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Policy paper

How we carry out ethical research with people

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Contents

[Introduction](#)

[Policy statement](#)

[Core research principles](#)

[Ensuring ethical participation](#)

[Avoidance of harm](#)

[Age-appropriateness of materials for children and young people](#)

[Disclosure and Barring Service requirements](#)

[Contact us](#)

Introduction

Ofsted carries out all research with dedication and commitment to the Civil Service and its [core values: integrity, honesty, objectivity and impartiality](#).

Ofsted is a member of the [Government Social Research profession](#), which supports the development, implementation, review and evaluation of government policy.

This document outlines the policy for carrying out research or evaluation directly with people, on behalf of Ofsted.

Carrying out ethical research with people

Research in Ofsted is the use of social scientific methods to provide new understanding on matters relating to activities within Her Majesty's Chief Inspector's remit, including the quality of education and care.

Evaluation in Ofsted is an area of research that uses social scientific methods to examine Ofsted's own policy and practice.

When we say 'research' in this policy, we mean both research and evaluation.

Social science research may involve collecting data from people who directly take part or indirectly via access to secondary data already secured. We will soon be publishing a policy document outlining our approach to ethical research using secondary data.

This policy only applies to collecting data from people for the purposes of research. As such, it does not apply to anyone collecting data from people for other purposes and who has a direct legal requirement to do so, for example as part of inspection and regulation of services in Ofsted's remit.

Policy statement

Ofsted is fully committed to high-quality research carried out according to ethical principles.

We aim to ensure that all research by Ofsted employees, or on behalf of Ofsted, is carried out in a way that protects all those doing the research as well as those taking part in it.

All of our research has the welfare and safety of children and young people at its core. If we have concerns about the safety of a child or young person, we will follow [Ofsted's safeguarding policy](#).

All our research carried out directly with people adheres to 3 core principles:

- data collected for research purposes will [only be used for the purpose collected](#)
- we must ensure [ethical participation](#)
- we must [prioritise the avoidance of harm](#)

Our research with people is informed by the following ethical guidelines:

- [Government Social Research guidelines](#)
- [British Educational Research Association \(BERA\) guidelines](#)
- [The UK Framework for Health and Social Care Research \(NHS\)](#)
- [Ethical Research Involving Children \(ERIC\) guidelines](#)
- [UK Statistics Authority Ethics in statistics and research](#)

- [Ofsted's safeguarding policy](#)
- [The Civil Service Code](#)
- The [Freedom of Information Act 2000](#)
- The [Data Protection Act 2018](#)
- [General Data Protection Regulation](#)

Core research principles

This section describes some of the main considerations under each of our ethical principles.

Data collected for research purposes will only be used for the purpose collected

Research or evaluation must meet a need to provide new knowledge about the conduct of Ofsted, the sectors we inspect or other topics necessary to perform our functions of informing the Secretary of State about the quality of education and care. Research must be proportionate to this need and researchers should avoid placing an unnecessary burden on people.

When inspectors are solely carrying out research in providers, they are acting in a research capacity. People taking part in research will not be given any evaluation of their practices in the form of individual feedback. Involvement in our research will not inform or trigger any Ofsted inspections that a provider receives. People's data is protected by the terms outlined in any voluntary participation agreement. As such, what people tell us will only be used for the purpose that was outlined to them. Those carrying out research on behalf of Ofsted have a duty to protect the people's data of people as outlined in [the avoidance of harm section](#).

If we have concerns about the safety of a child or young person, we will discuss any need to share information, with the people involved.

Ensuring ethical participation

Voluntary informed participation

Researchers will take appropriate steps to satisfy themselves that people have exercised free will when deciding to take part in Ofsted research.

Researchers must provide everyone with the information they need to make an informed decision about taking part. This should include, but is not limited to:

- the aims and purpose of the research
- what we will ask people to do
- the benefits and drawbacks of participation
- their right to withdraw for any or no reason
- how we will use, store and retain their data
- relevant contact details

Researchers must ensure that information is provided in a way that is appropriate for the participant, particularly when carrying out research with children or vulnerable groups. Researchers will always record people's voluntary informed participation in a way that is appropriate for the person and proportionate to the legal and ethical considerations, as advised by the ethics committee.

The right to withdraw

All people taking part must be made aware that they can withdraw from research for any or no reason.

People taking part should also be informed of the point at which the data they have provided can no longer be excluded from the research findings. For example, the right to withdraw may be impractical after data has been aggregated.

Researchers must provide their contact details so that people are able to withdraw from the research.

