Guide for Departmental Research Ethics Committees (DRECs) reviewing CUREC 1A checklists

This guide has been written to help DRECs to consider applications for ethical review made using the CUREC 1A checklist. However, many sections of this guidance will also be useful for researchers preparing an application. An application consists of the completed and signed CUREC 1A checklist, plus relevant supporting documents, such as information sheets and consent forms.

The sections which follow describe how to interpret and review the checklist itself, plus supporting information.

The CUREC 1A checklist is the main application form for social scientists and humanities researchers, and has been designed with social science methodologies in mind. It may also be applicable to researchers from other University divisions and departments.\(^1\) The CUREC 1A checklist consists of six sections. Advice on the function of each section and ways of reviewing each section follows:

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\(^1\) If researchers will involve the NHS in their research (eg equipment, facilities, staff, data), and/or use health-related research procedures, please direct them to http://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/governance/ethics/apply for more advice. They may need to apply to an NHS Research Ethics Committee instead of CUREC or obtain NHS approval for the research.
Section A: Filter for CUREC 2 applications

This section has two functions:

- Firstly, it will direct applicants to complete a CUREC 2 form if their research raises complex ethical issues. If they need to complete a CUREC 2 form, please do not process their CUREC 1A application but ask them to fill out a CUREC 2 instead, which will need to be sent to the DREC for initial review. Once the CUREC 2 application is deemed to be satisfactory, the DREC administrator will need to send it to the Social Sciences and Humanities Inter-Divisional Research Ethics Committee (SSH IDREC) Secretariat (via ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk) within three weeks of receipt, ensuring that sufficient time is left for the SSH IDREC to perform a final review.

- Secondly, the Section A filter in the CUREC 1A application helps research with borderline complex issues to stay within the CUREC 1A application process if researchers are able to conduct the research using “Approved Procedures”. (For more information about the function of Approved Procedures and the types of research they cover please see http://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/governance/ethics/resources/ap.) If this is the case, they must provide the number of the appropriate Procedure in this section and the Approved Procedure has to be applied to all of the research. In general, a project may only proceed in this way if no more than one Procedure is to be used. If multiple Approved Procedures apply, or the researcher(s) cannot address all complex issues under one Procedure, they must apply using a CUREC 2 application form.

Section B: Project details and description

Contact details
The Principal Researcher is either the supervisor (in the case of student research) or the Principal Investigator (PI) (in the case of staff research). A student may still write the CUREC 1A application and correspond with the committee, in consultation with their supervisor. Applicants should state the name of their Department or Faculty, not their College. Applicants must also correspond using their University ‘ox.ac.uk’ email address (not their personal email address), and state this address on their form.

Travel risk assessment
All researchers undertaking research projects outside the UK will need to complete and submit a travel risk assessment to their department well in advance of their project start date in order to be covered by University travel insurance. The departmental administrator or Divisional Safety Officer will be able to give the applicant further advice on this. In relation to the ethics process, it is good practice to ask for a copy of this risk assessment form - even if it hasn’t been approved by the department yet - to make sure the applicant has thought about safety issues and how to mitigate any risks. However, it is not the role of the DREC (or the IDREC) to review the detail of risk assessments.
Dates
The project duration is used to check that the project will not exceed the maximum duration of approval (which is 5 years).\(^2\)

Initially, the applicant is asked for the duration of the whole project, as it is often the case that the element of the research involving human participants is only a small part of the overall project. This is why the applicant is then asked to specify the anticipated dates of engagement with human participants. If these latter dates are in the past, please check whether the application is retrospective (i.e. whether the engagement with human participants has already started or finished, as opposed to their course/project as a whole).

Please note that ethical approval can only be granted to applications that have been submitted before the research has started.

Lay description of research
Applicants should
a) refer to professional guidelines wherever possible (see also Section D in the CUREC 1A form) and
b) supply relevant supporting documents.

Firstly, applicants must give a brief overview of their project aims and what they will be asking participants to do. Long scientific methods descriptions are not encouraged, as the purpose of the form is primarily to review the ethical issues raised by the research.

Next, applicants should describe the type of participant they plan to recruit (inclusion / exclusion criteria) and how they will obtain informed consent. There are informed consent templates, including standard wording to cover a range of research contexts, available at [http://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/governance/ethics/resources/consent](http://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/governance/ethics/resources/consent) (examples include templates for a written and an oral consent process).

