

In Focus: Commissioning research



Why is it important?

Organisations use research to develop their knowledge and understanding of a given issue. This can then be used to make a variety of operational and strategic decisions, from how to deliver services and products through to setting organisational objectives.

Within a campaigning and policy context, research provides an important tool for organisations to identify policy priorities and campaign issues, as well as inform and help secure changes to policy and practice. It can be used, for example, to assess the scale and nature of a particular problem, review its impact on individuals and communities, or identify possible solutions.

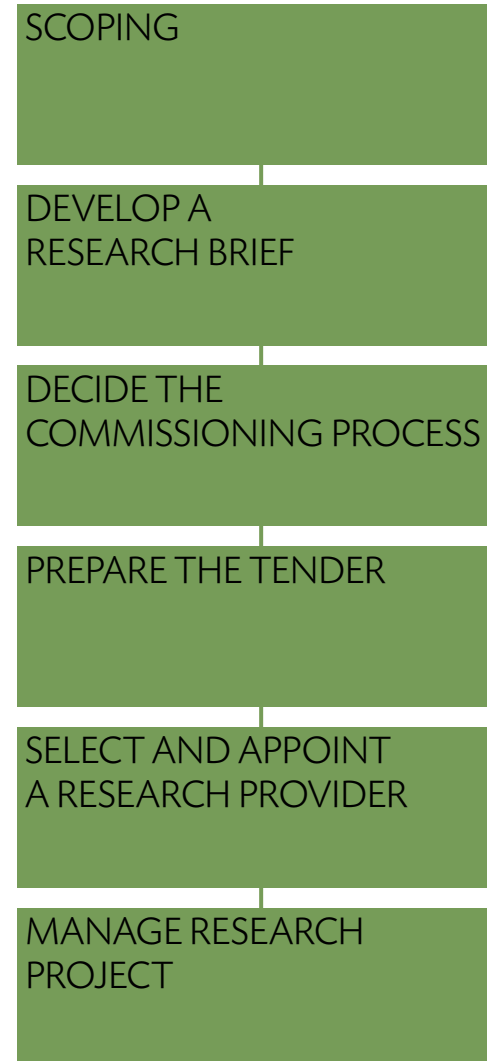
Most voluntary and community organisations do not have in-house research expertise or capacity. Commissioning research therefore is one way that organisations can obtain the knowledge or evidence they need to inform their policy work and campaigns.

'Research • noun *the systematic study of materials and sources in order to establish facts and reach new conclusions.'*
Oxford Dictionary

What does it involve?

Commissioning research is more than simply buying a service. Effective commissioning requires a combination of strong project management skills with a sound knowledge of research practice.

The commissioning process itself involves a number of key stages, from identifying your research questions and producing a research brief through selecting and supervising a research provider.



Where do I start?

Before you consider embarking on the commissioning process, it is essential to consider two key questions:

- **Is the research necessary?**
- **Is commissioning the appropriate route?**

The decision to undertake or commission research should always be based on a clear and identified need. This not only involves confirming that the research will result in the creation of new knowledge about a particular issue, but also clarifying how it will help fulfil your organisation's campaigning and policy objectives.

Similarly, the decision to go specifically down the commissioning route needs to be made for the right reasons. This might relate to insufficient in-house expertise and capacity. Alternatively, it might concern a need for the research to be conducted by an external research provider for reasons of independence and objectivity. It should certainly not be seen, however, as an easy option: the commissioning process can be a very resource intensive exercise, requiring a significant investment in time and resources from start to finish.

'Voluntary and community organisations often embark on a research project without fully thinking through why they are doing it and for what purpose. As a rule, we do not need more research within the sector; we need better research.'
Karl Wilding, Head of Research, NCVO.

STAGE 1:

Scoping

The first stage of any research project involves establishing the aims and purpose of the research. As part of this, you need to develop your research questions. These will form the 'route map' for the rest of the project. When drafting your research questions, consider the following:

- Can your questions realistically be answered by research?
- Can the questions reasonably be answered within the anticipated timeframe and with the resources you have at your disposal?
- How are the questions relevant to your policy and campaigning work?
- What information or evidence will be generated by answering the research questions?

