

COVID-19

The Department's procedures, and the ethics and risk forms, have been amended in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Please read this guidance, and the accompanying forms, all the way through before starting your application.

Because risks have to be assessed for every locality in which you propose to do fieldwork, you are strongly advised to limit fieldwork to a single locality wherever possible.

In 2020-21, **undergraduate students** will not be permitted to conduct face-to-face or proximate research with human subjects

For **MPhil students**, it is also unlikely that face-to-face or proximate research contact with human subjects will be approved; please consult the latest departmental guidelines on this.

Guidance on completing the Ethical Approval and Risk Assessment Form (projects involving human subjects)

This document provides guidance to staff and students who are filling in the Department's Ethical Approval and Risk Assessment form. Please read the guidance to each section as you are filling in the form.

About the Sociology Ethics and Risk Assessment for Research Committee (SERAR)

The remit of SERAR is to ensure that research conducted by members of the Department conforms with the ethical standards of the relevant professional bodies and of the academic profession as a whole; and that it complies with the Department's legal responsibilities, especially those relating to the safety and wellbeing of staff, students and research participants.

Assessment procedures

New assessment procedures have been put in place as a response to COVID-19.

Until further notice, the Committee will grant approval for projects in two stages.

In a first stage, the Committee will grant **conditional approval** to applications which meet ethical standards for social science research, and which would be considered safe for the researcher and participants, in a context where the risk from COVID-19 was negligible.

In a second stage, the Committee will give **permission to proceed** for projects which it deems safe for the specific dates and location of the proposed fieldwork. In order to gain permission to proceed:

- Travel and social contact must be permitted in the proposed location by (a) the University; (b) the UK government; and (c) the government in the fieldwork location.
- The applicant must be able to obtain comprehensive travel insurance including cover for healthcare in the event of contracting COVID-19.
- The proposal must include satisfactory strategies for the identification and mitigation of risk.

Permission to proceed, once given, may be rescinded at any time, before or after the project has started, in response to rulings by governments or the University, or local factors. If permission is rescinded once fieldwork has started, the researcher must stop all fieldwork activities, and may be asked to remain in a safe location or to return home.

Some applications (eg those which do not involve travel or face-to-face contact) may be given both conditional approval and permission to proceed at the same time. Proposals for work in locations which are not currently safe will be given conditional approval in a first round, and should be returned to the Committee at a later stage for permission to proceed.

Proposals do not need to be zero risk in order to be given permission to proceed. But the Committee must be satisfied that the risks have been thoughtfully assessed and are not unacceptably high.

Where the Committee feels that issues of risk or ethics have not been satisfactorily addressed, it may return your form to you, asking for clarification. Where an application raises more serious issues, the project will be passed to the University Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee for full review. Applications involving contact with vulnerable individuals will *always* be subject to full review. Full review can take time, so if you are planning research that involves vulnerable groups or sensitive topics, please submit your application well in advance of starting your research.

Undergraduates and MPhil students are strongly advised to avoid proposing research which may need full ethical review, because you may run out of time to do your fieldwork before approval can be granted.

Professional Guidance on Research Ethics

The following bodies issue guidelines on research ethics which will be useful when completing your application form; please familiarise yourself with them. The ESRC guidelines are particularly useful, as they contain illustrative examples.

[Economic & Social Research Council \(ESRC\)](#)

[British Sociological Association \(BSA\)](#)

[The Social Research Association \(SRA\)](#)

[University of Cambridge School of Humanities and Social Sciences](#)

[NHS \(National Health Service\)](#)

The remainder of this guidance document gives you step-by-step assistance to completing your ethical approval and risk assessment form.

Section 1. Contacts, and the Checking-in Procedure

You are asked to give details of three significant contacts so that, in the unlikely event that we become concerned for your safety, we are able to make contact as quickly as possible with people who may be able to help.

You do not have to provide contact details; if you elect not to, please write “DECLINED” in the relevant boxes, to indicate that you have actively declined.

Please remember to update these details as necessary – you can do this by emailing Paulina Baltsovou in the Sociology Department (pb815@cam.ac.uk).

The **contact in your fieldwork location** should ideally be someone who will be in regular contact with you in that location, and who is also familiar with the local language.

Please nominate your **check-in contact (CIC)** in accordance with the following guidance.

The **Department’s checking-in procedure** consists of the following stages.

- Before starting fieldwork, select a named individual as your check-in contact (CIC).
- Ensure that the Department and your CIC have each other’s phone number and email addresses. Give your CIC the following contact details:
 - +44 (0)1223 767444 This is the University’s 24-hour emergency contact number. If your CIC is worried about your safety, this is the number they should call.
 - enquiries@sociology.cam.ac.uk
 - pb815@cam.ac.uk
 - +44 (0)1223 334520 (the Department’s telephone number – please do NOT leave a message on this number, as it may not be picked up for some time).
- Ask your CIC to contact the University if you fail to check in with them at an appointed time, and they cannot reach you to check you are safe.
- Each time you leave for an interview or appointment, tell your CIC where you are going, who you will be meeting, and when you expect to finish.
- When the interview or appointment is safely over, let your CIC know that you are safe.

