

Keeping Research Connected: Q&A

We have grouped questions submitted at both webinars into themes and combines answers where similar questions have been asked.

Versus arthritis research plans

Q: What if any resource are you allocating to COVID-19 research?

This is a live conversation within the research directorate and the charity on how best we can respond. We need to understand where we can make most impact, and welcome comments and ideas from our research community on where to focus.

We are already having conversations with researchers on how we can support them to adapt their research to support the global COVID-19 research effort, and are working with partners – Kennedy Trust, NIHR on how we can adapt our plans. As a charity we are also gathering lived experiences during COVID-19 to help direct our plans and provide support where it is needed most.

We will use our comms channels to promote what work that our researchers are doing in this area.

Q: What is the current situation with your research plans for 2020/21?

Current awards: Versus Arthritis will support any decision made by the host institute, to prioritise frontline care or COVID-19 studies and impact on the institutions. This means that many research studies funded by Versus Arthritis may need to be paused. The aim will be to restart paused studies and fulfil contracts. We have been working with many of our research community to look at current awards (e.g. no cost extensions). We are also recommending that any award not yet started delays the start date.

New funded research: On our current calls, we are still planning the majority of our intended calls for 2020/21. For example our fellowship calls are live on the website, however deadlines have been extended.

We are still working with MRC on the Advanced Pain Discovery Platform (APDP) although calls for consortia proposals have been delayed. Further details are available on the '[Types of Grant](#)' page of our website. We are actively exploring new opportunities that are arising with other partners.

We are reviewing our deadlines and ability to deliver calls regularly. We are also currently considering next year's funding activity and will ensure that all decisions or changes to activity will be published on our website

Q: Do you think that grant applications for research that won't be affected by COVID-19 restrictions will be prioritised?

Our aim is always to fund the research that will most benefit people with arthritis and which stands up to scientific and lay scrutiny. If proposed research will be affected by the Covid-19 crisis, then this should be reflected in the proposed start date and duration of the work. It will be considered in the review, but we do not feel it should impact on the overall decisions made.

Working with others in the sector

Q: What you are doing at the moment on our behalf in the wider sector?

We are working with the Association for Medical Research Charities (ARMC), British society for Rheumatology (BSR) and other sector partners to lobby government on the impacts to research and researchers and to seek ways of securing the future of medical research.

We are working closely with UK charities and overseeing bodies such as the ARMC, Association for Medical Research Manager (ARMA), Richmond Group and the Russell Group Universities. As well as this we have connected with some international charities including Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation in the US, who we have shared notes on responding and adapting to COVID-19 with.

We do have good connections with other national and international charities, and we plan to have further conversations with them to share important intelligence.

Supporting our researchers

Q: My research is stopped, what is Versus Arthritis' plan to enable additional costs?

We have offered a flexible no cost extension across the board. We recognise that us doing this does not mean that the award will not incur further cost. Supplementary funding requests will need to be considered on a case by case basis, recognising that some costs may be recoverable by the host institution from government and/or other channels. We will work with institutions to ensure collectively that we manage this well. We are doing what many charities are doing. As a sector we are pressing the government for a reasonable level of support for pausing and restarting awards. We need to balance the many competing demands on our financial resources at a time when income is reduced.

Q: Where someone funded by Versus Arthritis is now working to support the NHS, what is the situation with their funding / costed extension?

Versus Arthritis will continue to support salaries of researchers re-deployed to the front line. However, our expectation is that this will be recoverable as the crisis begins to come to an end from the employing organisation or government initiatives. Our expectation is that institutions will explore this and work with us to reach the best possible solution.

Resuming research

Q: How will we start up clinical research again when patients are loathed to visit hospitals?

Communities are and will need to pull together around applying novel approaches to resuming research activities. We need to remain in close contact on this. We are liaising with our professional engagement and health services colleagues to advise.

Q: To continue our patient-based research we will be required to adopt the same level of PPE as required by the NHS due to close contact. Should we be discussing extra consumable costs to over the PPE and extra cleaning so that we can resume studies?

We would consider that the health and safety of patients is an institutional responsibility and that local decision need to be made as far as this goes. We do not expect to routinely provide funds to cover this.