You will need to clarify at this stage how you intend to use the research findings, how it will support your policy and campaigning work and, above all, what you hope to achieve as a result.

The scoping phase also involves finding out what research has already been done on the issue. The best way to do this is to carry out a literature review. A literature review can help confirm that your research questions will generate new or improved knowledge and therefore that your research is not duplicating work that has already been done elsewhere. It can also help you find out who the experts are on the particular issue you are concerned with.

RESEARCH QUESTION	OBJECTIVES	OUTCOMES
What you want to find out	What you want to do with it	What changes you want to happen as a result
Example: carers' organisation		
What proportion of service users eligible for Carers Allowance are actually receiving it? What reasons account for eligible users not receiving the allowance?	To test whether there is a significantly low receipt of Carers Allowance among eligible service users and establish the reasons for this; to use the findings to develop practical recommendations to increase take up.	To secure changes in benefit policy and practice to ensure that carers who are eligible to receive Carers Allowance are able to claim it.

Finally, it is important during the scoping phase to consider who are likely to be the key stakeholders for the research. These will include:

- potential research participants
- potential research providers
- individuals/organisations you will need to consult about the design and delivery of the research project
- individuals/organisations who might have a shared interest in the research findings
- external experts (researchers, policy specialists and practitioners) who will be able to advise on the design and delivery of the research project.
- your target audience(s) – individuals/organisations you intend to read and respond to the research findings
- research funders.

Establishing an advisory group or research panel can be an effective way of bringing together key stakeholders from the start. It can help secure the buy-in or cooperation you might need to carry out the research. It can also ensure you have access to relevant knowledge and expertise from both within and outside your organisation.

TIP: If you identify other organisations who share an interest in the research findings, consider whether you might want to collaborate with them. This could be an effective way of pooling expertise and resources, as well as potentially increasing the impact of the research.

STAGE 2:

Produce a research brief

Having completed the scoping stage and formulated your research questions, you should now be in a position to produce a research brief.

A research brief typically includes the following information:

- **RESEARCH AIMS AND OBJECTIVES** – what you want to find out and how this will contribute to your policy and campaigning work
- **RESEARCH OUTPUTS** – what you will produce e.g. report, film, toolkit
- **INTENDED OUTCOMES** – what changes you hope will result from the research
- **RESEARCH METHODS** – what approaches you will use to gather the information you require, what principles guide the approaches you will use
- **RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS** – who will take part in the research, how many participants are required and how they will be selected
- **TIMESCALES** – duration and timing of activities, including key milestones
- **BUDGET** – total budget, including breakdown of costs by activity
- **RESEARCH ETHICS** – what ethical issues are raised by the research and how you will address them.

ETHICAL RESEARCH CHECKLIST ¹

1. Is the research worthwhile and necessary?

Can you show that the research will generate new knowledge? Will the value of the knowledge gained outweigh the possible disruption and inconvenience caused to those involved in the research?

2. Have those involved in the research given informed consent?

Do those involved in the research – both participants and researchers, as well as those indirectly involved – understand what the research is about and how it might affect them? Will they be able to withdraw their consent at any time?

3. Will the privacy of participants be respected?

How will you ensure that the privacy of participants will be respected at all times? How will you respond to child protection concerns where confidentiality cannot be promised?

4. Are participants taking part on a voluntary basis?

How will you ensure that participants are not being pressurised, obliged or coerced into taking part in the research?

5. Have you addressed the potential harm to participants, researchers and others affected as a result of the research?

How will you monitor any harm arising before, during or after the research has taken place? Have you ensured the researchers have measures in place to assist participants who have been distressed? Are you certain that the researchers themselves have not been exploited or harmed by the research activity?

6. Have you catered to the specific needs of children and vulnerable adults?

If your research involves children and young people are you using age-appropriate research methods?

7. Does the research maintain appropriate standards of rigour, quality and integrity?

Have you declared any conflicts of interest? Do the researchers have the necessary training and expertise to conduct the research?

8. Do you have management systems in place?

What procedures have you created to monitor and review the research?

