

## Involving Children and Vulnerable Adults in Research

Clinical research involving children (i.e. under 18s) is vital to increase our knowledge of childhood conditions and improve healthcare for children. *Similarly, the involvement of vulnerable adults in research can provide a wide range of beneficial insight and evidence.*

*There are important considerations prior to involving children and/or vulnerable adults e.g. DBS checks, consent and payment issues.* Furthermore, researchers, professionals and parents/carers/guardians often feel anxious about asking children *and/or vulnerable adults* to take part in research, for example, because of potential risks or *perceived* burdens.

*The University's Policy on Research involving Children and/or Vulnerable Adults (link [here](#)) gives an overview of these considerations and guidance on how certain practicalities should be handled.*

The Nuffield Council on Bioethics has *also* published a report and a number of resources for researchers to consider how children and young people can ethically be involved in research. You can access these resources [here](#).

## Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS)

### What is DBS?

A Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check was introduced in 2012 as a replacement for the Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) check. It enables public, private, and voluntary organisations associated with children and vulnerable individuals to check the criminal records of individuals who are applying to work for/with them. On applying for a DBS check, an individual will be issued with a DBS Certificate.

### How do I apply for a DBS check?

Any individual aged 16+ can apply for a DBS certificate. There are 4 levels of DBS:

- **Basic:** this discloses warnings, reprimands, cautions and convictions deemed to be unspent.
- **Standard:** this discloses any warnings, reprimands, cautions and convictions the applicant has received.
- **Enhanced:** These checks are specifically for individuals teaching children or treating adults. They involve an additional check with the police to identify other information on file that may be relevant (e.g. potential danger to vulnerable groups).
- **Enhanced with barred lists:** This check includes reference to two DBS barred lists (adult and child) for individuals who have been specifically been barred from working with such groups.

### If I am conducting research with children or vulnerable people, do I need a DBS check?

DBS covers '*regulated activities*' that occur on a '*regular*' basis.

'Regulated activities' refer to certain roles that involve working with children or vulnerable adults, such as teaching, training, supervising or providing care. Research activities are thus not normally considered to be 'regulated' activities, but this is a grey area as a researcher might be working alone with vulnerable individuals and thus could be classed as 'supervising them' or 'caring' for them, or the research activity might be classed as 'teaching/training them'. **If there is a chance that the researcher will be left alone with a child or vulnerable adult at any time, then an enhanced DBS check must be carried out before the start of the activity.** This applies to all settings, including face-to-face research, and video or phone calls.

The 'regular' is easier to define as this refers to '*once a week or more, or 4 or more days within a 30-day period*'.

While your research activities may not legally require you to obtain a DBS check, some organisations ask that all individuals who are engaged with the organisation and who may come into contact with vulnerable individuals have undertaken a DBS check prior to the engagement.

Your DBS certificate needs to be in place ahead of the commencement date of any regulated activity within the project - this should be instigated approx. 2-6 months in advance to avoid potential delays to the regulated activity. The DBS check must remain valid for the expected duration of the regulated activity and must be repeated after 3 years. Currently valid DBS checks for staff or students do not have to be repeated for each research project undertaken unless the dates of the regulated activity within the project extend beyond the three year expiry limit on the current DBS check, in which case, a repeat DBS check will be required in advance of its expiry. This should be scheduled into the project plan at an early stage to ensure it complies with the Safeguarding Policy requirements. Research students who interrupt their studies will also need their DBS check to be repeated when their studies recommence.

### **How do I apply and how much does it cost?**

Basic and Standard checks can be requested by the individual via the DBS portal. Enhanced checks cannot be requested by the individual but must be done via a registered organisation on their behalf (i.e. the University). The costs of the DBS check for approved research activity will be met by the University, however should you lose your certificate then you will need to re-apply and will be liable to cover the cost.

To help you decide whether a DBS check is required:

- **Staff** should complete the [Staff DBS Risk Assessment Tool](#) Contact Human Resources with any queries using AskHR
- **Students** should complete the [Student DBS Risk Assessment Tool](#) Contact the Academic Registry Team with any queries at [rg.dbsteam@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:rg.dbsteam@northumbria.ac.uk)

### **DBS Clearance and Ethical Approval**

Applicants to the Ethics Online System should not upload their DBS certificate. Instead, the DBS reference number, and what level the certificate is (e.g. standard or enhanced), should be recorded in the relevant section.

### **Further Information**

DBS service on the Government website:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/disclosure-and-barring-service/about>

Safeguarding of Vulnerable Groups Act 2006:

<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2006/47/contents>

University Safeguarding Policy, under "Policies and Procedures Relating to Ethics": <https://www.northumbria.ac.uk/research/ethics-and-governance/>