

New European judgment affects commissioning

A recent European legal judgment is set to affect the way research is commissioned. Although it is not yet clear how it will work, the social research profession needs to address the issues quickly. [Alan Hedges](#) outlines the likely implications.

Alcatel, a communications company, thought it had been excluded from a European public contract by an unfair bidding process. The only way to challenge this at the time was through civil contract law, and damages the only redress. Alcatel went to the European Court of Justice (ECJ) arguing that bidders should have a right to challenge procurement decisions before it is too late to change them, and that an unfair decision to award a contract should be set aside and the contract re-awarded.

The ECJ ruled in Alcatel's favour, and in February 2004 the European Commission issued a new directive requiring member states to make it possible for bidders to challenge the outcome of a public procurement contract in their national courts. It must, therefore, be possible to suspend and annul a decision to award at a stage where any infringement can still be put right.

The directive is to be incorporated into UK law by December 2005, and the Office for Government Commissioning (OGC) expects implementation by mid-2005.

Implications for research commissioning

The implications for research commissioning are considerable. The UK has already seen at least one such challenge. An already-awarded contract had to be suspended pending investigation and although the original decision was eventually confirmed, it caused difficulties for commissioner and contractor alike.

Scope of change

The scope of the change is not clear, but will presumably only apply to contracts subject to the European procurement regulations and above EC thresholds. There may be exemptions – for example for very urgent projects. The

directive covers all procurement activity, of which social research is only a minute part.

OGC's view is that the directive will apply to framework agreements at the point where the framework itself is being tendered but not to the award of single-contractor projects within an established framework.

Standstill period

OGC is talking about a mandatory standstill period of perhaps 15 days between announcing a decision to award and issuing a contract. The standstill would start from the point when all unsuccessful competitors had been informed about the outcome; until then they would not be in a position to mount any challenge. Unless there is a challenge by the end of this period, the contract would proceed as normal.

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Grounds for challenge

Challenges must allege unfair or improper operation of the contractual process, but it is not clear what might reasonably be considered unfair. Someone without previous experience of the study field might argue that awarding a contract to someone with such experience is evidence of an unlevel playing field, but that notion of unfairness savours of the madhouse.

Resolving challenges

A challenged contract award would need to be suspended pending investigation and resolution. How this will happen is again unclear, and procedures are still to be worked out.

The directive says that decisions must be capable of challenge in national courts, but that would need to be a last resort since court action is slow and costly and probably only available to large and wealthy players.

If the parties accepted the outcome that would end the matter, but it might not be accepted as fair because it is not independent. It could not prejudice an unsatisfied contender's right to take court action.

OGC was considering an independent agency set up to determine challenges, but it is not clear if that is still an option. It might be quicker and more satisfactory than court action, but much would depend on how it was resourced and operated. It could prove a bureaucratic quagmire, and an agency handling the full range of procurement would not understand much about the

specific research context.

If the challenge is not finally sustained, the contract proceeds as originally planned. If it is sustained, the contract is presumably re-awarded to someone other than the supplier originally chosen. It is not clear how this would be done – it might need to vary according to the circumstances. Re-awarding automatically to the successful challenger, does not seem satisfactory because the fact that the procedure was flawed does not necessarily mean that the challenger would (or should) have been successful if it had not been flawed – some other competitor might then have risen to the top of the list. Depending on the nature of the flaw, it might be necessary to re-evaluate all the submissions or even to re-run the whole competition, a time-consuming, costly and unpredictable process.

Possible impact of these changes

The impact of the above changes and are still unclear, but could include:

- Extended timescales: at best, assuming no challenge, this means allowing a couple of weeks extra in the timetable. But any challenge will entail further delay, unpredictable in length, and possibly considerable if the challenge goes through the courts. Timescales need to allow for the possibility of a challenge, even if none materialises.
- Cost and resource implications for the commissioning body in making available unforeseeable amounts of time and money to deal with challenges: unless properly resourced, this would impact on staff and budgets, adversely affecting other contracts.