STAGE 3:

Decide the commissioning process

There are a number of ways to commission research:

1. directly appointing a researcher or research provider;
2. inviting a shortlist of known research providers to apply;
3. appointing a provider through an open competition process.

The commissioning process you decide to follow will be determined by a number of factors, including your budget, the size of the research project, the time you have available and whether you already have established contact with external researchers.

The key consideration here, however, is proportionality: there is little value following a competitive tendering process, for example, if you have only three months to complete the research.

You will need to check whether your funders have any requirements with regard to tendering: they may stipulate you follow an open tendering process as a condition of your grant or contract. Similarly, you may also need to check whether your organisation has its own procurement guidelines and whether they apply to research commissioning.

If you are either inviting applications or following an open competition process, establish the deadline for applications to be received and interview dates in advance. You will also need to consider who should be involved in the shortlisting and interview/selection process.

STAGE 4:

Prepare the tender documentation

An invitation to tender (ITT) comprises all the information that you will need to make available to prospective research providers. It may be collated as a single document or a series of documents.

Although an ITT can largely be produced from your research brief, you will additionally need to supply the following information:

- information about your organisation
- background to the research
- clear statement of required outputs
- intellectual property rights
- details of the tendering process, including how to apply, deadlines for applications, selection criteria and interview dates.

In terms of the application itself, you should generally require the following information from candidates:

- outline of proposed research methods and methodology
- timescales for delivery
- costs
- how they will address any ethical considerations
- requirements they may have of you as commissioner

You may additionally require candidates to submit a CV and/or examples of their previous work.

If you are inviting research providers to apply, it can help to speak to them over the phone before sending through the details. This provides the opportunity for you to explain the research in more detail and respond to any initial questions they might have.

If you are following an open tendering process, carefully consider where you want to publish or distribute the invitation to tender.

COMMISSIONING PROCESS

DIRECT APPOINTMENT

BY INVITATION

OPEN COMPETITION

STAGE 5:

Select and appoint the research provider

Selecting and appointing researchers is very similar to a job recruitment process. It is important to have clear criteria against which to assess each bid and a standard list of questions to ask all shortlisted applicants.

At the same time, however, it is important to build in some flexibility: allow room for the researchers to suggest approaches and methods you haven't necessarily considered yourselves. Use the interview process to explore all candidates' views on how to address the research questions you have posed.

ASSESSING THE QUALITY OF A BID

Do they understand the topic and organisation?

Are the proposed methods clear? Do they meet the aims/objectives?

Are the methods appropriate?

Is there a sufficient breakdown of costs? Is vat included?

Are they charging a day rate? Have they included travel and accommodation?

Have they addressed data protection issues?

Have they addressed ethical considerations?

Have they addressed intellectual property rights?

Have they included examples of previous work?

Do they have sufficient skills and experience to do the research?

Have they explained who will be carrying out the research?

When making your decision, don't be tempted to go for the cheapest proposal. It is important to assess each proposal against a wide range of criteria and weigh up the potential risks and opportunities of each potential research provider.

Before you formally appoint a research provider you may decide to take up references. This might be done either by asking them to provide references or by approaching previous clients that you already have contact with.

Once you have selected your research provider, it is essential to draw up a written contract or obtain some form of written agreement. The contract should establish what the research provider is required to deliver and the timescale for delivery. It should also address intellectual property and data protection issues, as well as other details outlined in the tender document. If changes have been agreed following the invitation to tender stage – such as changes in fees, timescales or research methods – these should be also be recorded.

STEP SIX:

Manage the research project

As a commissioner, your responsibilities do not end once you have appointed a research provider. From this stage onwards you are responsible for overseeing the research project from start to finish.

Before the research begins, it is ideal to agree how often you will need to meet with the research provider throughout the project, what updates or interim reports you will require from them, and any specific requirements they may have of you. If they are being paid in instalments, you will need to clarify payment dates and whether they will be contingent on delivering specific pieces of work.

If you have commissioned the researcher to produce a report, don't forget to allow plenty of time to review initial drafts.

What next?

Research is not undertaken so that its findings can sit on a shelf gathering dust. It is essential right from the beginning to plan how you intend to use the research, how you will communicate the findings and, above all, how you will make it accessible to those you seek to influence.

