

Guidance for the use of Recordings in Research

All research should be guided by the ethical principles of respect for persons, beneficence, justice and non-maleficence, and research involving the collection of recordings is no exception. This guidance aims to outline some of the factors researchers should consider when planning to collect recordings as part of a research project.

‘Recordings’ refers to audio recordings, photographs, videos, and other visual images of participants or locations that may be made using any recording device, either by a researcher or a participant, taken for the purposes of research.

This guidance should be read in conjunction with the following Policies, Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), and guidance:

- Policies/Schedules
 - [LSHTM Data Protection Policy](#)
 - [LSHTM Records Management Policy](#)
 - [Records Retention and Disposal Schedule](#)
 - [Mobile and Remote Working Policy](#)
- Standard Operating Procedures
 - [SOP-005 Informed Consent for Research](#)
 - [SOP-036 Confidentiality and Anonymisation of Research Data](#)
 - [SOP-43 Data Destruction](#)
- Guidance:
 - [Data Management for Interview and Focus Group Resources in Health](#)
 - [Communications and Engagement guidance on Photography](#)

This guidance does not cover photographs or videos taken for non-research purposes e.g. public engagement or marketing. For guidance in these cases please see the [guidance on digital content published by the Communications and Engagement team](#).

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1. Privacy and Confidentiality

1.1 Privacy

Privacy is the control over the extent, timing and circumstance of sharing oneself with others. It is about people rather than data, and the sense of being in control of the information we share and who can access it.

When deciding whether to collect recordings, consider whether participants would feel comfortable providing information in this manner. For example, a research participant may not want to be photographed taking part in a study on an infectious disease that carries stigma in their community.

When planning recordings as a data collection method please consider:

- Carrying out community engagement activities, seeking the advice of community advisory boards, or seeking advice of local ethics committees – as this can often help with determining whether planned data collection methods would be acceptable to the target community. The [Communications and Engagement team have published guidance on public engagement](#).
- Having a tiered approach to informed consent - as this gives the participant additional control over how their information is collected and shared. Template consent forms can be found under in [SOP-005 on Informed Consent for Research](#).

1.2 Confidentiality

Research should be designed to collect the minimum amount of identifiable information needed to answer the research question. When deciding whether to collect recordings an assessment should be done to ensure that:

- Sufficient benefit is derived from the recordings, and that this
- Outweighs the increased risk of breaches in confidentiality, and burden on participants.

This includes recordings of locations as well as individuals, as it can be difficult to anonymise locations. Depending on the type and sensitivity of the research, an identifiable location may be enough to put participants at risk.

A strong justification for the use of recordings, particularly visual recordings such as photographs or video, will be required in the application to the ethics committee.

If recordings are collected, steps should be taken to anonymise them as soon as possible. Techniques to anonymise recordings include:

- Blurring video or photographic images of participants' faces or other distinguishing features, e.g. tattoos or pinna
- Use of specific anonymisation software that converts visual images into cartoons or drawn images
- Electronically disguising audio recordings

However, even if steps can be taken, it is not always possible to fully anonymise recordings. For example, each individual has specific vocal characteristics which can make them identifiable, even after audio processing. And while photographic/video images of participant's faces can be blurred, members of their community may still be able to recognise them from their clothes/jewellery, gestures, or gait.

Some participants may not want to be anonymised. The risks of not anonymising recordings should be discussed in non-technical language to ensure participants fully understand any potential

consequences, and the decision not to anonymise should be explained carefully in the application to the ethics committee.

If recordings will not be anonymised it is good practice to share the recordings being used with participants before dissemination to check that they still consent.

1.3 Metadata

Many contemporary recording devices, such as phones, digital cameras, tablets etc., will imbed metadata into the recordings they produce. This can include information such as the date and time the recording was made and the GPS coordinates of where the recording was taken. This can pose a privacy risk to those taking the photographs and those shown in the photograph and must be removed before the recordings are shared with others.

1.4 Transcription of recordings

As per [SOP-036 on Confidentiality and Anonymisation of Research Data](#), only research staff with lawful access to the identifiable data are permitted to process the data in order to perform anonymisation. If there are plans to use transcription or similar services, consent from the participants must be obtained for the recordings to be shared with these third parties.

1.4.1 Transcription Services

LSHTM does not currently have a preferred supplier for transcription services and instead uses a range of companies and individuals. [Procurement have published a list of suppliers that have been used in the past and are available on Agresso](#)

2. Informed Consent

Informed consent is key to the ethical principle of respect for persons and explicit consent must be obtained for the collection and use of any recordings in research.