- Potential effect on the way the commissioning system operates: if forced on the defensive, research buyers might devote disproportionate time and attention to minimising the risk of challenges instead of optimising the quality, usefulness and cost effectiveness of what they are buying. SRA has argued for more flexible, informal and face-to-face approaches to commissioning, but the impact of this judgment might be to nudge the system in the opposite direction towards arms-length, legalistic and rigidly paper-based methods. The contractual tail should not be allowed to wag the operational dog, but unless commissioners make a sensible, decisive and timely response to the changed situation that may well become more rather than less likely. OGC has been considering audit or attestation of procurement procedures as possible ways of minimising challenges. These could be beneficial, but are more likely to trigger defensive and fail-safe reactions; much depends on how they are conceived and implemented. Informal approaches to dispute resolution were also under discussion, perhaps a more promising approach.
- Research quality: if it increases arms-length rigidity, the effect will be negative. Successful challenges which over-ride poor decisions could be beneficial for the research, but only if decided on grounds of capability and fitness for the project. I doubt the courts will get involved in (or be competent to adjudicate) research merits; they will look at procedural fairness (a valid concern, but not synonymous with quality).

- Uncertainty will increase for all players. Should buyers plan on the assumption that there will be no challenge, or should they factor in time and resources just in case? Successful bidders will be in the tantalising position of expecting to have to do the work, but being unable to book time and resources to carry it out.
- Litigation over bids may be necessary in extreme cases, but even the threat of litigation can harm co-operative relationships, which are so essential in social research. Litigation has been rare in our field; if this is because the available mechanisms have been limited, we may now see a disruptive upsurge of challenges. The cost of court action could deter 'frivolous' or 'vexatious' challenges, but the courts may not be the only route, not should they be, since the cost might also deter reasonable challenges from less affluent research organisations.

Taking action

- **The SRA is considering the implications and will contribute to the decision-making process.**
- **Research commissioners need to plan responses; put procedures and resources in place; and ensure these fit with good commissioning practice.**
- **Research organisations and practitioners need to be aware of developments and engage with the change as constructively as possible.**

New year, new look, new office



By *Ceridwen Roberts, Chair*

2005 promises to be a year of change. We have started with a fresh look for the SRA News. Content changes will follow as new commissioning editor, Chris Goulden, gets into the swing from the next issue. In January, we moved into our new office in response to continuing growth of membership, activities and staff. **Please use the new address and phone number given below.**

New status

We are urgently considering our legal status. More activity and income make it important to ensure we have the legal framework to meet our needs. Professional bodies and learned societies are typically becoming incorporated charities. There are advantages to the SRA doing likewise, and the executive has asked me to review the options and report back in March. Such changes may require revisions to our constitution, which was written some 26 years ago for very different circumstances, and so long overdue.

Office support

We will shortly be advertising for more office support to service the growing number of events and training courses. Recruitment for a part-time director is on hold until some of the constitutional issues are resolved and we are clearer about the financial implications of the changes.

Supporting members

Many of you have sought our advice about ethical matters. Our two-day ethical training workshop in March aims to help people with ethical issues so if this is a concern, do enrol for it.

Many members complained about bad commissioning practice over the recent holiday period. The worst example was a specification issued on 20 December with a closing date of 5 January! This is appalling, and we are keen to hear of other examples so that we can bring them to the attention of the commissioning working group which is dealing with practice issues.

The Alcatel judgment (see leader article by Alan Hedges) is also of serious concern, and the SRA is actively pursuing this with the Office of Government Commerce and the Chief Social Researcher.

The Freedom of Information Act is now in force. We are considering its effects on researchers now and in the longer term, and will keep you posted.

SRA NEW ADDRESS: 175-185 Gray's Inn Road, London WC1X 8UP
Our new number is 020 7812 0634

Making a difference: improving the impact of social research

*Over 200 social researchers crammed into a packed conference at the Institute of Education in London eager to debate how social research might make more impact. Through a mix of plenary sessions and workshops, researchers, research users and funders from across the UK gave their views and top tips for good practice in influencing, dissemination and participation. The speakers gave the conference much to think about. **Tina Haux** reports.*



Participants find much to discuss



Panel members. From left: Barry Shearman MP, Ann Bridgwood and Waqar Ahmad

John Graham from the Audit Commission discussed the extent to which research influences policy. He cited examples such as the EPPI study and the Perry Pre-school Project which were the basis for Sure Start, and the National Audit Office report Misspent Youth and Youth Justice policies. However, research has been ignored or used selectively in other major policy developments such as the recent alcohol strategy, 'bobbies on the beat' and incarceration policies. Research can be 'strong' or 'weak' according to its ability to influence policy. 'Strong' research includes systematic reviews, evaluation, cost benefit analysis, random controlled trials and longitudinal data while 'weak' research includes theoretical, single method, unprofessional or 'unreal' research. Researchers should become experts on what works by being aware of past and international developments, and also by better anticipating research needs.