Any research process invariably throws up new research questions and areas for further study. At the end of any research project, consider how your organisation might address these issues.

Finally, don't forget to capitalise on the relationships you have established with the research providers and other stakeholders during the research process. These relationships may prove valuable in your advocacy and campaigning activities further down the line.

TIP: One of the aims of the newly established Third Sector Research Centre (TSRC) is to offer third sector organisations access to research to inform their work. To find out how the TSRC might be able to help you, contact the Knowledge Exchange Team at knowledge@tsrc.ac.uk or visit www.tsrc.ac.uk.

CHECKLIST FOR COMMISSIONING RESEARCH	
Have you identified a need for the research?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Have you clarified the aims and purpose of the research?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Have you consulted with key stakeholders?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Have you produced a research brief?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Have you decided what commissioning process you will follow?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Have you produced a research tender?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Have you appointed a selection panel?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Have you agreed your shortlisting and selection criteria?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Have you produced a research contract? Has it been agreed and signed by the research provider?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Have you agreed key milestones and how you will oversee the research?	<input type="checkbox"/>

Putting it into practice

If you have five minutes...

- Sign up to the commissioning research discussion group on the Forum for Change website. Post any questions you have on commissioning to other members or share your top tips.
- Read other guides as part of the In Focus series, in particular, Building Your Evidence Base.

If you have one-two hours...

- Read through the research guidelines listed below, drawing out the issues that are relevant to your own work.
- Draw up a list of research providers relevant to the work of your organisation. This might include academic institutes, think tanks, and freelance consultants.
- Carry out an internal review of current research practice within your organisation. A SWOT analysis carried out as part of a team meeting, for example, will help identify the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and constraints.
- Arrange a meeting with other organisations in the sector that have experience of commissioning research. Find out what processes and guidelines they have in place and what research providers they recommend, as well as what general advice they have to offer.

If you have one day...

- Draft internal guidance on commissioning research for your organisation. You might want to produce standard templates to accompany the guidance such as research briefs, invitation to tender documents, research contracts etc. You might also want to produce a checklist to help you shortlist and appoint researchers.

Further reading

Toolkits and guides

Commissioning Research: Good practice guidelines

Published by the NSPCC Child Protection Support Unit, undated

Research Ethics Guidance

Published by the NSPCC Child Protection Support Unit, 2009

Commissioning Social Research: a good practice guide

Published by the Social Research Association, 2002

Ethical Standards for Research with Children

Published by the Society for Research in Child Development, 2007

Commissioning Research

Presentations from a seminar organised by LARIA and LGA

Research Ethics Framework

Published by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)

Sample research tenders and commissioning documents

Research tender document template and guidance

Published by the NSPCC Child Protection Support Unit, undated

Research Contract – standard terms and conditions

Published by the Equalities and Human Rights Commission, undated

Online resources

Voluntary Sector Studies Network
www.vssn.org.uk

Social Research Association
www.the-sra.org.uk

National Centre for Social Research
www.natcen.ac.uk/

Market Research Society
www.mrs.org.uk

ESRC Third Sector Research Centre
[www.socsci.bham.ac.uk/research/
Third_Sector_Research_Centre/](http://www.socsci.bham.ac.uk/research/Third_Sector_Research_Centre/)

About Campaigning Effectiveness, NCVO

Campaigning Effectiveness, NCVO

supports and empowers people and organisations to change their world through campaigning and influencing policy. We bring together experience and expertise and drive excellence in campaigning and policy work across civil society by providing support, knowledge, tools and resources. For further information about our work go to www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/campaigningeffectiveness

About Forum for Change

The Forum for Change is a network for people influencing policy and campaigning for change across the voluntary and community sector. Membership is free and open to everyone. To join or for further information go to www.forumforchange.org.uk or email forumforchange@ncvo-vol.org.uk

About In Focus

In Focus guide are produced for Forum for Change members as part of the Policy Skills Development Programme. They accompany the Getting You Started factsheet series and In Practice case study series, all of which can be found at: www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/campaigningeffectiveness/resources

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