

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN
GUIDANCE NOTE ON OBTAINING ETHICAL APPROVAL FOR RESEARCH
FROM ABERDEEN CITY COUNCIL AND OTHER LOCAL AUTHORITIES

This guidance note has been prepared for all internal University Ethics Boards and School ethics approval processes (where applications are not submitted via a University Ethics Board). It explains the requirements for ethical approval from Aberdeen City Council (ACC), who are an important research partner for the University, but also includes contact details for other frequently contacted local authorities e.g. Aberdeenshire Council, Angus Council, The Highland Council and Tayside Council.

This note confirms that **all applications to the ACC ethics approval process must receive appropriate internal University oversight prior to submission to the ACC**. This will ensure the submission of high-quality ethics applications which are more likely to receive ACC ethics approval following first submission.

Please do not hesitate to contact Dawn Foster, Research Policy & Governance Officer (dawn.foster@abdn.ac.uk) if you have any queries regarding this guidance.

Introduction

Aberdeen City Council (ACC) engages with a wide variety of academic institutions and researchers to support research projects. ACC promotes a culture of research and seeks to benefit from the expertise and findings of research projects that have been conducted to a high standard.

ACC also has a duty of care to **employees** and **service users** who might participate in research. This also extends to **research which may potentially affect the quality of services that ACC customers receive**. Research which involves ACC and its staff or customers (including research involving local primary or secondary schools) is governed by their Research Governance Guidelines, which are applied by their Research Governance Panel (RGP).

Researchers must obtain approval from the RGP **before** proceeding with any research or preliminary research activities (e.g. contacting schools to arrange research access). Any research undertaken must also have the full agreement of the council services or establishments involved. **Note that services/establishments may decide to refuse to participate or allow participation, even if an application has been approved by the RGP.**

Which types of research require ACC Ethical Approval?

ACC divides research activities into two main categories:

1. **Primary research** generally includes activities which involve **gathering new information** (e.g. surveys, evaluations, focus groups, consultations, audits, student projects and dissertations which **involve service users or staff**).
2. **Secondary research** will generally involve **new analysis of data that is already held by Aberdeen City Council** (e.g., research into adoption involving access to case files).

For research activities involving students on work placement with the ACC, please note that this will **not** be deemed part of the 'routine duties' of their placement and these research activities will require ethical approval by the ACC.

Applicants who require further guidance on whether their proposed research will require ACC ethical approval should contact Dr Catriona Mallia (Strategic Engagement & Research Officer) CMallia@aberdeencity.gov.uk

Procedure to be followed if ACC ethical approval is required:

1. **Contact Dr Catriona Mallia** (Strategic Engagement & Research Officer) CMallia@aberdeencity.gov.uk who will provide the application documentation and further guidance on the ACC research ethics approval process, including an **indicative timescale for a decision**. Note that the ACC **aims to provide a decision within 20 working days of receipt of applications** if there are no initial concerns/queries about the research proposal.
2. Applicants must ensure that the completed application **has been reviewed by the University PRIOR to submission to the ACC (or to any other local authority)**. Applicants should **check the process established within their School** – this may involve completed applications being initially submitted to either the School Ethics Officer, Principal Investigator, Line Manager or Supervisor to ensure that they have been completed to a high standard, hence more likely to receive ACC approval at first submission.
3. Once the completed ACC application has been reviewed within the University, it should then be submitted to the ACC process (as outlined in their application guidance).
4. Please note that the **research project cannot commence until ACC ethical approval has been granted**.