For online surveys only, researchers may adapt the combined informed consent process template in Appendix A of our Best Practice Guidance for Internet-Based Research at [http://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/governance/ethics/resources/bpg](http://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/governance/ethics/resources/bpg).

Ethical issues
Applicants should have received sufficient training in research integrity or research ethics, and have consulted professional guidelines as appropriate to their research area, such that they can identify the ethical issues related to their project and how these will be addressed. Please see [http://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/support/training/ethics](http://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/support/training/ethics) for information about research integrity and ethics training options. Links to professional guidelines are available at [http://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/governance/ethics/resources/guidance](http://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/governance/ethics/resources/guidance).

\(^2\) Per project, the approval given is for the project duration proposed in the CUREC application (calculated as the time between project start and end date in the project application). This duration begins on the date of the ethics approval letter. **A maximum of five years' duration of ethical approval can be applied for.** Should researchers wish to submit project amendments (see FAQs Section E) which extend this 5 year duration, they should notify the IDREC of this as part of the overall amendment notification, giving a brief summary of the research’s findings so far and justifying their reasons for extension.
This section, if filled appropriately, can be a useful “jumping off” point for the applicant and committee to consider the ethical issues involved. It is appropriate for applicants to say that issues will be resolved by the informed consent process. However, this then means that the process has to be robust and cover all the sections listed in CUREC guidance. Please see http://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/governance/ethics/resources/consent for more details.

Please also remember to consider the researcher’s welfare, as well as the participant’s. Please see useful information on Secondary Trauma and fieldwork issues for researchers at www.socsci.ox.ac.uk/services/research-and-impact/fieldwork/fieldwork.

Specific consent and data questions

- In exceptionally rare cases, it is permissible not to capture prospective consent, but only if the research aims make it impossible to capture consent beforehand. An example could be research which captures opinions in an emergency setting e.g. a frontline refugee centre, though it would still seem possible to deploy some sort of (truncated) consent process before seeking out opinions. Researchers employing deception (i.e. who are deliberately misleading participants about the nature of the research) should first check if they can apply the relevant CUREC-approved procedure (http://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/governance/ethics/resources/ap#collapse5-0). If they can’t fully apply this procedure, the researcher will need to complete a CUREC 2 application form.

- Applicants must then reflect more closely on whether they will collect what the UK Data Protection Act defines as “sensitive data”, i.e. data relating to race or ethnic origin, political opinions, religious beliefs, physical/mental health, trade union membership, sexual life or criminal activities.

- There is a legal requirement to obtain explicit consent for such data collection, and participants should be advised to add this to their consent processes. Again question 18 functions as confirmation of compliance with the Data Protection Act. DRECs should be careful to pursue the reasons given by applicants who answer “No” here or don’t answer the question adequately, taking advice from the IDREC and University Data Protection Office as needed.

- The next question is about responsible and secure handling of personal and “sensitive personal” data items. All departments/schools/faculties should have measures to implement the University’s IT Security Policy. Applicants are therefore encouraged to seek out local IT contacts who can advise on the best way for them to collect, transfer and store research data, especially personal or sensitive data. They should describe their arrangements here.

- Please note that, according to the Oxford University Policy on the management of research data and records, “the minimum retention period for research data and records is three years after publication or public release of the work of the research.” Research data and records are “defined as the recorded information (regardless of the form or the media in which they may exist) necessary to support or validate a research project’s observations, findings or outputs.” For further information please see the University’s Research Data Support website at http://researchdata.ox.ac.uk/university-of-oxford-policy-on-the-management-of-research-data-and-records/. At the same time researchers should comply with the Data Protection Act guidance from the University’s Legal Services office at https://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/councilsec/compliance/dataprotection/policy/.
Section C: Methods and procedures

This is a list of research methods and procedures. By ticking as many as apply, applicants can tell you more about what they are doing in their research, from which you can draw ethical implications. For example:

