Research and data ethics policy

Summary

The experiences of parents and carers inform all areas of Working Families' work: strategic decision-making, operational planning, service design and delivery, communications, and research and influencing. Additionally, the Charity gathers data from organisational participants, via the Top Employers for Working Families Benchmark and Best Practice Awards and through events and webinars.

The Charity routinely processes and stores participant (individual and organisational) data (quantitative and qualitative) and therefore expects that all associated with it (trustees, staff, consultants, collaborators, funders) reflect its vision and ethical values.

At all stages of a project, from planning through to delivery, Working Families' staff should consider relevant ethical issues and undertake consultation. This should include listening to those involved in the project along with any stakeholders, funders or sponsors. This ensures that all ethical decision-making is collaborative and dynamic, reassessing any ethical issues as the project evolves.

A key consideration is handling the voices, experiences and insights of experts by experience in a sensitive and ethical manner along with personal data.

These guidelines are designed to be applied across all areas of activity to ensure it is ethical and justifiable.

Objectives of the research and data ethics policy

- Support the Charity's commitment to inclusivity by recognising different perspectives and interests.
- Protect the dignity, rights, safety and wellbeing of all participants (including Working Families' staff, associates and collaborators).
- Provide a framework and set of principles to guide work involving participants (organisations and individuals) and personal data.
- Ensure that the Charity is working to the highest standards of practice involving participants in research, campaigns, policy influencing and service design and delivery.
- Provide information for sponsors, funders, clients and collaborators.
- Provide information for participants.

Responsibilities to participants

All Working Families staff, and collaborators contributing to activity, should work within an ethic of respect for all individuals involved. This means that individuals should be treated fairly and without prejudice and any data they share should be handled sensitively.

All staff should be aware of inequalities and asymmetries in social relationships, including those developed in service provision and through the course of research. It is important to reflect on these and create inclusive contexts for sharing information and insights.

Project leads should ensure that physical, social and financial barriers to participation are overcome. This will include consideration of financial remuneration for participants of panels, focus groups or interviews along with action to meet access requirements.

Project leads should provide a **Participant Information Sheet** (see Appendix) for all participants in research (surveys, interviews and focus groups). This should include information about the purpose of research, how it is funded and the advantages and risks of taking part.

In the context of research, researchers have a duty to share the outcomes of the research with participants if they choose to be kept informed. This could be through sharing an email with a link to the final report.

Project leads must consider how to balance maximising the value of a project to support Working Families' mission and minimising any risk or harm to participants or sponsors. For example, some benefits to participants may be compromised to achieve other gains or goals, but these compromises should be justifiable and, where possible, explicitly accounted for in the planning process.

Consent

Project leads must obtain participants' voluntary and informed consent to be involved in any research, such as interviews, surveys, focus groups and panels, and be aware that participants can withdraw at any time without providing a reason. The **Participant Information Sheet** (see Appendix) should contain information about participants' right to withdraw at any point.

Project leads must take steps to ensure that all potential participants understand what is involved in a study or communications exercise. They should be told why their participation is necessary, what they will be asked to do, what will happen to the information they provide, how that information will be used and how and to whom it will be reported. They should also be informed about the retention, sharing and any possible secondary uses of the research data.

The principles of consent apply to any possible reuse of data: for instance, if Index survey data was used by Working Families in campaigns or for other research purposes. If data are to be reused, this should be made clear when gaining initial consent. In some contexts, it may be appropriate to get consent from hosts of the data on behalf of participants.

Privacy and data storage

All members of staff should recognise the entitlement of both organisations and individuals to both privacy and anonymity. Processes must be put in place for all projects that gather participant data to ensure that it is made confidential and anonymised (unless participants are explicitly informed otherwise; for instance, employer case studies will normally be stored and published with the employer name included).

Only anonymised and disaggregated data should be archived for sharing with other researchers beyond the original project team. This must be safely deleted after six years in line with Working Families' data retention plan.

All project leads must be familiar with Working Families' data security policy.

Minimising harm arising from participation

Following these ethical guidelines should help to make participants of Working Families' projects feel valued and safe. Staff, and collaborators, should reflect on their duty of care to participants and minimise any potential risks throughout the project. This should also be addressed in the organisation's risk register.

Project leads should be transparent about any harm to participants that might arise as a result of the research or its publication. Any unexpected harm to participants (organisations or individuals) that arises during the research, or following its publication, should be brought to their attention immediately. For instance, negative publicity following publication may impact research participants who have given time and shared intimate experiences with researchers.

Appendix

Participant information sheet

1. Project title

[This should be a short and descriptive title of the project.]

2. Invitation

Working Families would like to invite you to participate in […] research project. Please take the time to read this information carefully so you understand why we are undertaking this research and what participation involves. If you would like any further information to help you decide about participating, don’t hesitate to get in touch. (See below for contact details.)

3. What’s the purpose of the project?

[Outline the aims of the project. Why is it important to Working Families? How does it build on previous research? Will it contribute new evidence? What impact will it have on policy and practice?]

4. Why have I been chosen?

[Explain why Working Families are contacting the participant. E.g. they agreed to participate in further research.]

5. What does participation involve?

It is up to you to decide whether you wish to take part. If you choose to participate, you should indicate your agreement to the online consent form [or by email]. You can withdraw from participating at any point and do not need to give a reason for doing so.

You will be asked to [e.g. participate in a survey/interview/focus group] which we estimate will involve […] amount of time.

If you have any questions about the project or would like to make a complaint, please see the contact details below of the project lead.

6. What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

[Indicate the level of risk and explain the reasonable adjustments that will be taken to remove any barriers to participation.]

7. What are the benefits of participation?

[Indicate that while there may not be any immediate benefits for participants, it is anticipated that the project will improve the quality of employment for working parents and carers over time.]

8. Protecting your privacy and confidentiality

The information you share during this project will be kept strictly confidential and will not be attributable to you. You [or your organisation] will not be able to be identified in any reports. Any data gathered about you and your experiences will be stored online in a password protected folder which only a small number of researchers have access to. Please view our privacy policy for further details.

Data gathered during the project may be shared in anonymised form for internal purposes and for other third parties undertaking research to improve the working lives of parents and carers.

9. Outcome of the project

You will be kept up to date with the progress of the research and will receive any publications.

10. Who is managing and funding the research?

[Insert details of the project lead and funder.]

11. Contact details

[Insert contact details of project lead.]

Shorter participant information section (e.g. for short surveys, or social media appeals for quotes):

This survey aims to [*xxx*]. Your responses are anonymous and will be stored in accordance with Working Families' privacy policy and research and data ethics policy (https://workingfamilies.org.uk/about-us/our-policies/). We may use your data [*give details, e.g. we will quote from responses in publicly available reports or other publications*], but we will ensure that any data used is anonymous and not attributable to you. If you have any questions or wish to withdraw from [*this survey/sharing your story*] after participating, please contact office@workingfamilies.org.uk.