

## **Guidance for Remote Data Collection**

The same ethical principles that apply to face-to-face research also apply to remote data collection. This includes ensuring that appropriate informed consent processes are in place, recruitment methods are fair, the research is scientifically valid, the potential risks and benefits have been considered, and that the research undergoes ethical review before the research begins.

The following guidelines outline some of the areas researchers should consider when planning research using remote data collection methods. These guidelines are to be read alongside LSHTMs policies, standard operating procedures (SOPs), and other relevant guidance documents, in particular:

- [LSHTM Data Protection Policy](#)
- [LSHTM Information Security Policy](#)
- [Data Classification and Handling Policy](#)
- [Bring Your Own Device Policy](#)
- [The Standard Operating Procedures for Research \(including SOP-005 on Informed Consent for Research, and SOP-022 on Good Documentation Practice, and SOP-036 on Confidentiality and Anonymisation of Research Data\)](#)
- [Data Storage Options guidelines](#)

### **1. General points to consider**

There are a number of things to consider when planning remote data collection. Below are some of the key points. This list is not exhaustive and the needs of each research project should be considered on a case by case basis.

- Do you have an appropriate space to conduct the research?
  - Interactions with participants occurring online or by phone should take place in a private and quiet place, where you will not be disturbed and with as little background noise as possible.
  - There are risks to confidentiality when conducting telephone/virtual interviews within shared spaces of a home. The risks associated with your chosen space should be considered and steps to mitigate these taken, for example the use of headphones, taking care not to verbalise confidential information, and taking care that the screen cannot be seen by others.
  - Participants should be supported in creating a safe space to take part in research, for example you may advise that the participant ensure windows are closed in spaces where they may be overheard.
  - If there is limited space, or the space has to be shared with others and privacy cannot be guaranteed, you should consider whether it is appropriate to continue.
- Do you have the correct equipment, and appropriate software?

- Have all portable devices and removable storage media to be used for data collection been provisioned, configured and managed by LSHTM IT Services?
  - Are all portable devices and any removable storage media being used for data collection encrypted?
- Are you confident that the chosen data collection method is secure and that participant's information will not be at risk?
  - Data should be stored in line with the Data Classification and Handling Policy and IT services can provide guidance on available storage options.
  - Please note that identifiable data must be stored on the secure server. Please contact ITS for further guidance on how this can be accessed.
- How will you recruit participants?
  - Are you using multiple methods, or relying on a single method, such as an online survey? Some methods may be easier for certain groups to engage with. Consider who your target participants are and how best to approach them.
  - Be aware of time zone differences when scheduling interviews with participants in other countries.
- Are there any implications of using technology for your potential participants (e.g. unexpected costs)?
  - Keep in mind the costs involved for participants using their personal devices, such as the use of data if no wifi, or the cost of call minutes. You should consider ways to ensure participants are not left out of pocket such as providing data hot spots or providing vouchers for phone minutes.
  - Using audio only will use less data than a video call.
  - Be aware that costs can be higher to both researcher and participant when making international calls.
- Are there additional risks to participants and how can these be mitigated?
  - Is there an increased risk of breaches of privacy and/or confidentiality?
  - Is there a risk of interception and/or surveillance of communications that would not be possible if the data were collected face to face (e.g. as a result of using certain online/mobile platforms). This is particularly important in cases where either the participant or the research topic could be of interest to 'motivated intruders' or where the improper access or disclosure of personal data could have a significant impact on the participant or put them in physical danger (e.g. the disclosure of health-related data may cause significant embarrassment or distress, or, the disclosure of someone's religion, political affiliations or sexual orientation could expose them to risk of physical harm).