How the recordings will be used must be clearly explained in the information sheet using language that participants will understand. This is particularly important if images are to be posted online and participants are not likely to have any understanding of the internet or social media, as there is the potential for their images to be seen by anyone, anywhere in the world.

The following should be included in the participant information sheet:

- The type of recordings that will be collected (audio, visual etc.)
- Who will collect the recordings (research staff, the participant etc.)
- The purpose of the recording and how it will be used
- How long the recording will be kept and how it will be stored
- Whether third parties such as transcription or other similar services will have access to the recordings
- That participants may withdraw consent during or after the recording, that this will not impact their rights, and that they do not have to give a reason for doing so
- Whether there are limits to when a participant can withdraw (e.g. up until publication)
- Plans for dissemination
- Measures that will be taken to protect confidentiality, including any limits to confidentiality e.g. if photographs are posted online
- Whether the participant will have the opportunity to view the recording after it is completed

- Whether consent to being recorded is part of the inclusion criteria for taking part in the research.

It is recommended that an itemised or tiered consent form covering each specific element is used. An example is provided below:

Statement	Please initial or thumbprint* each box
I confirm that I have read the information sheet dated.....(version.....) for the above named study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have these answered satisfactorily.	
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason, without my medical care or legal rights being affected.	
I understand that the <research activity> will be photographed/filmed and that I am free to withdraw consent and ask for photography/filming to stop at any time.	
I understand that photographs will be taken but that I will not be identifiable in any documents	
I understand that photographs/recordings of me may be shared via a public data repository or by sharing directly with other researchers for their ethically approved research, and that I will not be identifiable from this information	
<Any other required statements relevant to the specific study>	
I agree to take part in the above named study	

If there are plans to store recordings with the intention of sharing with other researchers for future research, or for educational purposes, this must be clearly stated in the information sheet and in the application to the ethics committee, along with details of the safeguards that will be put in place to assure the safety and confidentiality of participants.

Informed consent is an ongoing process and researchers have an obligation to ensure that participants are aware that they can ask questions or withdraw from the study at any time. Researchers should try to remain sensitive at all times to the changing comfort levels of participants and check with them if at any point they look like they may no longer be comfortable with the recordings being taken.

Further guidance on informed consent for research, including templates, can be found in [SOP-005 on Informed Consent for Research](#).

3. Data Management

3.1 LSHTM Data Storage options

When creating and storing recordings it is essential that the methods used are secure, in accordance with the [LSHTM Data Protection Policy](#), and the security arrangements are appropriate to the type of data you are collecting and the associated risks to individuals.

The LSHTM ITS Helpdesk have developed guidelines on available data storage options, including the suitability of different storage systems for the storage and processing of data classified as per the LSHTM Data Classification & Handling Policy.

- [Data Classification and Handling Policy](#)
- [Data Storage Options guidelines](#)

If unsure which storage option to use please contact the ITS Helpdesk for advice.

3.2 In the field/remote working

The [Mobile and Remote Working Policy](#) outlines the expectations and requirements relating to the use of mobile computing devices, in particular those that contain personal or sensitive personal data, including devices used to create recordings.

Additional guidance on the selection of audio capture devices and data security in the field can be found in [‘Data Management for Interview and Focus Group Resources in Health’](#)

3.3 Retention and Destruction of recordings

The [LSHTM Data Protection Policy](#) states that:

“To comply with the data minimisation and storage limitation principles, LSHTM will only retain personal data for as long as is necessary to meet the purpose for which it was collected, including a short additional time during which we will confirm that the data should be deleted. This will be assessed in accordance with the LSHTM Records Retention & Disposal Schedule. Personal data which are no longer needed must be deleted securely. Paper records must be disposed of in confidential waste bins (for secure destruction off-site) and electronic records must be securely deleted.”

In order to comply with this policy all recordings must be stored in a secure location for the duration that they are needed. Please see the [data storage options guidelines](#) for the available options.

For audio recordings, once a transcript has been verified as accurate, an assessment should be made to determine whether the recording continues to have value and should be retained, or whether it should be securely deleted.

If a decision is made to retain a recording, researchers are advised to seek advice from the LSHTM Archives & Records Management Service (archives@lshtm.ac.uk) and clearly outline the reason the recording should be retained in their ethics application.

4. Other considerations

4.1 Maintaining Integrity and authenticity of recordings

Researchers should take care to maintain the integrity and authenticity of a recording, i.e. participants should be made aware of when recordings begin and end so they don't communicate unsuitable information and editing should be performed with care to avoid creating a false or misleading message by removing or moving information.