Applicants must ensure that careful consideration should be given the following aspects of the research proposal, as the ACC RGP will assess applications in terms of:

- The feasibility of the project and the likelihood that the benefits will be realised in practical terms;
- Whether the proposed project is ethically sound, to ensure everyone involved is given the respect and protection they are entitled to;
- The resource implications for the service involved e.g. the feasibility of providing support to the proposed research without placing excessive demands on staff resources, and the impact the research will have on participants e.g. in terms of time;
- Whether the project will duplicate past or current efforts;
- The potential risks to participants and the organisation. This includes considering whether appropriate precautions have been planned to overcome these, and whether the potential benefits of the research outweigh the potential risks. Clearly, not all proposed research projects will pose the same levels of risk. With some proposals it is likely to be clear after relatively brief consideration that there is minimal or no risk to participants or the organisation, while with other projects there may be an initial reason for some concern which would warrant more detailed scrutiny and deliberation before giving approval;
- Whether issues related to data governance have been appropriately addressed, including consideration given as to whether a [Data Protection Impact Assessment](#) (DPIA) is required. Aberdeen City Council is committed to adhering to the UK General Data Protection Regulations and the Data Protection Act 2018. If you are granted research access, please note that you and your organisation are also bound by this legislation;

- Any approval of proposals is contingent on agreement that a copy of the research findings will be sent to the Performance and Improvement Team at Aberdeen City Council as part of the dissemination process.

Completed Research

- **All research, whether intended for publication or not, must be copied to Aberdeen City Council.** Research reports should be submitted to the Performance and Improvement Team. These are placed on a central research portal.
- **In some research projects, e.g. those which carry a high risk, the RGP may make it a condition of approval that the research report is considered by them prior to publication.** In such cases the research coordinator will distribute any reports to the RGP for approval.
- **Research findings may form part of the process of service improvement planning.** Where possible, research participants should be provided with the findings of the research, in a format which is appropriate to the audience e.g. using lay language; age-appropriate etc.

Procedure to be followed if ethical approval is required from Aberdeenshire Council

1. For research involving **education** (e.g. schools, school staff, education policy and practice, education support services, mental health & wellbeing of children and young people, and Additional Support Needs):
 - a. Consult the information provided [here](#). This includes a guidance note on the application process and downloadable copies of the associated application form.
 - b. Any further queries on the application process should be directed to Carron Douglas, Principal Educational Psychologist, carron.douglas@aberdeenshire.gov.uk.
 - c. Decisions are normally provided within three weeks of receipt of applications.
2. For research involving **other services within Aberdeenshire Council**, please contact the [appropriate service lead](#) for further information.
3. Ensure that the application **has been reviewed by the University PRIOR to submission to the Council**. Applicants should **check the process established within their School** – this may involve completed applications being initially submitted to either the School Ethics Officer, Principal Investigator, Line Manager or Supervisor to ensure that they have been completed to a high standard, hence more likely to receive Council approval at first submission.

Procedure to be followed if ethical approval is required from Angus Council

Enquiries regarding ethical approval of research projects should be submitted to the appropriate service/directorate (Children, Families & Justice; Communities; Finance; HR, Digital Enablement & Business Support; Infrastructure; Legal & Democratic; Schools & Learning; and Strategic Policy, Transformation & Public Sector Reform) using the contact email address customercare@angus.gov.uk. As noted above, the application must be **reviewed by the University PRIOR to submission to the Council** using the process established within the School.

Procedure to be followed if ethical approval is required from The Highland Council

Enquiries regarding ethical approval of research projects should be submitted using the contact email address https://www.highland.gov.uk/info/591/council_and_government/535/contact_us.

As noted above, the application must be **reviewed by the University PRIOR to submission to the Council** using the process established within the School.

Note: The above are the local authorities are most commonly involved in our research activities. Enquiries regarding ethical approval of research involving other local authorities should be directed to the appropriate local authority contact (see local authority websites for further details).

APPENDIX

The following information should be shared with applicants as this may be helpful when answering questions relating to research data management and data protection practices within the University of Aberdeen.