Anne Harrop from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) and Helen Barnard from BMRB introduced research commissioned by JRF into how its audience accesses research. They said that research findings are best presented in a range of ways such as personalised letters, road shows, parliamentary channels, meetings with key influencers and alliances with likeminded groups; that influencing requires as much money as the research; and that influencing and researching are different skills.

Waqar Ahmad called on researchers to respect the links between theory, methods and policies. Otherwise, research can be unethical and a waste of both resources and goodwill. More emphasis on better dialogue with those involved and creative dissemination would improve the impact of research. He also recommended that researchers insist on a more critical definition of relevance as the current emphasis on policy relevance risks being too short-term and applied.

Barry Shearman, MP and chair of the Education Select Committee, said that committees rely on research to accompany and scrutinise the work of government departments. He encouraged participants to approach select committees when they have high quality research relevant for planned or ongoing investigations, and also to help put topics on the agenda.

Ivor Garber advised on dealing with the media. Researchers should know the media readership, the journalists specialising in their field, the media news values, the news agenda, what they want (and don't want) to say and how they will say it (using plain language and illustrations and preparing). He encouraged researchers to contact journalists about interesting and relevant research findings.

See next page to find out who won the Mark Abrams prize awarded at the conference.

SRA announces winners of 2004 Mark Abrams prize

Daniel Guinea and Peter Betts from the Office for National Statistics are the winners of the 2004 Mark Abrams prize. Their winning entry 'Applying cognitive models to question testing of the UK Labour Force Survey questions about economic activity' is on the SRA website (www.the-sra.org.uk).



From left: Peter Betts and Daniel Guinea are congratulated by Dominic Abrams

The prize was awarded at the SRA annual conference held at the Institute of Education in December by Dominic Abrams, grandson of Mark Abrams.

There were six entries for the prize and it was not easy to select just one. All entries dealt with topics of importance in contemporary Britain, and some gave a refreshing consideration of world issues. There was evidence of originality, critical and reflective commentary and many good ideas.

The judges came to their decision because they thought that the Guinea and Betts submission fits well in the tradition of real survey research for which Mark Abrams was famous. They liked the high quality of the methodological research and the fact that that the findings could have important policy implications. They commended the essay because it was a delight to read and very well presented.

Daniel Guinea currently works as a social researcher in the longitudinal analysis team at ONS and has previously worked in the statistical analysis centre of expertise and the Qualitative Methods Applied to Surveys (QMAS) team. Before his current post, he worked as a teaching assistant and reader at the University of California at San Diego and as a research assistant at the European University Institute

at Florence. Peter Betts has worked as a qualitative methodologist in the QMAS team at ONS since 1999. Before his current post, he gained experience of quantitative surveys in the ONS Social Survey Division working on the family expenditure survey and the family resources survey.

The Mark Abrams prize was first awarded in 1986 to celebrate his 80th birthday. Mark Abrams died in 1994. The prize is traditionally awarded for the piece of work which in the opinion of the judges best

links survey research, social policy and social theory and as such, carries on his work. The competition had not been held for some years so it was pleasing to receive six good entries. The judges were Nick Moon, Martin Bulmer, Dominic Abrams, Jean Martin, John Hall, Janet Lewis and Susanne MacGregor. Conflicts of interest were declared where they arose, and judges did not rate or comment on those entries with which they had a conflict of interest.

Susanne MacGregor

2005 MARK ABRAMS PRIZE CALL FOR ENTRIES

The SRA Executive is pleased to announce the 2005 competition for the Mark Abrams prize.

