at risk by the conduct of the research, this will result in termination of the research project and funding withdrawn.

Minimum requirements

Ethical issues should be identified in the research proposal

Our principles provide the basis for ethics review. While the Centre does not require that ethics review has been completed prior to the submission of a research proposal, our principles should explicitly inform the development of research and evaluation proposals. Drawing on a trauma-informed approach outlined above, this should include a considered review of all possible ethical issues that might arise during the research project and what measures are proposed to manage them.

Examples of ethical issues to consider and address:

- Is there a potential for participants to be re-traumatised or exposed to other harm by taking part in the research? How can a trauma-informed approach support development of the research process to recognise, reduce and respond to potential distress of participants?
- Will participants will be recompensed for participation in research? If participants have been sexually exploited and financial incentives used to entrap young people, what ethical issues might arise by paying young people to participate?
- What ethical dilemmas arise when researching the experiences of children and young people with concerning or harmful sexual behaviours? Do young people know that they have been identified as having or potentially displaying such behaviours or is this considered by professionals working with them as too risky? What does this mean for voluntary and informed consent?
- What safeguarding procedures will be put in place? Are these written down and agreed within the research team? If a person reveals offences that have not been previously reported and or names an individual who is at risk of harm, what steps will be taken to manage such disclosures?

The Centre's approach to ethics review: Research Ethics Committee

The Centre has its own REC. The REC aims to evidence good governance by the Centre and demonstrates that we are taking our own responsibility for ethical standards in what is a very sensitive area. The Centre has specialist expertise in CSA and hence is best placed to assess ethical issues and responses identified. We also view this as an opportunity to model good practice in service user involvement and draw on the knowledge of experts-by-experience who may identify new ethical dilemmas not considered by professional reviewers. The REC will provide research leadership and learning for the sector and will create a knowledge bank of the ethical dilemmas important to this area that can be disseminated to the wider sector.

It is the responsibility of research and evaluation teams to identify what issues might arise. Researchers will be guided by their own professional societies, disciplines and organisations. The Centre makes a distinction between research and service evaluation; service evaluations are not generally subject to ethics review where data is being collected on a routine basis for monitoring and evaluation purposes. However, all research, including service evaluations involving collection of new data involving vulnerable people and personal data, will be subject to ethical scrutiny via the Centre's REC.

The following types of research will be subject to review:

- Vulnerable people, including all children and young people, those at risk of or experiencing CSA, and individuals who have sexually abused children
- People who lack capacity to make decisions or come to lack capacity during the research process as defined under the Mental Capacity Act 2005
- Administrative or controlled data, including medical, local authority or data held by Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS)
- Justified deception or research conducted with participants' valid and informed consent at the time of the study. It is understood that covert research, such as participative observation of night-time economy workforce, is sometimes necessary and justifiable and consent may be managed at the completion of fieldwork
- Risk to the safety of the researcher, specifically where there is the potential for psychological or physical harm
- Participatory research that includes members of the public, such as young people employed in the capacity of peer researchers
- International research or research undertaken outside the UK where there may be different laws, local practice and political sensitivities about researching child sexual abuse
- Social media research and participants recruited or identified through the internet, such as following up participants who have previously received services as victim-survivors or where individuals have sexually abused young people
- Linking or sharing personal data beyond initial consent given, specifically where there is a risk of information being disclosed that would require researchers to breach confidentiality of participants.

The following research is not subject to ethics review by the Centre REC:

- Evidence reviews, including literature reviews, rapid and systematic reviews
- Service evaluation where data are routinely collected for monitoring and evaluation purposes by service organisations and where accessing or sharing this data for research purposes does not contravene data protection regulations. Service evaluations that propose *new methods of data collection* involving any of the people or approaches outlined above are subject to ethics review by the Centre.

Additional Research Ethics Committees

The Centre's REC should be considered the principal REC for the Centre's research. It is understood that Centre-funded research may be subject to additional research ethics approval processes, such as via Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), NHS RECs, local authority governance committee and HMPPS. This may result in multiple and conflicting requests to amend aspects of the research process. In the event of such a dilemma, researchers should contact the Centre REC to discuss recommendations and agree how to manage conflicting feedback appropriately

How the Centre's REC will work

- All research, including service evaluations involving collection of new data involving vulnerable people and personal data, will be subject to ethical scrutiny
- The REC has an independent Chair and members have subject expertise, including experts-by-experience who review consent forms and information sheets for acceptability and accessibility
- The REC meets virtually and ethics applications should be submitted within 1 month of the commission starting
- REC manager will validate applications within 5 working days to ensure all documentation has been submitted; where documentation is incomplete, applicants will be asked to resubmit with full documentation
- If all documentation is complete, REC members will review proposals and make comments within 2 weeks
- Researchers have 2 weeks to respond to comments
- REC members will respond within 1 week of comments
- It is not necessary to wait for ethical approval before contacting research sites but data collection cannot begin until Centre REC approval has been granted
- Additional REC approval may be required via HEIs RECs, NHS RECs or HMPPS

Safeguarding in the research context

The safety and well-being of children and young people are paramount. The Centre has clear standards and expectations for dealing with and reporting safeguarding issues. It is the responsibility of the research supervisor to ensure that up-to-date safeguarding procedures are in place and that all team members are supported to act with sensitivity and act immediately if a child discloses significant harm. This also applies where individuals who have sexually abused children identify further previously undisclosed incidences of abuse against children and young people. Researchers also need to be aware of their safeguarding responsibilities to vulnerable adults and have clear processes and systems in place if harm is suspected. This is important in the context of the Mental Capacity Act 2005.