Section 2. Project Details

In light of the COVID-19 outbreak, dates may be provisional if you are seeking conditional approval. Please be aware that the SERAR Committee will not give permission to proceed more than 6 weeks before the date of travel.

We do not need to see a lot of theoretical background in this section. Please use this section to tell us about your research questions, and how your fieldwork will fit into this.

Before completing this section, please read ahead to the questions in Section 3, to avoid duplication.

Section 3. Your Participants

Part of good research ethics is ensuring that participants are not excessively burdened by a research project, and have a comfortable experience of taking part. This means that all the letters, forms, interviews, etc relating to the project should be tailored to participants' needs and abilities. If you plan to interview people who are expert in a field it may be appropriate to include technical detail in your approach and your questions; for other people you should try to avoid technical language, and phrase your materials in a way they will understand. If in doubt, pilot your materials on a friend or family member who does not have a background in sociology. If you plan to interview people with limited literacy, please take particular care to use simple language and expression. We will return your forms for amendment if they do not meet these standards.

You may like to include a link to the University's guide to the use of personal information, in your initial approach to participants.

<https://www.information-compliance.admin.cam.ac.uk/data-protection/research-participant-data>

The best way of establishing how long an interview or questionnaire will take (question 3d) is to pilot it on a small number of people. A pilot is also a good idea in order to ensure that your participants understand your questions in the way you expect. Please be aware that your University colleagues are unlikely to be ideal subjects for these pilots. Firstly, some of the questions may not apply to them, meaning they will skip much of the content and finish in a short time; secondly, their interpretation of the questions will tend to be similar to your own interpretation rather than that of your respondents.

Section 4. Informed Consent

The application form defines vulnerable individuals as children under 18 and people who cannot give informed consent owing to cognitive or psychological disabilities. A more extensive list of people who may be considered vulnerable, or situations in which people may be vulnerable, is [provided by the ESRC](#).

If your contact with vulnerable individuals will be only incidental (option B) this should not delay approval, provided you should state clearly in your safeguarding statement that you will not spend time alone with vulnerable individuals.

You are welcome to use the Department's template for the informed consent form; however, you **MUST** adapt it for your own project. Please ensure that the language is appropriate to your participants (see Section 3 of this guidance). There is also guidance on the University's [Data Protection and Ethics](#) web pages.

Traditionally, participants give consent by signing a paper form. However, for online interviews it may be more appropriate to email a form for your participants to return, or to create a Google form. Please indicate how you will collect consent in your application form.

If you will be dealing with organisations, please be clear about how you propose to obtain approval from a representative of the organisation.

Section 5. Anonymity, Accuracy and Data Security

This section relates to data obtained from human participants. For data obtained from other sources, please see Section 8.

Section 5a. Providing anonymity to your participants is not compulsory – if you will be interviewing public figures, it may be more appropriate to interview them “on the record”. However, it is usual when using data on private citizens to give an undertaking of anonymity.

Section 5b. You need to consider all stages of the research. Please remember that simply omitting people’s names from written research does not necessarily mean that individuals cannot be identified. This is particularly likely with people in unusual situations, or in prominent positions.

Section 5c. It is generally good practice to give people who are interviewed “on the record” the chance to read the remarks attributed to them before they are published, and to confirm that they have been accurately represented. This said, there is no *obligation* to do this, unless you have given a previous undertaking to your respondent that you will do so; and you are also under no obligation to publish your respondent’s account if it disagrees with your own.

Section 5d. Again, there is no requirement that you will share your results with participants, but many researchers like to “close the circle” by doing this. An edited summary may be much more suitable than sharing the entire PhD.

Section 5e. This is extremely important, and there are many considerations. Is your laptop encrypted? Is your memory stick encrypted? Will you be storing your data on any other devices, or on a cloud drive? Will your data be stored in an encrypted file? What will you do with audio recordings? Are your devices automatically backed up? Where are backups stored? See this [information on storage](#).

Section 5f. There is no “correct” answer to this question, but it is useful to plan ahead to the end of your project, and to ensure that your plans are compliant with the General Data Protection Regulations ([GDPR](#)) legislation.

Further guidance on data management: [Research Data Management | \(cam.ac.uk\)](#)

Section 6. Health and Safety in the Field

Please use this section to describe ALL potential risks EXCEPT for any relating to COVID-19. Risks relating to COVID-19 are dealt with in Section 9.

The Department and the University take very seriously their obligation to ensure the safety, as far as possible, of students and staff on fieldwork. We do not expect your research to be entirely risk-free, but we do expect that researchers will consider carefully how to keep themselves safe.

Please read the guidance of the [Social Research Association](#) on researcher safety and watch the [training video](#) on assessing risk provided by the University. For further guidance on safe travelling see the University's website [Safeguarding Work Away](#).

Section 6c. Under normal circumstances, there are only a few locations so dangerous that we would rule out a project being undertaken there; but we do need to know that you are aware of any risks involved in travel to that location, and will take sensible steps to mitigate them.