- If remote data collection does present additional risks, could the research be conducted at a different time using face to face methods?
- Have you documented your assessment of the risks arising from remote data collection and the measures to be implemented in mitigation e.g. as part of a data protection impact assessment?
- How will you obtain informed consent? (See section 3 for guidance on informed consent)
- Will participants have the space and privacy to take part remotely?
- If performing interviews with a translator, consider where the translator will be located. I.e. will they be in the same room as the interviewer/interviewee or a 3<sup>rd</sup> person on the call?
- How will you respond to participant distress or deal with sensitive or upsetting issues?
  - Do you need to adapt the referral pathways that would be used for face-to-face research?
  - If a participant withdraws, how certain are you that you will be able to fulfil promises to destroy data (especially when data might be stored on third party servers).

In addition to the above, if you are switching from face to face data collection methods to remote data collection, you may also need to consider:

- Whether there is a like for like replacement. For example telephone interviews, or online focus group discussions.
- Whether changing the data collection methods will impact your ability to answer your original research question
- Whether you need to adapt more than just your data collection methods (e.g. analysis plans).

## **2. Remote data collection platforms**

LSHTM does not recommend any particular platform for remote data collection and ultimately it is up to individual researchers to weigh the benefits and risks and determine which would be the most appropriate platform for their study.

Researchers should check the terms and conditions of service of the different platforms and consider these alongside LSHTM data and information security policies when making a decision. Things to consider when choosing a platform include:

- Whether the platform offers end-to-end encryption

- Check whether this is on by default or has to be manually activated.
- Whether the data will remain in the UK or the EEA.
  - Any platform transferring data outside a GDPR jurisdiction should be avoided where at all possible. For more information on this please contact the DPO.
- How long the platform will retain the data on their servers.
- Whether data collected on the platform is accessible by the provider itself or may be shared with third parties (e.g. commercial parties, law enforcement agencies, government authorities, etc).
- What the options are for participants to manage their own privacy, for example the option to change the name that shows on the screen when joining an online focus group

Any terms and conditions of service for a selected platform must include contractual provisions governing the processing of personal data which reflect the requirements of the GDPR.

If in doubt about whether a particular platform provides adequate security/data protection for the type of data you plan to collect, please contact the Data Protection Officer and/or IT services for advice.

## **2.1 Privacy documents**

Something the LSHTM ethics committee have looked favourably on, for all platforms, is providing participants with a 'privacy document'\*. This is a document explaining how the participant can protect their privacy while using the platform.

Privacy documents generally include sections on:

- How the participant can change their picture and name,
- How to update privacy settings,
- How to block people,
- And include a reminder that the participant can leave at anytime.

\*Please note this is not the same as the [privacy notice](#), which explains how LSHTM processes personal data.

## **3. Informed Consent**

The requirements for obtaining informed consent are the same for both face-to-face and remote data collection. The key points are that consent must be:

- Informed – the participant is provided with all relevant information needed for them to make an informed decision, and the information is provided in a manner they are able to understand and comprehend.
- Freely given – consent is given in an environment free from coercion or undue influence.

Written consent is considered the current gold standard however, alternative methods such as verbal or implied consent can be considered in cases where the risk to participants is minimal and there is sufficient justification. The justification for deviating from written consent must be provided in the ethics application and the ethics committee will make the decision about whether the justification is sufficient.

### 3.1 Written consent

In cases where written consent will be obtained researchers should consider the facilities participants are likely to have access to. For example, if emailing a consent form and requesting that a participant print, sign, scan and return, how likely is it that the participant will have access to the facilities to do this? If you are contacting professionals in their professional environment, it is likely that this won't be a barrier, however for many other groups this will be.

If access to facilities to print and scan is likely to be a barrier to taking part, consider whether posting the consent form and providing a pre-paid return envelope would be a more appropriate option.

Alternatively, with the permission of the ethics committee, the researchers university email address can be used to send participants an email where the consent statements are in the body of the email. Participants can then respond to the email indicating whether they consent to each statement and sign off with their name and date. These emails must then be retained in the same manner as a traditional consent form.

### 3.2 Verbal and implied consent

In cases where verbal or implied consent will be sought, information about the study must still be provided to participants. Methods to send the information to participants include:

- Emailing the document to participants
- Placing the document online for participants to download
- Sending by post
- For online questionnaires and surveys information can be provided at the start of the survey/questionnaire and a link to further information provided if required.

