

AN COIMISIÚN TOGHCHÁIN, THE ELECTORAL COMMISSION

RESEARCH INTEGRITY AND ETHICS POLICY

It is a function of An Coimisiún Toghcháin (An Coimisiún) ‘to commission or conduct research on electoral policy and procedures, including on matters relating to the discharge of its functions.’

An Coimisiún is committed to upholding the highest standards of research integrity throughout the entire research process. **Principles to ensure the integrity of our research** inform all stages of the research process from inception to completion – from topic identification, to research design, data and evidence-gathering, data analysis and reporting.

These principles, which reflect best-practice in research integrity,¹ are that the research is:

- Independent and impartial and unbiased
- Transparent in how research is developed, undertaken, reviewed, reported and communicated
- Rigorous
- Evidence-based and underpinned by robust, reliable and valid information or data (in line with Section 2.2 of the National Policy Statement cited above)
- Peer reviewed and scrutinised
- In compliance with other relevant policies and safeguards such as in the area of data protection
- Inclusive and fair, and
- Applies **robust ethical values** where *research involves people as participants* (see Ethical Framework below).

In pursuit of these principles:

1.1 At inception, research topics are identified by An Coimisiún in a *transparent, objective and impartial manner*, based on best professional judgement and appropriate consultation. All projects are intended to further knowledge in areas that are within An Coimisiún’s mandate.

1.2 On application² (or at the planning stage if the project is conducted internally), researchers must:

- explain how they will ensure that the research is approached in a *transparent, objective and impartial manner* in line with An Coimisiún’s status as an

¹ The principles of integrity adopted by An Coimisiún are consistent with commitments to foster and ensure research integrity set out in the [National-Policy-Statement-on-Ensuring-Research-Integrity-in-Ireland.pdf \(iua.ie\)](#) published by the Research Integrity National Forum in particular Commitment 1 (page 6) and Section 2.2 Research Data Practices and Management.

² All requests for commissioned research will include the Research Integrity and Ethics Policy.

independent body and its statutory research mandate, including **identifying any potential conflict of interest**, and how it would be managed

- clearly describe the intended methodological approach and how it will be applied, based on their best professional judgement at the outset
- where research relates to under-reached, under-represented or vulnerable groups consider and explain how representatives of these groups and/or their perspectives will be reflected
- explain the processes in place for scrutinising and reviewing the methodological approach for the duration of the project
- commit to uphold An Coimisiún's principles of research integrity set out above and to undertake an Ethics Assessment, and an Ethics Statement where appropriate, in line with An Coimisiún's [ethical values](#) prior to commencing research.

1.3 From commencement to completion, adherence to research integrity forms part of the review process for each research project. While a description of methodological approach and a commitment to research integrity is required on commencement, at the submission of each research update and/or draft, and in final drafts, the researcher(s) will:

- clearly describe and justify the methodology and how it is applied when gathering and interpreting data and information. This includes setting out assumptions made, data-analysis decisions and protocols, logs of data analysis and providing access to data and records which allow, where appropriate, for reproducibility. This must be presented in clear, accessible language and for both qualitative and quantitative research
- clearly describe and document the research method and decisions on the data and material consulted where primary research and data gathering is not part of the research, for example for the conduct of policy analysis or a comparative analysis that draws on secondary sources.

Given that An Coimisiún Toghcháin's research is publicly funded, outputs and data will be publicly accessible and open source where possible including published in established research and data archives. The approach to such publication will be agreed between the researcher and An Coimisiún in advance of the commencement of the project.

External projects will have in place a review process with regular updates which is overseen by a project manager and a Steering Group comprising qualified, professional research staff in An Coimisiún and at least one external, appropriately-qualified researcher. Internal projects will be subject to peer review by professional research staff in An Coimisiún and, where appropriate, be peer reviewed by a sub-committee of the Research Advisory Group.

It is important to note that this policy is intended to set overall ethical parameters and general guidance and good practice which will underpin all research conducted for or by An Coimisiún Toghcháin. Given its broad scope, An Coimisiún's research will span a wide variety of topics, involving a range of methodologies and potential ethical implications. Where projects are considered particularly complex or sensitive from an ethical perspective, a bespoke set of guidelines and safeguards may need to be developed and these will be agreed at the outset between An Coimisiún, the researchers, the Research Advisory Group and other experts in research ethics as required.

ETHICAL VALUES, ASSESSMENT AND STATEMENT

Where a research project will involve people who contribute time, effort, insights and personal data (e.g. formal or informal interviews, surveys or focus groups), the best interests of participants must be safeguarded at all times. To this end, An Coimisiún's basic ethical values must be upheld throughout the research process:

- Avoiding harm and maximising benefit - only collecting data which clearly contributes to the objectives of the research and to the role of An Coimisiún
- Respecting the rights and dignity of individuals and groups participating, including paying attention to any identified traditions or practices particular to participants
- Obtaining informed consent from individual participants having already given clarity on the purpose of the research, why they are asked to participate, and how the information they provide will be used
- Considering whether participants may require appropriate supports including potential reimbursement of associated costs or expenses and if this is the case how it will be achieved ethically without impacting on research integrity or the right to dignity and independence of participants
- Protecting data – ensuring privacy and confidentiality with regard to the protection of personal data in line with the provisions of the EU's General Data Protection Regulation 2016 ('GDPR') and Data Protection Acts 1988-2018. Where data is being collected the researchers will clearly set out how they will ensure compliance with data protection legislation including their planned approach to data retention and deletion.