4.2 Children or young people

It is good practice to obtain the consent and/or assent of both the child and their parent/guardian, even where the child is old enough to consent for themselves. However, even if the parent/guardian gives consent, if the child is not willing to be recorded the researcher must respect this.

Depending on where the recordings will be collected, permission may also be required from gatekeepers such as head teachers.

Researchers should ensure they are familiar with the [LSHTM safeguarding policy](#) and comply with any requirements for Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks, as well as consider making a plan outlining the steps that will be taken should a child disclose abuse of any kind.

For more information please see the LSHTM guidance on [Research Involving Children](#)

4.3 Recordings made by research participants

In addition to researchers collecting recordings themselves, it is becoming increasingly common to give research participants recording devices and asking them to collect images of their lives or communities, or create visual diaries, for example as part of the photovoice method.

It should be noted that in the UK copyright law in relation to still and moving images rests with the person taking the image, or their employing institution. This means that the copyright of images or videos taken by participants rests with the participant. If there are plans to disseminate images as part of research findings, it is recommended that copyright be managed as part of the informed consent process either through gaining permission to use the images, or assigning copyright to the researcher. If further guidance on this is needed, please contact legal services for advice.

There may be times when a research participant collects recordings of individuals not involved in the research. This can lead to additional issues around consent, as the individuals shown in the recordings will not have necessarily given their consent, and are unlikely to know the planned uses of the recording. This issue is complex and researchers are advised to provide guidance to participants prior to the start of data collection on seeking permission and explaining the purpose of the recording before collecting recordings of other individuals.

Researchers should exercise caution when considering publishing recordings including individuals without consent. Consideration should be given to whether retrospective consent could be obtained from the individual, perhaps via the participant who collected the recording, and whether the recording could potentially place the individual in the recording at risk.

4.4 Locations

Recordings of private or public places or locations (such as houses, schools, places of employment, streets, landmarks) can present a risk to the privacy of participants or communities whether or not individuals are shown in the recording.

While it is possible to give a location a pseudonym, it can still be relatively easy to identify based on the image. This may be enough to identify a particular community or institution, and combined with other information such as quotes, may be enough to identify an individual.

Researchers should consider the implications of taking recordings of places and locations including issues of anonymity, potential for harm, and consent (in particular for recordings in private places).

4.5 Social Media

If a researcher wishes to use recordings of people which have been shared on social media they should consider whether the individual(s) shown in the recording have consented to the recording being taken and shared. Researchers should also check whether any recordings they wish to reproduce are protected by copyright. For more information please [the LSHTM Guidance for Research Involving Social Media Data](#).

4.6 Covert recordings

Participant consent must be obtained before any recordings are made. LSHTM staff and students should not collect any recordings of participants without consent, or make covert recordings. If it is felt that covert recording is required for a specific project, please seek advice from the LSHTM Legal Team before approaching the LSHTM Ethics Committee.

4.7 Recordings of illegal activity

If there are plans, or it is reasonable to expect that the research will result in the collection of recordings of illegal activities, it is advisable to seek advice from the LSHTM legal team prior to the research starting and a plan put in place for how to manage these types of recordings (e.g. when disclosure would be required).

4.8 NHS specific guidance

The General Medical Council has produced guidance on the making and using visual and audio recordings of patients by doctors, including for the purposes of teaching and research.

https://www.gmc-uk.org/-/media/documents/making-and-using-visual-and-audio-recordings-of-patients_pdf-58838365.pdf

Individual Trusts may have their own policies/guidelines on the making and use of recordings on Trust premises (including the use of smart phones and other mobile devices with recording functionality). If planning a research project involve recordings on NHS Trust premises, or of NHS staff or patients, please contact the relevant Trust(s) for their policies/guidelines.

5. Further reading

- ESRC National Centre for Research Methods Review Paper - Visual Ethics: Ethical Issues in Visual Research <https://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/id/eprint/421/1/MethodsReviewPaperNCRM-011.pdf>
- Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK (ASA) Ethical Guidelines 2021 for good research practice. https://www.theasa.org/downloads/ethics/asa_ethicsgl_2021.pdf
- Statement of ethical practice for the British Sociological Association—Visual Sociology Group https://www.britisoc.co.uk/media/24310/bsa_statement_of_ethical_practice.pdf
- PhotoVoice's Statement of Ethical Practice - <https://photovoice.org/soep/>