- If they only tick “analysis of existing records”, they may not need CUREC approval, if those records are already publicly available.
- **Snowball sampling** helps understand how recruitment will operate, and could in some cases raise issues of inducement, e.g. if one family member recruits another to a research studying inherited health conditions.
- CUREC has best practice guidance on the use of casual or local workers. **Covert observation**, in contrast to **participant observation**, has implications for consent and privacy. See [http://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/governance/ethics/resources/bpg](http://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/governance/ethics/resources/bpg).
- Similarly completion of **questionnaires in hard copy** versus **online questionnaires** raises different issues with regard to consent (see our Best Practice Guidance pages again for best practice about consent in internet-based research, including a combined informed consent template for online surveys). See [http://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/governance/ethics/resources/bpg](http://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/governance/ethics/resources/bpg).
- Confidentiality in a **focus group** will need careful explanation to research participants, including the limitations of being in a group setting on confidentiality.
- The capturing of visual data (**video recording or photography**) should always be justified if this is not obvious from the study design. For example, applicants should explain why photos are needed in a study whose primary outcome measure is coded interview data. Similarly, a study using an iPhone to record video of subjects being interviewed should justify why video rather than aural data is needed, e.g. because facial expressions need to be correlated with a subject’s manner of verbal expression.
- It is important that consent is gained from participants (or their guardians) for any **audio recording, video recording or photography** of and/or by the participant.

Section D: Professional guidelines and training

This section gives a list of professional associations, which are also available on [http://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/governance/ethics/resources/guidance](http://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/governance/ethics/resources/guidance). The list is not exhaustive and applicants have space to list other guidelines relevant to their work. They should read and tick at **least one guideline** to show they will follow best practice. If the project is outside the scope of the committee’s expertise, it can be helpful to look through the guidance which has been ticked, in case it resolves some of the envisaged ethical or conduct issues.

Applicants should then list relevant training. We encourage all departments/schools/faculties to offer or promote research ethics or integrity training (see [http://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/support/training/ethics](http://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/support/training/ethics)) to their staff and students (this can be delivered in a variety of ways, e.g. via online courses, specialist ethics face-to-face training or as part of a research methodology seminar).
If a project involves a particularly specialised or risky activity, researchers, particularly student researchers, must justify how they are appropriately qualified to carry out such activity. Principal researchers (see Section B question 1) are responsible for the qualification and training of all members of the project team.

For some studies with participants at risk and/or children, researchers will need to complete the relevant Safeguarding training and a relevant risk assessment before starting their research. DRECs should ask for a copy of the Safeguarding certificate and risk assessment for their records in order to ensure that the training has been completed. For further information about Safeguarding, including links to the online training courses and risk assessment forms, please see www.admin.ox.ac.uk/personnel/cops/safeguarding/. However, it is not the role of the DREC (or IDREC) to review the details of risk assessments.

**Section E: Signatures**

Signatures should preferably be electronic signatures (i.e. emails sent from the signatory’s Oxford email address confirming endorsement. Wet ink and scanned signatures are also permissible though it is hoped these will be phased out in favour of electronic alternatives. Non-University members should **not** sign CUREC 1A forms.

DRECs should **not** approve a CUREC 1A application unless all relevant signatures are in place. Staff need a Head of Department signature, students need a Head of Department and Supervisor signature.

**Why do we need a separate departmental endorsement signature?**

It is important for the department/school/faculty to endorse the project independently, even though a departmental research ethics committee (DREC) may be reviewing it. This is because the DREC reviews the **ethical issues only**, whereas a departmental endorsement will approve the project design and scientific methodology, in addition to the project’s ethics. By endorsing the project, departments may also be able to monitor that research projects are consistent with departmental research strategy.

**Section F: Final check**

This section is for the applicant to check again that they have supplied everything which is needed. This includes appropriate supporting documentation.

**Supporting documentation: how to review when supplied as part of the CUREC 1A application**

General advice on what kind of supporting documents applicants are expected to produce is found on the SSH IDREC application process web page:
http://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/governance/ethics/apply/sshidrec#collapse1-2. In general, DRECs should ensure that documents are expressed clearly and simply, with age-appropriate language. Specific advice on how to design informed consent processes and write associated documents is given at http://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/governance/ethics/resources/consent.

Researchers are encouraged to adapt the informed consent templates available on the CUREC website:

- Written and/or oral consent process templates: http://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/governance/ethics/resources/consent#collapse1-2
- For online surveys only, researchers may adapt the combined informed consent process template in Appendix A of our Best Practice Guidance for Internet-Based Research at http://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/governance/ethics/resources/bpg.

Each of these sections contains downloadable templates covering all the relevant sections needed for a complete information sheet, written consent form, and oral consent script.

The informed consent templates may not be appropriate for all types of research, for example ethnographic research. In the latter case the researcher may choose instead to follow the guidelines given by the Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and Commonwealth at http://www.theasa.org/ethics/guidelines.shtml and provide details in their CUREC application as to how they will obtain consent as appropriate from participants in the research.