Examples of mitigation strategies could include arranging interviews in public places; arranging to be accompanied by a local guide or working in pairs; the check-in procedure outlined on Page 2 of this document; or modifications to that procedure in response to particular risks. In some cases, restrictions due to COVID-19 may mean that some mitigation strategies are no longer feasible; please give details if this applies to you.

Section 6d. Experience living or working in an area, a knowledge of the local language, or having a network of local contacts, would be taken into account as enhancing personal safety.

Section 6e. Comprehensive travel insurance is a precondition for obtaining fieldwork funding for PhD students; we would also expect other staff and students to obtain suitable insurance. The [University of Cambridge travel insurance scheme](#) is available to University staff and graduate students travelling for fieldwork.

Section 7. Risk Assessment

Please **DO NOT** include risks attributable to COVID-19 in this section – those risks are dealt with in Section 9.

The following definitions apply in this section:

HAZARD – a possible outcome or event which carries the potential for harm. Examples: being trampled by a horse, or experiencing emotional trauma.

LIKELIHOOD - the probability that the hazard will actually occur. Please score as follows:

Score	Likelihood	Chance that the outcome will occur
1	Highly unlikely	Under 0.1%
2	Unlikely	0.1% – 5%
3	Moderately likely	5% – 25%
4	Likely	25% – 75%
5	Highly likely	75% – 100%

SEVERITY – the amount of harm that would be done if the hazard actually occurred

Score	Amount of harm	Examples
1	Very small	Wasted time or effort; boredom; mental fatigue; minor embarrassment or frustration; minor property damage; minor or moderate physical discomfort; minor invasion of privacy; the anticipation of any of these.
2	Small	Minor physical pain; moderate psychological distress (embarrassment, shame, etc.); minor reputational damage; the anticipation of any of these; offence; moderate property damage; moderate invasion of privacy; increased exposure to everyday risks (traffic, air pollution, etc.)
3	Moderate	Moderate physical pain (actual or anticipated); recalling of traumatic events, moderate to high intensity stress or anxiety, etc.
4	High	Severe physical or psychological pain or damage, etc.
5	Very high	Substantial destruction, serious injury, medium to long-term disability, death.

RISK RATING = LIKELIHOOD x SEVERITY

OVERALL RISK RATING = the highest risk rating of all the hazards you have described

Projects with an overall risk rating of 6 or under are deemed as low risk; those with higher overall risk ratings are classified as medium risk (8-10) or high-risk (12 or over), and are likely to be referred to the University ethics committee.

If any of the following apply to your project, you are expected to cover the issue in the risk assessment:

- Working with vulnerable individuals, such as those suffering from a physical or mental illness or those who have suffered a recent trauma.
- Asking questions concerning intimate details about their own personal lives or those of people close to them – for example about bereavement, sexual behaviour, family troubles, violence, alcoholism, or drugs.
- Requesting sensitive information which is likely to cause an emotional reaction or that requires particular measures to protect the confidentiality of your participants

Section 8. Data Security and Anonymity

This section relates to data obtained from secondary sources, archives, or publicly available data.

Data security is an increasingly important consideration, and failure to comply with General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) or any conditions set down by custodians of secondary data, could damage the reputation of the Department and your own reputation as a researcher; it could also jeopardize your ability to obtain access to secondary data in the future.

If you are using secondary data, the majority of the ethical issues and anonymisation will have been done by the data collection agency; however, you should still ensure that you are familiar with the University's policy on the use of personal data.

<https://www.research-integrity.admin.cam.ac.uk/academic-research-involving-personal-data>

If you will be using only publicly available data, please complete only section 3a (and section 3c, if it applies).

If you will be using data for which you have to make an application, please complete section 3b (and section 3c, if it applies).

We strongly advise you to keep any documents relating to data access, and any undertakings that you have signed, for future reference.

There is guidance on data protection and research ethics as well as managing your data securely available on the University's Research Data Management site: [Data Protection and Ethics | Research Data Management \(cam.ac.uk\)](#)

Section 9. Managing the risks of COVID-19

This is the section which will assess COVID-19 risks. If this applies to you, please give as much information as possible in order to help the SERAR Committee reach a decision.

Please be reminded that the situation in some areas is evolving quickly. The Committee will therefore not give permission to proceed more than 6 weeks before you are due to travel.

If you are seeking only provisional approval, you may decide to leave this section blank, to be filled in later when applying for permission to proceed.

Section 10. Checklist

Processing is easier if the attachments are pasted at the end of the application document (as screenshots, if necessary). If this is not possible, please submit them separately.

Consent form for participants in research projects

[TEMPLATE - PLEASE AMEND TO REFLECT YOUR PROJECT]

Title of Project:

Researcher:

About the Project:

The University's regulations on the secure storage and use of participants' data may be found at <https://www.information-compliance.admin.cam.ac.uk/data-protection/research-participant-data>

1. I confirm that I have understood the purpose of the project and my participation in it, and I have had the opportunity to ask questions.
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason.
3. I understand that my responses will be anonymised and used only for academic research.
4. I understand that my interview may be recorded.
5. I agree to take part in the above project.

Signatures

Participant: Name _____

Signed _____ Date _____

Researcher: Name _____

Signed _____ Date _____