Furloughing

Q What is Versus Arthritis' position on furloughing research staff?

We have been working closely with AMRC and ARMA to clarify the Government's guidance on the furloughing of research staff whose salaries are supported by charities. The AMRC have received verbal confirmation that the scheme is intended to cover charity-funded researchers and that there will be a follow up statement with clarification and examples.

If you have staff members whose salaries are paid by a Versus Arthritis award who are unable to carry out their work, our expectation is that the employing organisation takes steps to furlough these members of staff and seek support through the CJRS.

Furloughing of staff is a local decision to be taken by the host institution and Versus Arthritis will support decisions to furlough staff where they are not able to continue with their research activity.

To ensure parity for research staff funded by our awards with those paid directly by the institution, our position on the top up of furloughed staff salaries is to follow the policy of the institution and we will require sight of this policy to agree any request.

Q: Versus Arthritis support many researchers salaries through the research grants and whilst no-cost extensions will be extremely helpful in helping researchers to complete their studies, how do you expect researchers to complete their research studies during those extensions with no salary support?

If it is not possible to continue with research at this time then your research should be paused or the furlough option for staff be explored. We will look to work with you to reprofile the funds remaining in the award once the research starts up again and although supplementary funding requests may need to be considered, some of these costs may be recoverable by the host institution from government and/or other channels.

Q: What plans are in place to communicate with individual institutions beyond writing to the PI, so furloughing can be discussed/planned in a cohesive and uniform approach?

We have been in communication with some universities but not all as we want to get a clear picture of the issues award holders are facing before we do this, as different institutions may be doing different things re furloughing.

Our position is that if you have staff members whose salaries are paid by a Versus Arthritis award who are unable to carry out their work, our expectation is that the employing organisation takes steps to furlough these members of staff and seeks support through the CJRS. At the point where staff members are not able to carry out their research related work, we ask that you speak to the institution and then get in touch so we can be updated on your plans.

Awards

Q: Can Versus Arthritis confirm whether the non-spend on salary for the period that research staff are in furlough, will be retained within the grant and that we will be able to use this to extend their contracts for the same period of time once they re-start work on the grant?

Yes the unspent salary will remain in the award.

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Q: Have you set a limit on the length of no cost extensions? Is it possible to consider a longer extension, perhaps in a few months' time when things are clearer? How extensions take account of maternity leave?

The three month no-cost extension was applied as an initial blanket response on all our awards. However, we can be flexible with the length of the no-cost extension if longer is necessary. Please contact your award team to discuss this.

The usual process for maternity leave should apply in that awards will be suspended for the duration of the leave. The no cost extension has moved the end date of the award on three months and then the suspension will be applied within this.

Q: With regards to the current Covid-19 situation, are there any significant differences between Centre and Project grants?

The option of a three month no cost extension has been applied to all our awards. We are not specifically delineating between centre and project awards but are of course aware that there may be differences in terms of support need. We will deal with these on a case by case basis.

Q: Do we need approval to move costs around in the grant, to adapt to changing approaches to delivering our research? For example if social distancing and video rheumatology clinics continue for the long term (say into 2021), what do we do about research that needs patient samples

We will consider the reallocation of award funds and scientific focus on a case by case basis. Virement request to move budget around will still be necessary so that we are able to keep accurate records of award spend. However, we will be looking upon these in a very flexible manner and respond to any requests promptly.

Q: I was hoping to organise some form of engagement with osteoarthritis patients. Is the VA patient engagement team developing ways in which we can do this in a socially distant world?

We agree that this current situation has opened up many opportunities to do things differently in terms of electronic communication for instance. This is something we will be watching closely as time goes on.

Telling your story

Q: Who should we contact to give news stories about applying current research to COVID situation?

We are always very happy to receive news stories from our award holders. We can summarise how you are adapting, the innovations you are introducing and the challenges you are facing to our wide networks so they can understand how our research is being affected. Your experiences also greatly strengthen the case we are making alongside others including the AMRC government on how the sector is faring and what it needs. These can be sent to researchliason@versusarthritis.org