Entries and nominations are open to social scientists of any age and nationality working in the UK. Entries, which should be original work, should be in English and not more than 6,000 words. It is possible to submit recently published or forthcoming work. In the case of the former, this should not have been published earlier than 2005. No particular theme is set, but preference will be given to theoretically-informed empirical work concerned with the UK. Secondary analysis of survey data would be especially welcome. The panel of judges will take due account of the age, experience and circumstances of authors, and reserves the right not to award a prize.

The prize, if awarded, is worth £250 and will be presented at the annual conference of the SRA in December. Prize-winning entries may also, by agreement, be placed on the SRA website. Entries and nominations (six copies), together with brief biographical details of the author(s), should be sent to Suzanne Cohen at the SRA Office by 30th September 2005.

Further information about Dr Mark Abrams, previous winners and details of how to enter are on the SRA website www.the-sra.org.uk

SRA SCOTLAND : *Chris Nicol gives a round up of activities in Scotland.*

Hello and goodbye

We are pleased to welcome two new members Chris Creagan and Iain Binnie but sorry to say good-bye to Chris Martin (it's a rule that there can be no more than four Chris's on the committee at any one time!).

Seminar on youth action team

In November, Mike Forrester of Edinburgh Youth Social Inclusion Partnership and I presented a paper which examined the work of the Lothian and Borders Police Youth Action Team. Although the research looked at the first year of the project, we were able to indicate that it has had an impact on the attitudes of local young people and the community as well as the number of youth calls coming into the police.

Seminar on internet polls

Our first seminar of the year took place on 10 February when Professor John Curtice of Strathclyde University talked about the use of internet polls to predict election results.

Demand for training

In response to demand, we ran a further qualitative training course in January. See www.the-sra.org.uk for details of SRA Scotland training.

SRA goes west

We may hold some events in Glasgow, and would appreciate suggestions from colleagues in the west about possible venues or seminar topics that might appeal to a Glasgow-based audience. Please contact Rachel or myself at the numbers below.

Learning from research and evaluation: 25 February

The SRA and UK Evaluation Society are hosting a joint event on 25 February on learning from research. We are grateful to the Scottish Executive's Office of the Chief Researcher for sponsoring this event.

SRA Scotland annual event: June

We plan to hold our annual event in June. This will examine the impact of devolution on research in Scotland. Date and speakers to be confirmed.

Contact

For further information about the SRA in Scotland contact Rachel Ormston rachel.ormston@tns-global.com 0131 656 4036 or Chris Nicol chrisnicol@capitalcitypartnership.org 0131 270 6038

SRA IRELAND : *Peter Humphreys looks back over 2004 and outlines plans for the future.*

Focus on membership

Over the past year, we have successfully built up the SRA's membership in Ireland. As well as independent researchers/consultants, we have members from many public and private sector bodies. We now hope to run a couple of training courses – watch this space for more details.

Profile: Comhairle

Comhairle was established in June 2000 to support information, advice and advocacy services for all citizens. It is involved in developing and supporting the nationwide network of Citizen Information Centres (CICs), the

Citizens Information Phone Service (CIPS) and the Oasis Website (www.oasis.gov.ie/). One of its statutory functions is to promote and develop the provision of information on the effectiveness of current social policy and services and to highlight issues that are of concern to users. In carrying out this function, Comhairle relies on feedback from CICs and CIPS based on the needs and experiences of service users.

Information workers identify queries which have a policy dimension and report these to Comhairle which produces quarterly reports cataloguing a sample of these. It also sends submissions

on relevant topics to government departments and agencies including an annual pre-budget submission. All published reports, quarterly reports and the newsletter VOICE: Influencing Social Policy are available at www.comhairle.ie/

Contact SRA Ireland

Opportunities for networking, training and raising the professional recognition and representation of social research in Ireland will grow as our membership grows. So, if you are interested in knowing more and would like to help, do get in touch with me at phumphreys@ipa.ie. It could be the best career move you make in 2005!

