



NatCen

National Centre *for* Social Research

Enhancing ethical
awareness through
increased ethical
scrutiny

The NatCen REC

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Britain's leading independent social research institute

What does ethics mean to researchers?

NatCen REC

- Why set up a REC?
- Issues to consider
 - Impact on timetables
 - Impact on costs
 - Impact on projects/clients
 - Facilitative, not a barrier
 - Need to get researchers on board, not impose more bureaucracy on them
 - Enhance ethical awareness, not deskill

How the NatCen REC works

- Three committees, one sitting every month
- Eight members (6 NatCen, 2 external), of whom 5 need to be present (at least one external)
- Applicants fill in “checklist” based application
 - One item ticked – full review
 - None ticked – expedited review by REC Chair
- Costs included in research costing (research time for applicants and expenses for running the REC)
- Research team encouraged to attend to discuss issues that arise

How the NatCen REC works

- No duplication – if ethical review done elsewhere (NRES, University) no need for NatCen REC to be involved
- Review at “high level” – generally no need to have all documents complete, ethical review sought at an early stage
- Ethics is focus, not research design or methodology

Research ethics checklist

- Checklists covers eight key ethical questions for consideration
- None ticked - expedited review
- One or more ticked - full review
- Vulnerable people
- Gatekeeper co-operation
- Sensitive issues
- Psychological stress or anxiety
- Prolonged data collection/burden
- Raised risk to researchers
- Financial inducement beyond normal payments
- Covert observations

(Particular confidentiality or disclosure issues)

Training

- Training for all staff of senior researcher level and above
 - Important, especially at beginning, to overcome “fear”
 - Explain process and aims
 - Get researchers to see it as helpful, not just time-consuming
 - Explain it is not set in stone – if changes are needed to make it work better, then the system can be adapted

Changes made over time

- Some minor changes to checklist, as so few projects expedited
- Virtual REC for tight timetables
- Where possible, indication of decision, or issues that need to be considered, provided during the meeting
- Simplified REC processes for repeat projects (e.g. omnibus, British Social Attitudes)
- Archive of REC decisions put in place

Ethical advice provided

- In the first year the REC reviewed 64 applications
- Mainly advice or guidance, minor changes
 - Leaving behind generic support leaflets
 - Improvements to advance literature (improving informed consent)
 - Use of third parties to recruit participants
 - Disclosure issues and following of NatCen disclosure protocol
 - Support for interviewers (and sometimes other staff eg transcribers)
 - Ensuring incentives are fair and appropriate
- Sharing of best practice and knowledge

What do our staff think?

- A review was recently conducted, to find out the views of staff whose projects had been through the REC
 - Completing the application
 - Experience of the REC meeting
 - The decision and follow up
 - Impact on projects
 - Other issues

Staff views - general

- Positive views about considering ethical issues up front:

“[The process of filling out the form] makes you think through .. things you perhaps wouldn't have considered if you didn't do something like that, or at least not in as much detail”

“I think it ensured that thought and process are put in place sooner than they would have done. Also ... very occasionally I think some smaller issues have come up and been suggested that wouldn't have been anticipated”

“Impacted in a positive way 'cause it made us consolidate our recruitment procedures and made us think about recruitment in a more informed way”

Staff views – the meeting

- The meeting itself can be daunting..

“The first one .. I felt like I was being grilled, .. Didn’t feel very supportive, they wanted me to say exactly what we were going to do and it wasn’t up for discussion. The second one was better in that respect, they did give me advice”

“Not that it is confrontational, but you feel a little defensive”

Staff views – the meeting

- But some positive points (shows level of expectations)

“I think it was a good process, some lay people there as well as people from other organisations, a healthy mix. The REC committee were really quite friendly, they weren’t there to trip you up or anything. Very constructive and helpful”

“I felt they were not trying to put me on the spot but that they were trying to work through some of the ethical questions with me”

Staff views – impact on funders

- Some concerns

“It is never a bonus. It is always going to have implications for your timetable and costs. I know ethical review in itself is a positive thing, but in talking to clients it is often a negative thing because they are expecting us to do the work in a short time scale and the REC adds time”

Staff views – impact on funders

- But generally positive

“I think it definitely did add to our proposal, as it was quite a contentious project; that we could say it will go through this process and we will be thinking about the ethics”

“It was a project they viewed as sensitive.. wanted to be able to say to the wider world when it got published that it had been through some ethical scrutiny .. it was in our favour that we had that in house”

Other issues discussed

- Consistency (by size of project and by REC)
- Follow up and policing

Has the REC changed things

- Pleased that the REC has not had to reject or radically change projects
- Ethical issues were being considered prior to REC
 - But may not be fully considered up front – more reactive
- Better sharing of information with REC, plus an obvious source of advice or guidance
- Best practice being communicated and refined
- Researchers not left to make their own decisions
 - Particularly important around issues such as disclosure
- Not a fundamental change, but an improvement