In cases where a consent form is not being used, consent should still be documented.

For verbal consent a record of the following should be kept:

- Participant's details,
- Information provided,
- The time and date consent was obtained,

- And the details of the person who obtained consent (with impartial witness if required)

Audio-recording consent is also an option, but only with the participant's consent and the agreement of the ethics committee.

For online questionnaires and surveys, compulsory questions can be asked at the start of the survey/questionnaire to acknowledge that participants have read and understood the information. By answering 'yes' to compulsory consent questions, informed consent is presumed and the participant can proceed.

Please note that if you are conducting interviews or focus groups remotely and plan to record the sessions, participants **must** be told this in advance and give their consent for this to happen.

### 3.3 SOP and templates

For more information and to access template information sheets and consent forms please see [SOP-005 on informed consent for research](#).

## 4. LSHTM Data Storage Options

When moving to remote data collection it is essential that the methods you use are secure and that the data is managed in accordance with data protection law, including GDPR, and that the security arrangements are appropriate to the type of data you are collecting and the associated risks to individuals. The LSHTM ITS Helpdesk has developed guidelines on the available data storage, 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.

## 5. Additional points to consider

### 5.1 Participants

#### Online

- Some platforms will require participants to set up an account and/or download software. This should be included in the information given to participants.
- When conducting online focus groups/discussions set ground rules upfront, for example, not attempting to identify fellow participants, or contacting other participants outside of the research. If possible configure the settings so that participants can only private message the moderators and not each other.

- If there is no option to change display names, encourage first names only.

## Telephone

- If making telephone calls, consider using a pre-arranged 'code word' prior to starting the interview to verify the identity of the callers.
- If privacy is a concern consider establishing a 'safe word' the participant can use to let you know that it is no longer safe to continue.

## 5.2 Staff and students

- Disclosure of personal numbers may be a risk to both participant and researcher. Researchers are strongly discouraged from providing their personal phone numbers. Instead work lines or a dedicated mobile SIMs should be used. If using your own personal phone consider setting up 'outbound number blocking', which means that the call will show up as 'withheld number' on the recipients phone. If you do this please ensure the participant knows what time you will be calling so that they feel comfortable answering.
- Sometimes research can involve discussing sensitive or distressing topics. Please see the [Occupational Health](#) pages on Sharepoint, which includes a page on mental health support and resources, for the guidance and support offered by LSHTM.

## 6. Useful contacts

- For research ethics queries or queries about the ethical review process please contact [Ethics@lshtm.ac.uk](mailto:Ethics@lshtm.ac.uk)
- For any technical questions about IT and IT security please contact the IT Services via Service Desk <https://servicedesk.lshtm.ac.uk>
- For any queries about data protection, including the need for a Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA) please contact the Data Protection Officer at [DPO@lshtm.ac.uk](mailto:DPO@lshtm.ac.uk)
- For any queries about research data management please contact the Research Data Manager  
<https://lshtm.sharepoint.com/Research/Research-data-management/>

## 7. Other Internal guides for managing remote data collection

- [COVID-19: Remote data collection](#) – a 'how to' guide to support conducting of remote data collection, and the recordings of a selection of webinars on the topic of data collection in the COVID-19 era.
- [Data management for MSc summer projects](#) – provides additional guidance from an IT perspective on data management. Aimed at MSc students.

## 8. External guides for managing remote research

- [Association of Internet Researchers](#) – includes three reports to assist researchers in making ethical decisions in their internet based research, including Internet Research: Ethical Guidelines 3.0 (2020)
- [The British Psychological Society](#) - Ethics Guidelines for Internet – Mediated Research (2017)
- [UK Research Integrity Office](#) – Good practice in research: Internet-mediated research (2016)

### 8.1 Other resources

- [ODI](#) – A selection of publications and tips for collecting primary data in a Covid-19 era.