It is expected that researchers working with vulnerable people will need to secure [Disclosure and Barring Service \(DBS\) clearance](#).

Developing a culture of safeguarding is at the heart of protecting children and vulnerable adults. This involves research supervisors cultivating a safe space for researchers to discuss risk, worries and concerns. This also involves recognising different levels of expertise within the team. For example, it may be apposite to encourage research staff without a background in safeguarding to participate in training. The NSPCC provide an [introductory course on child protection](#). This course is completed online and aims to provide people working with children and young people a clear understanding of how to recognise, report and record concerns about a child's welfare. The Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) have produced an e-Learning course that introduces participants to the principles and practice of [adult safeguarding](#). This defines adult safeguarding, abuse and peoples' responsibilities.

For useful guidance on how to develop safeguarding protocols within the research and evaluation context, please refer to the [NSPCC's Disclosure guide](#). While the guide is specific to children's safeguarding, the principles and processes are applicable to both children and vulnerable adults.

Researcher trauma and safety

Researching the experiences of victim-survivors and perpetrators of sexual violence can be emotionally challenging. It can also be physically risky, given the nature of field research contexts. Less recognised are effects of being indirect witness of trauma and abuse that can result in secondary traumatic stress, sometimes referred to as [vicarious trauma](#). This refers to the cumulative impact of researching this area.

Research organisations supporting sexual violence research have a duty of care toward their staff and should have appropriate protocols to protect researcher safety and wellbeing. In practice, it is the responsibility of research supervisors to discuss protocols together as team, provide regular supervisory sessions to staff and in some incidences, arrange for formal counselling as part of the research process. However, all team members should critically self-reflect on their own vulnerabilities and ensure risks to physical or psychological safety are minimised and managed.

For more information, the Sexual Violence Research Initiative have developed a useful briefing paper on [Researcher trauma, safety and sexual violence research](#).

Data protection and storage requirements

- **Data storage** – Research supervisors should ensure that there are appropriate practical arrangements in place to maintain the integrity and security of research data. At a basic level, this might involve ensuring that there is a locked filing cabinet to store for example, completed consent forms or providing staff with computer equipment that has data encryption software loaded to protect security of data stored digitally.
- **Data transfer** – Research supervisors should also be aware of the limits of the original consent given by participants. Transferring personal data to others in which the original participants are identifiable may violate privacy and the original consent given.
- **UK Data Protection Act 1998 (DPA)** – Researchers should be aware that the processing of any information relating to an identifiable living individual constitutes ‘personal data processing’ and is subject to the provisions of the [Data Protection Act 1998 \(DPA\)](#). It is the responsibility of the research supervisor to ensure that personal data processing is in line with the DPA.

For further guidance, please refer to the Information Commissioner’s Office [Guide to data protection](#) and new European Union guidance [General Data Protection Regulation](#) which applies to the UK from 25 May 2018.

Complaints

Research organisations and service providers should publish procedures and have clear mechanisms in place for receiving and addressing, in a timely manner, complaints or expressions of concern about the conduct of research carried out under their auspices. Such mechanisms might include providing research participants with the contact details of a responsible officer within the research or service provider who is independent of specific research projects and is empowered to investigate appropriate investigation of any complaints in a timely manner.

Ongoing review

As the research progresses, further ethical issues may arise. Researchers should establish internal governance procedures to review research ethics on an on-going basis, ensuring that research remains trauma-informed and guided by the Centre's research principles. If the researcher assessed that children or young people have been put at risk by the conduct of the research, they must discuss this immediately with the Centre's REC. Failure to raise and address may result in sanctions, including the termination of the research project and withdrawal of funding.

Impact of publication and dissemination activities

Careful thought to be given to any risk to participants, researchers and others of publication and dissemination activities. The impact of published findings on the health, well-being and recovery of victim-survivors should also be considered.

References

Quadara, A. and Hunter, C. (2016) *Principles of trauma-informed approaches to child sexual abuse: A discussion paper*. Sydney: Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse

Harris, M. and Fallot, R. (2001a) *Using trauma theory to design service systems*. London: Wiley.

Harris, M. and Fallot, R. (2001b) *Designing trauma-informed addictions services*. *New Directions for Mental Health Services*, 2001(89), 57–73.

Health Research Authority (2016) *Defining research*. London: Health Research Authority

Hackett, S. (2004) *What works for children and young people with harmful sexual behaviours? Barkingside: Barnardo's*

List of useful organisations and websites

[Research Ethics Handbook: A guide for social scientists](#)

[UK Evaluation Society](#)

[Evaluation Support Scotland](#)

[Health Research Authority](#)

[Research at HMPPS](#)

[Research Councils UK](#)

[Sexual Violence Research Initiative](#)

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