Hints, tips, and common mistakes

The following list contains some hints and tips, based on what makes life easier for SERB. (And if things are easier, our review can be quicker.) It also contains some advice based on recently submitted applications to SERB.

1. Document version control is important for several reasons. We need to know that we're looking at the most up-to-date versions of documents. You need to know which versions are approved for use. Participants need to be given the most up-to-date versions. And you need to document (on your consent form) which version of the PIS participants are reading. Please read the sections on version control and naming documents in *SERB Guidance 02 – Guidance for applicants*.

2. Please proof-read your documents thoroughly, and ensure:
    a. That there are no tracked changes in 'clean' documents.
    b. There is consistency between documents. For example, how long will you be retaining participants' data? This cannot be 10yrs in one document, and 6yrs in another[1].

3. Participants cannot give informed consent if they are not adequately informed. Don't ask for participant consent for anything which is:
    a. Not in the Protocol, and/or
    b. Not in the PIS.
    For example, if the protocol states that interviews will be audio-recorded, don't ask for consent for video. Don't ask consent to use anonymised verbatim quotes in study output if this hasn't been explained in the PIS.

4. Understand the difference between anonymised data, and pseudonymised data, and be clear which you are using.

5. Please limit the documents submitted to SERB to those required for the specific project that we are being asked to review. For example:
    a. If there's a survey plus participant interviews, then of course we need to see documents relating to both. Whereas, if your overall project has a systematic literature review and then a survey, we don't need to see the protocol, or any other documents, relating to the review.
    b. We don't need to see PhD timelines or Gantt charts unless they are directly relevant.
    c. Please don't just copy and paste stuff from your grant application. We don't need to see your overall budget and justification of costs.
    d. Some documents (e.g., researchers' GCP and/or Research Integrity certificates) can be combined into a single file.

6. Please upload single copies of each document. If you make a mistake and upload a draft, and wish to replace it, either make it very clear that the original document has been superseded (correct version control should do this) or delete the incorrect version. This can be done until you submit the application, after which it's locked for editing.

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[1] It is, of course, perfectly legitimate to keep different data for different lengths of time (e.g., to keep audio-recordings only until they are transcribed, but to keep the transcriptions for several years), as long as it's clearly explained.

7. In your application, or in response to SERB comments, please don't use phrases such as: "We have used a similar approach in previous studies that received SERB ethical approval" as if this alone is justification enough. Instead, please provide the arguments that led to the previous approval. "We've done this before" is, in itself, not a good defence – but the reasons for doing so might be perfectly acceptable. So instead, explain *why* you wish to adopt the approach you are proposing.

Does SERB review studies with any methods?

8. Yes, as long as it falls within SERB's remit. SERB reviewers have varied methodological expertise, but we may co-opt reviewers with discipline-specific expertise, or methodology-specific expertise, as appropriate[2]. In almost all circumstances however, the aspects of participant identification, informed consent, etc. are common, and understandable. (And if you're doing something unusual with your participants, you're going to have to explain it to them in a language they understand; the chances are that we'll be able to understand it too.)

Does SERB comment on non-ethical issues?

Because a favourable opinion from SERB automatically leads to sponsorship of your study by the University, we check for a number of aspects of Research Governance … even if some might seem to be outside the remit of an ethics committee.

Also, we may point out aspects of study conduct that one might think more methodical rather than ethical. These might often be marked as optional, or in the first instance we may just ask for a comment in response, rather than a change. And often, these may be things that should get picked up by good quality peer review.

9. Have you provided a reasonable justification of your proposed sample size. It's unethical to subject participants to research procedures if the study has no change of answering the research questions (e.g., a survey of 100 people to determine the prevalence of Type 1 diabetes) but:
    a. A small qualitative study with two focus groups of 4-6 people has considered the sample size; and
    b. A UK-wide social-media-advertised online survey must have anticipated a certain number of responses.
    Just show us your working.

10. If we spot mistakes in spelling, or strange/inconsistent formatting we might point it out – especially if this is in participant-facing documents. We try to ensure we marked these changes as optional, unless we think they are too numerous or serious that there's a risk to the University's reputation.

11. We may raise 'picky' issues, but this is often in an attempt to ensure that applicants don't commit themselves to something which then ties them down. For example, if you say:
    a. We *will* recruit 20 participants

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[2] This is standard procedure within the university. And indeed, SERB reviewers are sometimes called upon to review applications from other schools, if it's felt that we have more appropriate expertise.

Then you need to recruit 20 participants. Not doing so would, technically, be a breach of protocol. Whereas, if you say:

    b. We *aim* to recruit 20 participants.

You have sensible and pragmatic leeway, and it's no problem if you only manage to recruit 19.

Is SERB guidance out of date?

For many issues relating to data collection, data storage, data archiving/destruction, etc., we rely on other areas of the University. Therefore, throughout our documentation we refer to several other university policies and procedures. At the time of publishing our guidance, these links have all been checked to ensure they're correct. If you believe that the University guidance on a particular issue has changed, and SERB is out of step with current advice, please let us know, at serb@abdn.ac.uk.

Other SERB guidance documents:
- SERB Guidance 01 – Requirements for research ethics approval
- SERB Guidance 02 – Guidance for applicants
- Guidance 04 – End of study