RESEARCH BRIEFING : *If there is anything you would like to publicise on these pages please send details to the SRA admin office. You can also receive more frequent briefings by subscribing to the SRA e-bulletin. See www.the-sra.org.uk for details.*

Government Social Research Service gearing up to help policy and delivery

The government's chief social researcher, Sue Duncan, has established a cross-government group to develop the first generic competency framework for the Government Social Research Service (GSR). The framework, which is in the final stages of development, will ensure that the skills and competencies essential to operate effectively as a government social researcher are measurable and standardised across the organisational and geographical boundaries in government. It covers a wide range of generic skills – such as communicating and promoting research, decision-making, staff and project management – as well as specific professional competencies. The framework will be used for **training and development:** identifying gaps and helping members develop in the right direction; **development and succession planning:** assessing readiness or potential to take on new challenges; **recruitment and selection:** choosing the right people to join and progress in the service.

Experience shows that employee involvement is the single most important factor in the introduction of competency frameworks, and so the work is being taken forward by members of GSR from a range of departments. The group produced a draft framework from a review of frameworks used in departments; other government analytical fields; and the civil service fast stream. The group wanted to involve as many members as possible and achieve a framework that is clearly underpinned

by an objective, systematic and thorough analysis of the range of jobs in GSR. An occupational psychologist has been commissioned to conduct a job analysis involving staff at every grade in GSR, to determine how far the draft framework reflects the jobs that exist. Sue Duncan has added her perspective on the likely changes to the roles in the future to ensure that the analysis does not just focus on how jobs are done now or in the past, but is also compatible with her strategic vision for GSR.

Data emerging from the process looks interesting and reassuringly in line with the draft framework; time will tell. The GSR looks forward to sharing the results and plans for implementation of the framework in the next edition of SRA news.

Developing this competency framework is also in line with the professional skills for government initiative under which a full set of standards for policy making is being developed. Siobhan Benita, from GCSRO, is playing an active part in the work by 'mapping' good practice and linking the skills required for policy experts to other government professions and specialisms.

Information on GSR is available at www.gsr.gov.uk.

Any questions about the GSR competency framework should be addressed to: Rebecca Laffineur
E: rebecca.laffineur@cabinet-office.x.gsi.gov.uk
T: 0207 276 1772

Scottish Executive promotes links with academic institutions

By Louise Appleton

Social researchers at the Scottish Executive are taking forward two pieces of work to help promote links with academic institutions. Due to report in early Spring, the work will look at how government and academic social researchers can better secure knowledge transfer, and apply the wealth of ideas and evidence that are continuously being generated to inform policy.

One study will map the organisation of social science in Scotland's higher education sector. This will act as a catalyst to open up communication on how government priorities and social science research capacity matches-up and to identify common links and interests.

Secondly, the way government social research responds to and plans for the long-term is also being looked at. This sits closely with the mapping exercise because it is essential that the two agendas come together. Government and academia should be able to see where they can help each other draw a robust picture of the existing research evidence base, in order to inform the policy solutions for tomorrow's problems.

These two pieces of research will contribute to a variety of upcoming discussions and debates. **For more information see www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Research**

Focus On: new series for social researchers

By Hayley Butcher

Social Trends has been giving the facts about life in the UK for the past 35 years, so how does the new 'Focus on' series differ? The answer is that the reports bring together many sources, particularly the latest Census data, and harness some of the latest technology available to provide the first ONS web-centric publications. They also provide links to more detailed data and other relevant information, as well as giving analyses and commentary on the figures to make them more relevant and understandable.

The first online overview reports in the series – *Ethnicity and Identity, Gender and Wales: Its People* (including a Welsh language version) – were successfully launched last January and topics have been added since including the *Labour Market in 2002, Older People, People and Migration, Health, and Religion*.

In December, we added a new dimension by publishing the first of our more detailed full reports – *Focus on Social Inequalities*. These provide a comprehensive description of key aspects of a topic. They are primarily paper-based reports, but electronic versions and the underlying data are available for downloading. The *Focus on Social Inequalities* full report was accompanied by an online 'overview' report.

Focus on Social Inequalities describes the different experiences of social groups in the UK today in six key areas: education, work, income, living standards, health, and participation. It looks at the 'advantaged' as well as the 'disadvantaged' and explores the relative differences between them.

