

The Housing Agency

Research Support Programme

Ethical Framework



An Ghníomhaireacht
Tithíochta
The Housing Agency

1. Introduction

The Housing Agency's Ethical Framework provides guidance for those conducting research which is carried out by The Housing Agency's own staff or by an external organisation/consultant commissioned by the agency (including research commissioned in partnership with other organisations). It also provides guidance in assessing whether to support or facilitate requests by external researchers.

All Housing Agency staff and external consultants commissioned to undertake research on behalf of the Agency, must fully adhere to these guidelines. The guidelines below are intended to ensure that rights, privacy and confidentiality are maintained, that all research is carried out with integrity and transparency, and that the well-being of any participants are fully respected.

The Housing Agency acknowledges that these guidelines do not provide a complete set of rules for resolving ethical choices or dilemmas. New situations constantly emerge within the housing arena which require creative approaches to ethics issues. This ethical framework offers guidance – it cannot replace the need for self-critical, imaginative and responsible ethical reflection about issues which may arise in the course of research, but it can help guide and illustrate how to proceed.

2. General principles

The Housing Agency's key principles for ethical research are:

1. Research should aim to maximise benefit for individuals and society and minimise risk and harm;
2. The rights and dignity of individuals and groups should be respected;
3. Participation should be voluntary and appropriately informed, wherever possible;
4. Anonymity, data protection and confidentiality should be paramount;
5. Research should be conducted with integrity and transparency;
6. Independence of research should be maintained and where conflicts of interest cannot be avoided, they should be made explicit.

3. Ethical standards

If successful, and before commencement of the project, the proposal will be assessed for any ethical issues that may arise during or following the research. If any potential ethical issues are identified, the successful bidder will be asked to provide an ethical statement which sets out assurances on how the research meets the ethical standards required. The Housing Agency can provide guidelines on submission of an Ethical Statement. The Housing Agency Research Ethics committee will consider whether the information provided by the applicant adequately addresses ethics issues that may be encountered during or following the research. Any proposals assessed by the Research Ethics Committee that require Ethical Approval must obtain this from the Ethics Committee before proceeding.

4. Minimising Risk and Harm

In carrying out their research, researchers should take every possible measure to minimise the risk of harm to any individual. In particular, they must be fully cognisant of the implications or research involving “vulnerable” groups.

5. Rights of individuals and groups should be respected

Researchers should maintain respect for participants in all manners, and pay particular attention to minority ethnic groups, traditions and practices, and ensure knowledge of these practices before conducting research.

6. Informed Consent

In research involving participants, participation should be based on the freely given informed consent of participants (see Appendix 1 for Informed Consent Template). This implies a responsibility on the researcher to explain in appropriate detail (both in writing and verbally), in a language they can understand, and in terms meaningful to participants.

This explanation should include the following:

- What the research is about;
- The nature of their participation;
- Who is undertaking and financing the research;
- Implications in terms of risks and benefits of participating in the research;
- Why it is being undertaken/purpose of the research;
- The name and contact details of the Principal Investigator;
- Information about what will happen to their information, how it will be used and disseminated, stored and when it will be disposed of.
- That their participation is entirely voluntary, and that a decision not to consent will have no adverse consequences;

- That participants have the right to withdraw from the study and withhold information at any time without affecting their use of services or need for assistance.
 - That the researcher will be bound by any confidentiality agreement except in cases where information disclosed by the customer/tenant indicates a serious risk to self or to others. Where such issues requiring disclosure arise, they shall be reported to a Housing Agency Researcher who will inform the relevant body.
 - Any intended follow-up contact as part of the current or future research.
- They should understand how far they will be afforded anonymity and confidentiality researchers should be explicit in their limits of confidentiality.
 - Research participants should understand that they can reject the use of data-gathering devices such as tape recorders and video cameras. Research data, records or films should not be communicated or used other than for the agreed purposes and with participants' written consent. When making notes, filming or recording for research purposes, researchers should make clear to research participants the purpose of the notes, filming or recording.
 - Special care should be taken where research participants are particularly vulnerable by virtue of factors such as age or disability. Researchers will need to take into account the legal and ethical complexities involved in those circumstances where there are particular difficulties in eliciting fully informed consent.
 - In cases where written consent cannot be obtained, such as with recorded telephone interviews or where the subjects are illiterate, informed oral consent should be obtained by documenting on the consent form. Where participants have impairments that limit understanding and/or communication to the extent that they are unable to give informed written consent, permission where possible should be obtained from a family member or other responsible adult, such as a caregiver or guardian, before proceeding with the research.
 - Researchers should decide on a project by project basis whether the provision of incentives to recognise and value participants' time and input into research (e.g. giving a token of appreciation) is appropriate.

The signed consent form and the information sheet together are proof of the process of informed consent.

7. Anonymity, Data Protection and Confidentiality

Data Protection Legislation applies to The Housing Agency and accordingly any work undertaken must fall within the remit of the General Data Protection Regulations and Data Protection Act 2018. Accordingly, a Data Processing Agreement will be entered specifying the requirements to operate within the bounds of the legislation and Regulations. This shall include (but not limited to) obligations in obtaining, securing and retention of person data."

8. Our Commitment

- Research that is unlikely to contribute to The Housing Agency's purpose, or is in contradiction with the organisation's values, will not be undertaken or commissioned.
- We will only fund research which has an adequate and appropriate ethics statement, and which takes seriously the ethics dimensions of the research.
- Ensure that a review of proposals considers ethics issues. During review, research committee panel members will be asked to consider whether the information provided by the applicant adequately addresses ethics issues that may be encountered during or following the research
- Consider reviewer or panel member disagreement with the suggested project approach to ethics as either grounds for a conditional grant or rejection of a proposal (where it calls into question researcher competence or the feasibility or validity of a proposal).
- Consider suspension of payments if The Housing Agency review shows that a project requires major changes which will alter it so much that it can no longer retain support.
- The relationship between funders and social researchers should be such as to enable social enquiry to be undertaken as objectively as possible. Research will be undertaken with a view to providing information or explanation, rather than being constrained to reach particular conclusions or prescribe particular courses of action.

Appendix 1 Example Consent Form for Research Participants

Please read the following statements:

- I understand the information outlined in the information leaflet given to me (if applicable).
- I agree to take part in this research project [INSER NAME OF PROJECT].
- I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the research and the information that I will provide.
- I have had any questions answered satisfactorily.
- I understand that I may decline to respond to any question within the research process
- I understand the importance of providing a true account of the issues covered.
- I understand that the information I give will be treated as confidential and it will not be attributed to me in any way.
- I agree to my interview being recorded and once the research is completed the tape will be deleted. (If applicable)
- I agree to my data being stored on a secure server for the duration of the project

Please sign here if you are willing to participate in the research
