Research Ethics for Interviews and Focus Groups

This *Guide* should be used alongside the general Ethical Considerations *Guide* and Interviews and Focus Groups method *Guides*. It covers ethical issues specifically relating to carrying out interviews and focus groups and includes tips on participant consent and confidentiality, disclosures and safeguarding and additional considerations for vulnerable participants.
Research Ethics for Interviews and Focus Groups

This Guide should be read alongside the following Guides when planning research and evaluations:

- Ethical Considerations
- Interviews
- Focus Groups

All of the ethical considerations discussed in the general Guide apply here, but it is important to also consider the following key points in relation to carrying out interviews and focus groups in particular:

- **Key point 1** — Information for interviewees/participants about how their data will be used
- **Key point 2** — Interviewee/participant consent
- **Key point 3** — Safeguarding and having appropriate disclosure messages
- **Key point 4** — Additional considerations for conducting research with children, young people and/or vulnerable adults, including those with a disability, learning difficulty or special educational needs.

**Key point 1 — Information for participants**

This will form part of the recruitment process. You should provide a one- or half-page flyer to tell prospective participants about the research. As well as giving them some background information about the project, it should explain how the data will be used and whether the information will be kept confidential. This is the first step to asking for informed consent. The information sheet should be given to participants in advance of the interview (e.g. include it with letters/emails confirming interview arrangements) and should also be given in hard copy on the day of the interview. The flyer should have the following information:

- Title of the research/evaluation project
- Who is undertaking the research, and if appropriate, who the project is for
- Aims and intended outcomes of the research
- Ethical protocols covering confidentiality, use and storage of data and any safeguarding/disclosure protocols
- Confirmation of how the data will be used (and usually confirmation that the data collected will only be used for research purposes unless there is a safeguarding issue – see below).

The flyer can be designed in a way which appeals to the reader, as long as all of the information is included clearly. For instance, if the information is for children and young people you may wish to use images and colour. Participants with disabilities, learning difficulties or special educational needs (SEN) will also need this information to be adapted appropriately (for example consider the text size, using pictures or symbols, simplified language).
Key point 2 — Participant consent

Participants should have the opportunity to provide informed consent prior to being interviewed. If your participants are professionals you may find that verbal consent is sufficient. However, it is best practice to obtain written consent to participate from everyone, particularly from service users, parents, children and young people. In any event, the consent process normally works as follows:

Recruitment

Potential participants are contacted by phone or (preferably) in writing by post/email. At this point, the research and rationale for selecting them to participate should be properly explained (see above). If the individual agrees to participate, this is known as ‘first consent’.

At the time of an interview/focus group

The interviewer should remind the participant(s) of the purpose of the research and why they have been selected. They should confirm the participant’s(s’) agreement to participate. Confidentiality should also be covered: how will the data be used and stored, and will they be named or identified in the report? Finally, the researcher must make it clear that the participant can stop the interview/leave the focus group at any time and withdraw from the research, even after they have given their consent to participate.

Consent ‘slip’

It is practical to include a tear-off consent slip at the bottom of the information flyer, with the name of the research as a header, which states:

In regard to X research, I [name] give/do not give my informed consent to be interviewed for the purposes explained to me.

There should be spaces for the participant’s printed name, signature and the date. As above, the language should be adapted to the needs of the participant, particularly for children and young people and interviewees with disabilities, learning difficulties or special educational needs (SEN).

Key point 3 — Safeguarding and disclosure issues

At the start of each interview or focus group (even if it is a second session with a participant) the interviewer/facilitator needs to explain that the data collected will remain confidential. However it is also important to make the interviewee aware that if a safeguarding issue emerges (known as a disclosure) during the interview or focus group then the interviewer will have to report this. An example statement for the interviewer/facilitator to use at the start of the interview/focus group is:

Everything you tell me will be treated as confidential. However, should you mention something that leads me to believe that you and/or someone else is at risk of serious physical and/or emotional harm, I will have to pass this information on to my supervisor.

Before the data collection period starts you should ensure that all researchers involved in your project are clear about what actions will follow such a disclosure. You may also decide to explain the procedure to interviewees. You should follow the local set procedures for dealing with a disclosure. If in doubt, contact the duty social worker.

Location

If you are collecting information from participants face-to-face, consider the location in which you do this. Location is important to consider for two reasons – participant confidentiality, and researcher safeguarding.
For interviews and focus groups, ideally the location would be somewhere quiet and comfortable where conversations cannot be overheard to protect the confidentiality of the participant. However, it is a good idea to keep a door open or ensure other staff are around to protect the researcher, especially when participants are vulnerable or if behaviour is unpredictable.

Confidentiality

In most cases the research you are conducting will be confidential i.e. you will not identify the participants or people they talk about by name, or describe them in such a way that someone could work out who they are. For example, you should not refer to a ten year old white British boy with a physical disability living in New Town if this information could possibly be used to identify the individual.

On occasion, for instance when citing an example of good practice (e.g. how a school has implemented a programme), you might seek permission to identify the organisation in the report. Usually this should only be considered for an organisation – it is rare that research would need to identify individual families or people in research outputs. If you intend to secure agreement to identify an organisation you must be clear about this, and the rationale for doing so, from the outset. In such cases you still need to follow the steps above relating to obtaining consent and disclosure messages.

If you have agreed with an organisation that you will identify them, you must obtain their approval of sections of the report in which they are identified before publication. They have the right to decide that they no longer wish to be identified, and you must respect that wish.

Key point 4 — Vulnerable people

People conducting research with children, young people and/or vulnerable adults including those with a disability, learning difficulty or special educational needs, must have an up to date enhanced Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) check.

When carrying out interviews and/or focus groups with children, young people and/or vulnerable adults, you should consider how the methodology might need to be adapted so that they can provide their views. For example, consider the design of your materials (e.g. information sheets and invite letters) so that they are appropriate for the audience:

— You may want to use images or visual aids and simplified language if appropriate.
— Think about whether the interviewee will need a member of support staff, a teacher or a parent with them during the interview, and how this might affect how they answer the question.
— Challenge your preconceptions and expectations of what an interviewee might be able to do.
— Be flexible and accommodating to the needs of the interviewee. For example, if they would prefer to write or type their answers instead of talking to a researcher, you could provide them with a template with the questions and space for answers.
For more information about conducting research with vulnerable people, see other relevant Guides below.

Other associated Guides from reason:
- Interviews
- Focus Groups
- Ethical Considerations
- Ethics for Research with Children, Young People and Vulnerable Adults