Toolkit Stage 2
Planning and governing your research project

This stage is intended to provide considerations and helpful hints to help you develop and govern your research project, rather than be a comprehensive guide to the commissioning process.

Key steps

- Develop your project plan
- Convene an early research project steering/advisory group
- Clarify your stakeholders and primary target audience(s)
- Develop your research brief and tender document (based on Stage 1 activity and input from early research project steering/advisory group meeting)
- Commission your researcher (strong reputation; established and respected in the field; same objectives, interests and ethos as your organisation)

Theory

It is important to involve the target audience(s) for your research findings (eg service users, service commissioners or providers, policy-makers and practitioners) in the planning and commissioning stage of your research project. Early steering groups, advisory groups or reference groups serve some or all of the following key functions:

1. To build networks
2. To increase the likelihood of the research findings being used (as involving your target audience(s) from the beginning should help them to take ownership)
3. To identify your data or evidence needs
4. To help develop your research brief and tender document
5. To explore access to data by involving 'gatekeepers' at a senior level
6. To set the terms of reference for the group

In terms of governing your research project, continuing to have regular steering/advisory group meetings can also be used:

7. To support the research process
8. As a research quality control mechanism
9. To share knowledge and advice – to 'add value'
10. To monitor relationships between the key partners involved
11. To resolve any arising problems, eg with data access or within or between particular organisations
12. To facilitate your role as a 'critical friend'
13. To facilitate your role as knowledge and relationship broker

Organising (and/or chairing) these groups is a useful way to facilitate collaborative problem-solving through information and knowledge exchange but it is important to agree the exact purpose of the group, setting the terms of reference at the first meeting. Where appropriate, formal data sharing agreements between group members should be drawn up and reviewed regularly to avoid potential problems with data access further on in the research project.

Choosing your researcher

To maximise the chances of your research findings being used to influence the sector (and create potential impact), you should consider commissioning a researcher that is close enough to the sector to understand it but with sufficient distance and academic status to be seen as credible and independent, and with enough reputation in the field to be 'a draw' for your target audience(s). Independence (that is, independence from local authorities, statutory agencies and service providers) may not be enough to ensure audience receptivity and utilisation of the research. There is a careful balance to be struck between the researcher being seen as sufficiently independent (including from the funder), but with a high reputation and a strong (and sometimes partisan) knowledge of the sector. See Figure 3.

Understanding the internal processes and culture of the organisations you work with (your potential research users) and commissioning researchers who are considered 'experts in the field' and who share a strong understanding of the processes and cultures will provide the best potential for a successful outcome and impact.

Figure 3

Essential qualities of a researcher
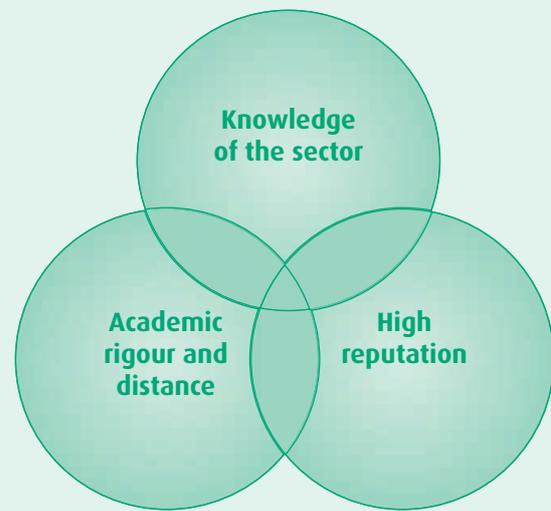
Things to consider

Who are your **target audience(s)** and how will you **consult them** at this stage? This may be informal through one-to-one conversations or small meetings with your existing stakeholders (who may suggest other relevant audiences/contacts) or more formal meetings with other key agencies who have a potential interest in the research findings. Do as much consultation as you can at this stage but remember that the research findings may identify another key audience(s) further on in the process that you may not have necessarily considered at the outset.