2.1 Prior to commencement, responsible researchers will conduct an ethics assessment which considers each of the ethical values as follows and prepares an ethics statement:

- Identifies any potential ethical issue related to each value and how it will be addressed throughout the research project

- Designs an informed consent form where relevant which
 - a) explains the purpose of the project
 - b) explains the relevance of the participant to that purpose and
 - c) requests consent (see sample form at Appendix 1)
- Sets out how any data gathered will be recorded, processed and protected, including its anonymity and its confidentiality, in line with GDPR and the Data Protection Acts and An Coimisiún's Data Protection Policy
- Identifies any participants which may be described as experiencing 'vulnerability' and notes measures taken to minimise exacerbation of vulnerabilities particular to the situation and or experience of certain groups. Groups who experience vulnerabilities include participants who are, or may be, unable to give *informed* consent (e.g. because they are children, have a language barrier that may affect their ability to fully understand, have a disability or cognitive impairment). If assent is sought, then clear procedures and protections are required.

Where an applicant's research proposal requires approval by the Ethics Committee or the equivalent body in his/her institution, documentation submitted and approvals received as part of this process may suffice if they meet the requirements here. An Coimisiún staff will endeavour to ensure any approvals needed are as streamlined as possible taking account of potentially different requirements across different institutions. This policy will also apply to research conducted by or in partnership with bodies who are not eligible higher education institutions (HEIs) or research-performing organisations (RPOs) such as civil society organisations or NGOs.

2.2 Where a project is externally commissioned, the Ethics Statement is approved by the Project Steering Group.

Where a project is conducted by staff of An Coimisiún, the Ethics Statement is approved by a sub-committee of the Research Advisory Group (RAG).

2.3 Adherence to the Ethics Statement by researchers is part of the regular review process for all projects set out at 1.3 above.

While the above processes are put in place by An Coimisiún, it is the case that all professional researchers involved are individually responsible for ensuring that they conduct research in line with the principles of integrity and the ethical values cited in this document.

2.4 For each project a protocol around publication of the research and future use by the researchers of any data collected will be agreed between the researcher/s and An Coimisiún.