IMPORTANT INFORMATION FOR APPLICANTS

1. Research Data Management

1.1 Use of Online Survey Tools

Of the [institutional survey tools](#) endorsed by the University of Aberdeen for use in research, **Snap** covers the largest number of usage cases and is suitable for collection of sensitive data. Snap is therefore the recommended tool unless the specific circumstances of the project require an alternative platform. DDIS (the University's Directorate of Digital and Information Services) have provided the following standard text on use of snap which should be used within ACC applications:

Snap webhost

The university runs its own instance of snap webhost which is hosted on a dedicated server owned and operated by the University of Aberdeen. Data collected by snap surveys are therefore stored on University managed systems and subject to the same level of security described in 1.2 below. Access to survey responses is password protected and accessible only to the survey owner (user), system admins (DDIS staff), or any University of Aberdeen staff member to whom the user has specifically provided access. Data downloaded from the snap webhost should be stored in institutional solutions outlined in B below.

Please note that information provided by [Snap Surveys Ltd](#) **does not apply** to our institutional webhost. No UoA data is stored on their servers.

If applicants believe that Snap is unsuitable for their project they are encouraged to contact digitalservices@abdn.ac.uk who can advise on selection of an appropriate platform.

1.2 Information / data security standards

In April 2019, the University of Aberdeen achieved Cyber Essentials Plus standard across our full corporate environment, a significant achievement demonstrating our commitment to providing a safe and secure digital workplace for all staff and students, supporting all our teaching and learning, and research activities.

DDIS provides a resilient and secure campus network. The following IT security measures are in place to protect against malicious intent:

Intrusion Defense: Email spam filtering, Malware protection, Blacklists to provide security for the University email system, Antivirus software is installed on all servers, Electronic data and data in transit are encrypted and password protected using an acceptable standard of encryption. Currently approved algorithms for the encryption are 3DES, AES (FIPS197), Blowfish and are used at a recommended 256-bit strength.

All staff are required, as part of their terms and conditions of employment, to abide by the University's Information Security Policy and IT Conditions of use.

The University of Aberdeen is not accredited to but aligns closely to ISO27001 standards.

1.3 Managing, storing and curating data

DDIS provides a resilient, centrally managed, unstructured data storage service with live data replicated in two physically separated data centres. Where data is stored in research-specific shared-drives, it is subject to a robust backup regime: backups for staff projects are accessible for 6 months, and PGR projects for 2 months. Data will be stored on a shared drive, set up for the team. The PI will be the shared drive owner with the following responsibilities: i) approving access and access levels to the shared drives; ii) approving remote access, for example via 'Remote VPN (Virtual Private Network)'; iii) curation of data held in the drive in compliance with [University policies](#) and other project obligations (this includes data management, retention, and deletion), and iv) delegation of any of above to a deputy. File names/locations will have an appropriately descriptive title, including the date the data was received/generated.

Applicants are encouraged to contact digitalservices@abdn.ac.uk if they require further guidance on these issues.

2. UK GDPR and Data Protection

All ethics applications involving collection of personal data must ensure that the accompanying 'Participant Information Sheet' includes a link to the University's [Research participants privacy notice](#).

Data obtained directly from participants

When you are collecting personal data from the individuals concerned, you need to be clear, open and transparent with those individuals. You must set out what you intend to do with their data. Specifically:

1. The purpose for which the personal data will be used. This might include use of the personal data in future research studies (this should not be too open ended – participants need to understand the potential future uses of this data).
2. Any organisations or recipients outside the University to whom you intend to disclose the personal data. (NB: this does not apply if sharing or publishing anonymised data.)
3. The safeguards that will apply to any international data sharing arrangements. See checklist point 5 and contact the Information Governance team if this applies to your project.
4. Information about any automated decision-making that will affect participants. Contact the Information Governance team for assistance if this applies to your project.
5. How long the personal data will be kept. This may be the storage period until the data is deleted, or a review period after which the research value of the data will be assessed.

This information must be provided at the time you collect information from the participants. It can be provided within your correspondence/communications with participants (usually within the Participant Information Sheet).

Further information on data protection issues is available [here](#)

Applicants are encouraged to contact the Information Governance Team at dpa@abdn.ac.uk if they require further guidance on these issues.