Convene a steering or advisory group to help guide the research project and provide you with a governance mechanism. Include all those key stakeholders who will benefit from the research in order to facilitate essential network building and to ease the knowledge translation throughout (see Stage 4).

In the first meeting (pre-commission stage) **agree the function** of the group. Is it to steer the research project process? Or to advise only? Is it to monitor operational processes and deal with issues raised by the research itself? Is it to help extract the ongoing learning from the research and transfer this to assist community project development? Do you need more than one group depending on the purpose and size of the research project? What are the resource implications of having the group(s)?

It is also advised to **monitor the function** and impact of the group against the original terms of reference to ensure that the objectives remain focused or that all members are clear if the objectives have changed. You could consider changing the dynamics of the group as the project progresses if this is necessary to remain effective.

Do you have a project **monitoring and evaluation plan** and is it 'research specific'? It is important to ensure methodological and ethical issues are dealt with before the research project starts, for example considerations around sampling, consent and confidentiality. For more information on building ethics into the research design, go to

www.ethicsguidebook.ac.uk/Building-ethics-into-the-research-design-8.

At this stage it is a good idea to develop a **dissemination plan or strategy** as part of the research specification. Do you or the researcher have a dissemination plan? Consider your aims of dissemination and whether there are different ways that the research could be disseminated to each audience. You will also need to consider all the possible resource implications of this (including any staff time

needed to help produce outputs and organise events).

How will you commission the research? By directly appointing a researcher? Or inviting a handful of known researchers to apply? Or holding an open competition? The National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) has produced a free guide to commissioning research which also provides a list of resources for further guidance and sample commissioning documents

www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/sites/default/files/document/commissioning_reserch.pdf

Helpful hints and possible pitfalls

Whilst involving policy-makers and practitioners in a steering or advisory group can create advantages such as facilitating essential access to data from key agencies or having a ready-made peer review panel, it may also create tensions or issues that you will then need to deal with. Consider monitoring attendance as frequent membership turnover can lead to a lack of continuity and understanding of the original research objectives and a change in commitment to the project. Also be aware of any potential conflicts of interest between 'strong-minded' or 'strongly-focused' stakeholders/members.

Early planning and confirmation of dissemination events as part of your dissemination strategy can actually become an effective way of managing reporting deadlines within the project lifespan.

Employing a researcher with a passion for and dedication to the cause and high reputation can often mean you get very good value for money.

However, it is important to ensure at the commissioning stage that they do indeed have the capacity to conduct the work to meet your specified project deadlines.

While it is a good idea to include researchers in the early steering or advisory group(s) to help with developing your research questions and brief, you will need to consider issues around **intellectual property.** For example, there is a possibility that you might use ideas put forward by researchers who are then not awarded funding for the work. Intellectual property is increasingly becoming an issue for research funders and it is important that this is considered at the commissioning stage (for example, to cover issues such as data ownership and whether the research datasets will be publicly available once the research is complete). The NCVO guidance includes a section on issues to consider.

Exercise/Framework

Develop your research brief based on the information gathered during Stage 1 and Stage 2. A standard research brief should include (but not be limited to):

- Research aims and objectives
- Research outputs
- Intended outcomes
- Research methods
- Research participants
- Timescales
- Budget
- Research ethics[3]

The Social Research Association provides further guidance on running a competition to commission research, which can be accessed at the-sra.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Commissioning-Social-Research-good-practice-guide1.pdf

✔ Stage 2 checklist

- ◯ Key stakeholders and target audiences contacted *(to gauge interest and availability)*
- ◯ Preferred researchers shortlisted and contacted *(to gauge interest and availability)*
- ◯ Early steering/advisory group meeting held and terms of reference agreed
- ◯ Research brief developed based on analysis in Stage 1 and input from steering/advisory group
- ◯ Dissemination strategy developed
- ◯ Researcher commissioned

3 In Focus: Commissioning research. National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO). London.