

FAQs

Research Ethics and Research Activity during COVID-19

Date of Guidance: 3rd April 2020

The current situation regarding Coronavirus (COVID-19) is having a significant impact on on-going research and will impact on research that is planned to be undertaken within the coming weeks and months. The Research Ethics Review Group has received queries from researchers who have been ethically approved and from staff who are facilitating researchers to conduct their research in Tusla. We are offering some guidance to researchers and staff below to assist during the Covid 19 pandemic. The safety and wellbeing of all research participants, researchers and those facilitating research is a priority of the Research Ethics Review Group. This is a changing picture day to day, so we will revise any guidance accordingly.

In all cases where research is either funded or commissioned and/or supervised by academic institutions we strongly recommend that you seek guidance and clarity in relation to funders/commissioners/academic supervisors/RECs respective positions on whether or not fieldwork should take place during this time of restrictions and within the context of the government guidelines on social distancing.

Q. My research project has been ethically approved by Tusla's Research Ethics Review Group, but my academic institution has restricted face to face interviews and focus groups during the Covid 19 pandemic. What should I do?

A. This is a difficult time for researchers who have been approved to conduct their research. You may have been approved by Tusla's Research Ethics Research group to conduct your research using face to face interviews and focus groups. If this is the case, and your academic institution has restricted this methodology, please talk to your supervisor in the first instance about what can be done and explore the use of alternative methodologies that may still meet the aims and objectives of your study. If you do need to make a change to your methodology to complete your research, please contact the Tusla Research Ethics Review Group by emailing recadmin@tusla.ie and request the Approved Research Amendment Request Form. You need to provide information outlining your requested changes and how it may impact other aspects of the study e.g. quality of data, data collection methods, gatekeeping, time frame etc. Tusla's Research Ethics Review Group will review the Approved Research Amendment Request Form as soon as possible outside of the REC meeting schedule.

Q. I've started to recruit my sample in Tusla, should I continue?

A. During the Covid 19 pandemic, Tusla frontline services are being prioritised and are classed as an essential service during government restrictions and this may lead to gatekeepers you have identified being asked to prioritise other critical service matters. This may cause a delay for you, as Tusla staff may not be in a position to prioritise sample recruitment in the timeline you have identified. The needs of service users who have been identified as potential participants should also be considered during this time, and what is most appropriate for them, and whether engaging in research is supportive or an additional burden for them. If this is the case, please talk to your supervisor in the first instance about what can be done and with gatekeepers about their concerns and capacity. It may be the case that recruitment will be delayed until services return to normal business, which will inevitably create a delay to completing your research. **We acknowledge that a modified timeframe may impact negatively on your research and your projected timeline for completion.** If this is the case, please inform the Tusla Research Ethics Review Group of this and request the Approved Research Amendment Request Form and submit to recadmin@tusla.ie

Q. I've started my fieldwork in Tusla, should I continue?

A. During the Covid 19 pandemic, and in the interests of the safety and wellbeing of all involved, fieldwork may need to be postponed. We ask researchers to reflect on whether conducting research with staff and service users at this time is appropriate or an additional burden. This is to protect staff, service users and researchers during the pandemic. It is advisable that researchers stay in touch with research approvers, gatekeepers and prospective participants, who may have already consented to participate to explain the circumstances. Talk to your supervisor and seek their guidance, if applicable, about delays to fieldwork. If you are conducting commissioned research, please talk to your funder about the current situation and what can be done. Again, if fieldwork is postponed, or different methodologies can be adopted and facilitated, please inform the Tusla Research Ethics Review Group of this and complete the Approved Research Amendment Request Form and submit to recadmin@tusla.ie

Q. Should I submit a research ethics application to Tusla's Research Ethics Review Group during the Covid 19 pandemic?

A. The Research Ethics Review Group is continuing to accept applications in line with the schedule uploaded to this page. If this position changes, further guidance will be issued on the Tusla Research Centre Research Ethics web page. In consideration of the scenarios presented above and in the context of current restrictions please consider the nature of your research within the context of government guidelines on social distancing and whether, in fact, the research can be carried out whilst these restrictions are in place. It is unknown how long these restrictions and guidelines will be in place and it is strongly advised to bear this in mind when planning research fieldwork timelines. Student researchers must adhere to University Guidelines and funded or contracted researchers must consult with funders of research in this regard. If this changes, we will update the guidance. This may be a good time for researchers to work on research ethics applications, engage with research evidence and consider alternative data sources to support your research question(s).

Q. Can I use other technologies such as MSTeams and WhatsApp to conduct my interviews/focus groups?

A. A Crisis Management Team (CMT) has been established within Tusla to provide governance and oversight to Tusla staff and funded agencies during the Covid 19 pandemic. CMT guidance is being developed to respond to issues arising. Tusla ICT has produced guidance to Tusla staff on *Interim measures with regard to the restricted use of WhatsApp*. The guidance notes that *'There are many technical options that provide video calling capability. However, it is considered necessary to select an option that is already likely to be in use by all service users on their personal phones. Otherwise, to request parents, children or carers to install and get familiar with a new system or application will add unnecessary worries for them at this distressing time. At the same time Tusla must remain focused on data privacy requirements, and reach a balance in providing essential care and connection for service users while at the same time maintaining privacy'*. In terms of the restricted use of WhatsApp during the Covid 19 pandemic, the following is noted in the guidance:

The data privacy restrictions required will mean that practitioners cannot:

- Make outgoing calls, except when calling back a service user who has messaged them
- Make outgoing three way or more calls, however staff can be called into a 3 way call

Other digital communications noted in the guidance include mobile phone telephone communication, teleconference and MSTeams. Further guidance may issue on the use of other online platforms, and the FAQs will be updated accordingly.