The report highlights that household income and educational attainment have improved overall but the gaps remain large. However, employment rates for most key groups that have been disadvantaged in the labour market have improved recently and at a greater rate than for the population overall. Nevertheless, a significant minority of people are affected by a lack of material resources and the inequality in the health of the population has widened over the last few decades.

KEY RESULTS INCLUDE:

- **Education, Training and Skills:**
Exam results differ by social status
In 2002, 77 per cent of children in year 11 in England and Wales with parents in higher professional occupations gained five or more A* to C grade GCSEs. This was more than double the proportion for children with parents in routine occupations.
- **Work:**
Employment grows for the disadvantaged
Between spring 1999 and spring 2003, the overall UK working-age employment rate increased from 74 per cent to 75 per cent. For people aged 50 to 59/64 there was a rise from 65 per cent to 70 per cent and for lone parents a rise from 49 per cent to 53 per cent.
- **Income:**
Gaps in income and wealth remain large
Between 1994/95 and 2002/03 the UK income distribution was broadly stable. Disposable income (adjusted for inflation) grew by over a fifth for both

those on incomes at the top and bottom ten of the distribution.

- **Living standards:**
People on low income are less likely to have PCs
- **Health:**
Manual workers die earlier than others
For the period 1997-99, life expectancy at birth in England and Wales for males in the professional group was 7.4 years more than for males in the unskilled manual groups. This was almost two years greater than in 1972-76. In women, the gap in life expectancy was 5.3 years in 1972-76 and 5.7 years in 1997-99.
- **Participation:**
More volunteers are from higher income homes
In 2001, 57 per cent of adults in England and Wales with gross annual household incomes of £75,000 or more had volunteered formally in the previous 12 months. They were almost twice as likely to have done so than those living in households with an annual income under £5,000.

All Focus on reports are available free at: www.statistics.gov.uk/focuson

For general enquiries about the *Focus On* series, contact Hayley Butcher on 020 7533 5882.

For enquiries about the content of the *Focus on Social Inequalities* report, contact Penny Babb on 020 7533 6122.

Printed copies of the *Focus on Social Inequalities*, priced £40, can be ordered from www.palgrave.com/ons; email ons@palgrave.com; or phone 01256 302915.

House of Commons says ESRC is well run

The Science and Technology Committee has reported on the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). The first report can be viewed at the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee home page, or downloaded as a PDF document (778Kb) from the ESRC website www.esrc.ac.uk/esrccontent/news/latest_news.asp#stcreport

Ian Diamond, Chief Executive of the ESRC said, "We welcome this very positive report from the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee and appreciate their recognition that we are 'a well-run Council managing its limited budget sensibly'. We believe it is a fair summary of our current position and reflects much of our own thinking following our recent consultation with the social science community."

Join the evidence network

The ESRC UK Centre for Evidence Based Policy and Practice website at www.EvidenceNetwork.org launched in May 2001. Within a few months it was attracting 20,000 hits a month, and the number of associates of the centre with access to the protected area of the website has since grown to nearly 700 worldwide, reflecting the rapid growth of interest in evidence-based policy and practice.

The website gives associates an international focus for dissemination of information, provision of support services and exchanges of views amongst researchers, practitioners and others with an interest in evidence-based policy issues. It provides services including a substantial bibliography of the significant international literature on research evaluation and synthesis, systematic review compilation, research utilisation and other evidence-based policy topics with search facilities and live links to original documents.

Visit www.EvidenceNetwork.org to try out the various facilities. If you decide to join, click the 'request to join' button on the home page, or contact Alan Gomersall at a.gomersall@qmul.ac.uk. Associateship is free but you must be an active researcher or practitioner in the field.

Write for care and health

Check out www.careandhealth.com which carries articles based on new or about-to-be-published research. It has a broad social care remit and attempts to cover the increasing variety of partnership arrangements involving health, social care, housing and other agencies. It is looking for articles to be published fortnightly under the heading 'The Knowledge'. See www.careandhealth.com for details.

NCRM nodes announced

The Economic and Social Research Council has announced the successful applicants of the commissioning for the Nodes of the National Centre for Research Methods (NCRM). See www.ncrm.ac.uk/nodes/index.php for details.