Figure 1 – Ensuring integrity of externally-commissioned research

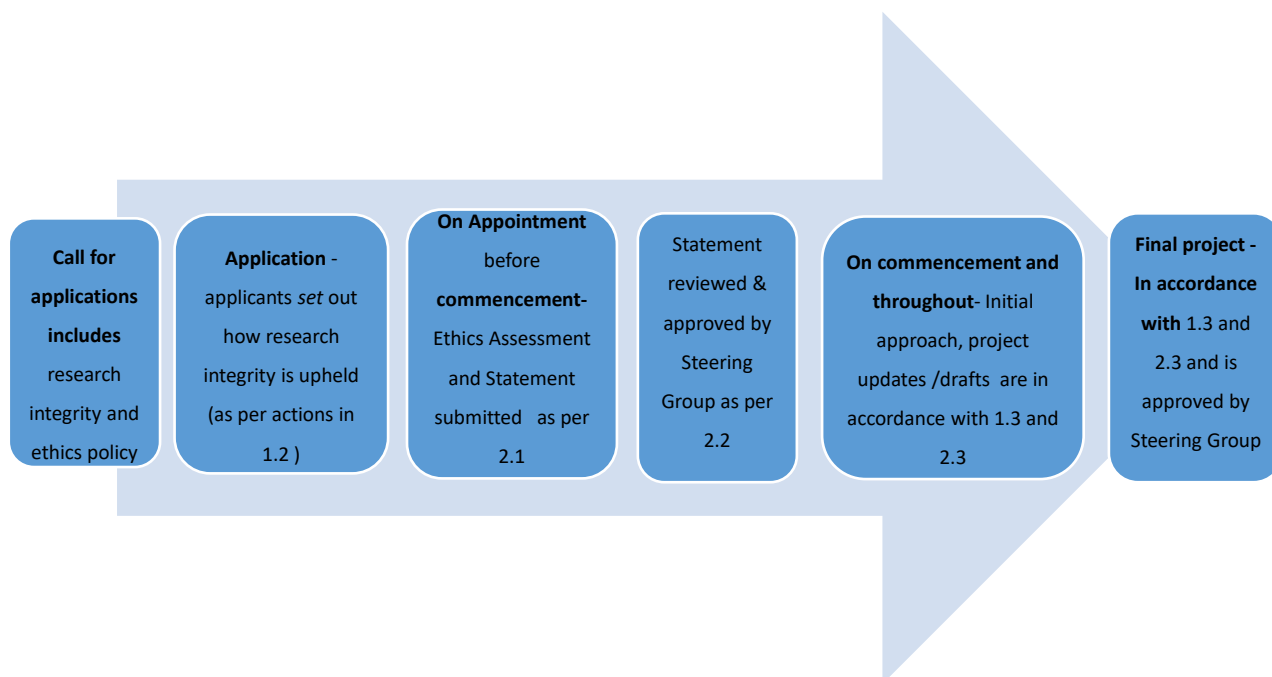
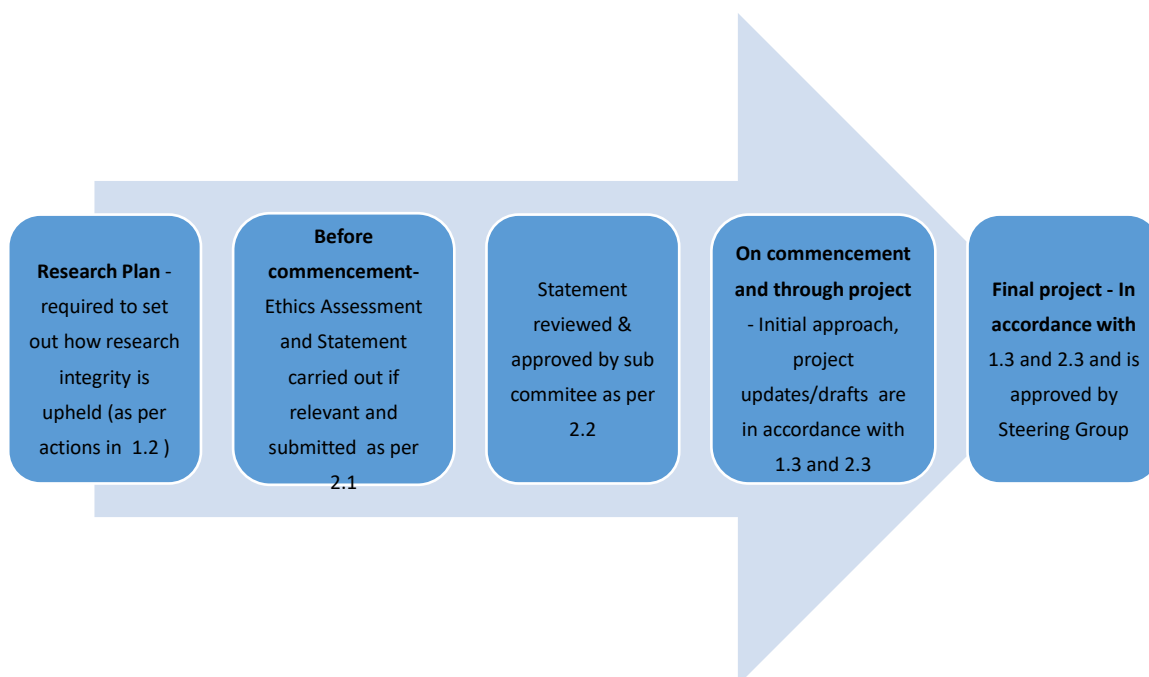


Figure 2 – Ensuring integrity of in-house research



Appendix 1

Sample consent form for participants

Please read the following statements and sign below to indicate agreement:

- ☐ I understand the information outlined in the information leaflet about this project given to me
- ☐ I agree to take part in this research project [INSERT NAME OF PROJECT]
- ☐ I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the research and the relevance of 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 that I may withdraw from the research at any time without consequence
- ☐ 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
- ☐ I have received information and contact details of the relevant ethics representative/ethics committee (if applicable).

Participant Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Researcher Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Appendix 2

Functions of Commission

30. (1) The Commission shall have the following functions:

- (a) to explain to the public, in accordance with *Chapter 5*, the subject matter of referendums;
 - (b) to review, in accordance with *Chapter 7*, the constituencies for the election of members to the Dáil and the election of members to the European Parliament and to report to the Joint Oireachtas Committee in relation thereto;
 - (c) to review local electoral area boundaries and report to the Minister in relation to those boundaries, in accordance with *Chapter 8*;
 - (d) to conduct research on electoral policy and procedure and make such recommendations to the Minister as it considers appropriate, in accordance with *Chapter 9*;
 - (e) to provide, to the public, information on electoral processes (including referendums) and to encourage participation, by the public, in the electoral and democratic processes of the State, in accordance with [section 67](#) ;
 - (f) to prepare and maintain, in accordance with *Chapter 6*, the Register of Political Parties;
 - (g) to oversee the electoral register in accordance with *Chapter 10*;
 - (h) to regulate online political advertising in accordance with [Part 4](#);
 - (i) to protect the integrity of elections and referendums against the dissemination or publication of online disinformation, online misinformation and manipulative or inauthentic behaviour online in accordance with [Part 5](#).
- (2) The Commission shall have all such powers as are necessary or expedient for, or incidental to, the performance of its functions.
- (3) The Commission shall, subject to this Act, be independent in the performance of its functions.