The role of gatekeepers and guardians

A gatekeeper is any person or organisation that acts as an intermediary between Ofsted and potential participants in research. Researchers will contact people directly before taking part in the research, if it is practical to do so.

However, it may be necessary to use a gatekeeper:

- when a legal guardian can grant or deny their permission for a child to be approached to take part in the research
- for people who it is not possible to contact directly

When a gatekeeper is used, researchers will take reasonable steps to ensure that all people taking part are as fully informed as possible, including of their right to withdraw.

Appropriate use of incentives or rewards

Those designing research may consider whether small incentives or rewards are required to mitigate against any expense of, encourage, or express thanks for, participation. Researchers must ensure that incentives are proportionate to the participant group, cost and benefit of the study. These may be in the form of a summary of research findings or a voucher.

People taking part will not receive non-financial incentives such as inspection exemptions or changes to our inspection approach.

Power relationships with people taking part

Researchers must take steps to mitigate the possible impact that any imbalance of power may have on people, the validity and truthfulness of the data collected.

There are many different power relationships that will be present in research. You should give particular consideration to mitigating against power imbalances between:

- researchers and people taking part
- inspectors and the settings they inspect
- individuals taking part
- minority groups or people with protected characteristics and researchers or other individuals
- gatekeepers and people taking part

Security of personal and sensitive data of people who take part

All researchers working on behalf of Ofsted will take all possible steps to protect the identity of, and data belonging to, people invited to take part in research during invitation, data collection, data storage, analysis and reporting.

Data access will be restricted to those with a need to see it, such as anyone carrying out research on behalf of Ofsted with relevant DBS clearance and/or confidentiality agreements.

We will store and delete all data according to our data protection policy, data protection legislation and the information we have given to people taking part.

Researchers must decide how long to retain data for. For example, this may be for the purpose of the project or for longer for the purposes of research. Researchers must be able to justify why we are collecting and storing data and

must inform people who take part about what we will do with their data.

Researchers must ensure that the principles of data minimisation are applied to reduce the risk of identifying someone from stored data. Effective arrangements are put in place to ensure that personal data is regularly reviewed and deleted when it is no longer required for our work.

Avoidance of harm

Adequate support for, or protection of, people who take part and staff

Researchers should consider any possible harmful consequences that taking part in research might have for people, including for researchers. Research designs must include mitigations against harmful consequences, both psychological and physical.

Research designs must take account of risks that arise from:

- off-site work
- carrying out research with people
- conflicts that may arise from the dual roles of inspector and/or researcher

Researchers must have appropriate knowledge and training on carrying out ethical research with people, including but not limited to:

- people's right to withdraw their consent
- safeguarding concerns during data collection
- data protection principles
- sensitive topics
- research with children and young people, vulnerable adults or other disadvantaged groups

People who take part in our research should be offered the opportunity to talk to about potential negative consequences from the research, where appropriate. Researchers must consider how to protect vulnerable people during their research. For example, they can offer people the opportunity to have support present during data collection or to review their data to ensure that they are represented fairly.

Research at Ofsted is carried out in accordance with our duty to ensure the health, safety and welfare at work of all our employees and contractors. Researchers will inform their line manager immediately if they have any concerns about their own or

others' safety and wellbeing at work, from carrying out research or otherwise.

Researchers will take reasonable steps to protect the identity of inspectors during evaluation. Evaluation will not be discussed with line managers on an individual basis.

Age-appropriateness of materials for children and young people

Particular consideration needs to be given to any potential negative impact on children and or young people who participate and how to mitigate against negative consequences.

Researchers should ensure that all research designs are appropriate for the child's characteristics, including age and any special educational needs or disability. This affects:

- the topic and research questions
- the questions that will be asked of children and young people
- the methods and materials used

When creating materials, researchers should use age and ability appropriate materials. Examples include: scenario-based questioning, storyboards, drawing, or other indirect methods of carrying out research with children and young people.

Disclosure and Barring Service requirements

All researchers will have Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks to ensure that no researcher is barred from working or is unsuitable to work with such groups.

An enhanced DBS check is required for individuals whose role involves direct and regular contact with children or vulnerable groups.

Contact us

You can contact us by email Research_Surveys@ofsted.gov.uk, if you have a query relating to carrying out ethical research directly with people.

Raising concerns and making a complaint about Ofsted

If you have a concern or complaint about research in Ofsted that you are, or have been involved with, you should speak to the research lead. If your concern cannot be resolved directly with the individuals involved, you should ask to speak with the Head of Research via the contact details provided to you during the research.

If your concerns about our research have not been resolved, [you can raise a complaint](#).

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