



SCOTTISH LAND COMMISSION  
COIMISEAN FEARAINN NA H-ALBA

## Research Ethics Policy

### Introduction

The Scottish Land Commission (the Commission) expects that its staff and research contractors will follow the highest practical ethical standards in delivering research. In order to achieve this it is required that all staff and contractors involved in delivering research for the Commission will adhere to the following five key ethical principles:

- Principle 1: Sound application and conduct of social research methods and appropriate dissemination and utilisation of the findings.
- Principle 2: Participation based on valid informed consent.
- Principle 3: Enabling participation.
- Principle 4: Avoidance of personal harm.
- Principle 5: Non-disclosure and appropriate retention and disposal of personal information.

### **Principle 1: Sound application and conduct of social research methods and appropriate dissemination and utilisation of the findings**

Quality matters. Research done by or for the Commission must be based on robust and relevant methods. It is unethical to intrude into people's lives with methods that are unsound, unproven or unreasonable.

Research should not unduly burden respondents, and the risks of over-researching particular groups should always be laid against any anticipated benefits of the research.

It is important that evidence emerging from research is widely and appropriately disseminated in order to generate maximum impact. While responsibility for this will ultimately rest with the Scottish Land Commission, contractors are encouraged to highlight any opportunities to increase the impact of research that may arise during the course of the contract to the Commission.

## **Principle 2: Participation based on valid informed consent**

Informed consent is the cornerstone of ethical social research. This means that it should always be made clear to research participants that participation is voluntary and that they have the right to refuse to answer individual questions or to withdraw from the research process entirely at any point.

People should not be pressurised into participation, and they should be given sufficient information to enable them to make an informed decision, including on how any data collected will be used. The use of recording equipment requires explicit consent of the participant.

Consent may need to be renegotiated where respondents are being re-interviewed, and researchers must disclose the source of the original sample if respondents request this.

The UK Information Commissioner advises, in relation to obtaining consent for the purposes of the Data Protection Act 1998, that there should be some active indication that consent has been given. As a minimum, this means that researchers must ensure that they can demonstrate that they have fully informed potential respondents about the nature and purpose of the study, that consent is voluntary, and that they can withdraw at any time. Researchers must decide what is appropriate as a means of assuring consent in the context of any particular study.

Participants may request that their personal data be destroyed and may in some cases have the right to have it destroyed, under the Data Protection Act 1998. Participants may also request copies of research data relating to them via Subject Access Requests under the Data Protection Act 1998, or a request under the Freedom of Information Act, 2000.

Secondary data analysis, including systematic reviews and research synthesis, must be conducted in a way that is consistent with the respondent consent given in the original study. Where it is expected that your research will make use of methods that are clearly significantly different to those originally outlined to the participants, you may have to seek separate consent for research.

If individuals choose to take part in research, their consent should be freely given and any information likely to affect a respondent's willingness to participate should be provided. Participants should be neither overwhelmed nor inadequately informed. Relevant information includes the purpose and nature of the research, who is undertaking it, who the sponsor is, and plans for dissemination/feedback. Participants should also be specifically informed of any features that might particularly affect them and any consequences of participation should also be clearly explained.

Written information that is intended for participants' use should be produced in 'plain English' and in an appropriate font size (size 14+ for those with visual difficulties). Where relevant, potential participants should also have access to material produced in minority languages, Braille or in audio format. Any such requirements should be discussed with the Scottish Land Commission.

### Principle 3: Enabling participation

Researchers must consider how their research design could exclude groups or distort participation. In particular, the effect of research design on minority populations, those with caring responsibilities and those with physical or mental impairment should be considered. Consideration should be given to issues likely to act as a barrier to participation, and reasonable steps taken to address these. Possible measures could include:

- assistance with costs incurred in research participation - e.g. help with childcare, or transport costs etc.;
- appropriate venues for research - e.g. accessible locations for focus groups);
- provision of services - e.g. transport to and from the venue for those with accessibility/mobility problems;
- methods of data collection - e.g. offering a choice between self-completion and interviewer assisted interviewing in projects where respondents may have difficulty reading or comprehending written material;
- sample design - e.g. considering the case for over-sampling under-represented or hard-to-reach groups; and
- co-production/user-involvement - e.g. consulting hard-to-reach groups and/or their representatives on research design to ensure that possible barriers to participation are identified and minimised.

An appropriate budget for any costs that contractors expect to incur as a result of these types of actions should be budgeted for within the original project proposal.

### Principle 4: Avoidance of personal harm

Researchers must ensure that participants and the wider social groups or organisations to which they belong should have their physical, social and psychological well-being protected at all stages of the research process. A research participant may feel wronged if the research:

- is unnecessary;
- is inappropriately intrusive;
- raises false hopes;
- adversely affects their reputation; or
- causes them avoidable anxiety or distress.

The risk of perceived intrusion can be minimised by avoiding unnecessarily long interviews, ensuring research methods are appropriate to the research question and ensuring that research participants time is spent providing information that is clearly needed and not available from other sources. The conduct of research should also be sensitive to participants' private space and respect participants' privacy.

Researchers should try to anticipate and guard against any possible harmful consequences of participation in research. This includes ensuring that interviewers have been properly trained and subjected to appropriate employment checks.

## **Principle 5: Non-disclosure and appropriate retention and disposal of personal information**

Respondents have a right to privacy. The identity of, and personal data belonging to, participants and potential participants (including information about the decision whether or not to participate) must be protected throughout the research process – including respondent recruitment, data collection, data storage, analysis and reporting. Researchers should ensure data protection requirements are met and maintain the security of personal data at all times.

Researchers should also uphold principles of confidentiality and maintain participants' anonymity, unless specific permission has been given for disclosure. If permission is sought to disclose information then researchers should be clear about what information they would like to disclose and how this would be used. If permission has not been specifically provided then researchers must ensure that participants' anonymity is maintained and assume that all information has been provided in confidence, even if participants seem unconcerned about data protection. Information gathered in this way should never be used in any way other than that agreed with the participant.

Clear procedures should be developed to protect the identities of those identified through third parties (e.g. in snowball sampling, or sampling from administrative records). Participants' names and addresses must be kept secure and separate from their responses to reduce the likelihood of breaches of security and anonymity.

Personal data collected as a part of a research project anonymised or otherwise must not be used for purposes other than those they were collected for – e.g. marketing, advertising or political campaigning. Where anonymous data is to be used for secondary data analysis or training, particular care must be taken to ensure that the further analysis retains the anonymity of respondents. Special care should be taken with small or very localised samples, and with the rich data generated by qualitative research that could enable individuals to be identified from their characteristics alone.

Under the Data Protection Act researchers are required to retain personal information no longer than is necessary for the purposes for which it was obtained. In practice this means that personal data gathered during the course of research should be reviewed on a regular basis and securely destroyed once it is no longer required. Contractors undertaking research on behalf of the Scottish Land Commission will be required to demonstrate that any personal data is handled and stored in a manner that meets the requirements of the Data Protection Act.

**Date for next review: October 2018.**