NEW FINDINGS

New report on extent and nature of poverty

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has just published an overview of the extent and nature of poverty in Britain over the last century, and a review of the policies that have been implemented to address it. *One hundred years of poverty and policy* is available as a free PDF download from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation website or buy directly from the site for £8.95 plus postage and packing. See www.jrf.org.uk/bookshop/details.asp?pubID=657 for details.

Scottish Executive publishes findings of first stakeholder survey

A recent report from MORI shows how well external partners think that the Scottish Executive engages with them. This is the first year the Scottish Executive (SE) has conducted a survey of its stakeholders. Independent market research company MORI Scotland was commissioned to conduct a corporate-level survey of stakeholders. Between September 9 and October 8 2004, MORI Scotland contacted 1193 stakeholders, receiving a total of 824 responses.

Looking at the findings overall, the Executive's key stakeholders have delivered a generally positive assessment of the way the Executive engages with them. A copy of the main findings is available on the Executive website at www.scotland.gov.uk/stakeholdersurvey

Social researchers hear about index of multiple deprivation

*A packed lecture theatre at the Royal Statistical Society gathered to hear the latest on the development of the Index of Multiple Deprivation in the jointly hosted RSS/SRA Cathie Marsh Memorial lecture. **Penny Babb**, ONS reports.*

Carol Hayden from the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit at the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister chaired the meeting and provided the context for the initial development of the IMD 2000. She described the need for a systematic basis for examining the experiences at a local area on a range of measures to better inform service delivery. The Index is about real places, people and poverty; the NRU aims to use it to tackle high levels of deprivation.

Mike Noble, Oxford University, spoke about the development and use of IMD 2004. He described the IMD as an eight-number solution, emphasising the value of drawing on the eight underpinning indices, rather than solely the composite index. However, he recognised that even doing this belies the thousands of pieces of information considered when formulating the index.

The development of the 2004 version has been greatly influenced by the lessons learned from formulating and using the 2000 edition, as well as the versions developed in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Feedback from the steering group and external consultations also informed the developments.

A key aim is to overcome the difficulties of waiting for decennial data at small area levels from the

census and to provide a source that is reliable intra-censally and updateable. Some domains were revised, particularly those on housing and the living environment. Mike highlighted the difficulties of anticipating such change, in terms of backward compatibility versus more representative data. There were also issues for comparing IMD 2004 with indices in the other countries of the UK. Limitations to adequate or appropriate data sources meant that the domain 'barriers to housing and services' was restricted to housing only. An advance on IMD 2000 was to have a new domain on crime by obtaining data directly from police authorities. It was important to ensure that measures selected were systematic across the country. There were also difficulties in applying data from the British Crime Survey.

Mike described several domains in greater detail. On income, the aim is to get a direct measure of poverty at a local level, however this is only available through modelled estimates and indirect measures were required. Means-tested benefits data from the Households Below Average Income series were used, however benefit take up is a problem and how this varies over a space isn't known. The FRS was found to be too volatile to produce suitable data – this is an area that requires further research.

Some of the methodological issues encountered were dealing with small numbers; creating domain scores; shrinkage estimation; and different metrics for some scores that needed to be combined. Factor analysis was used to identify underlying patterns. Weighting was a significant issue, for example equal weights were not necessarily found to be equal when combining for the composite index. The team was concerned that implicit weights weren't created; exponential transformation was used on ranks to produce explicit weights.

Mike concluded that area-based measures complement target measures. It is possible to focus in on localities of particular concern with this type of small-area analysis, however there is always room for improvement methodologically.

Helen Bushell, Welsh Assembly Government, talked about the relevance of the Index of Multiple Deprivation (2000 – Wales) to policy. She described how its use has been central in community regeneration. It has enabled comparison with the other countries in the UK. The smaller population in Wales has meant that information management has been easier as well as synchronising across diverse areas. The Welsh IMD is being updated and is due to be completed in 2005.

The IMD in Wales has been used for the allocation of funds and targeting action, highlighting areas of social exclusion, areas for stamp duty relief, and for action on the Community First policy. Some areas felt stigmatised by being identified for Community First action while other areas that weren't identified fought to be included. The emphasis was placed on it being an evidence-based process to identify areas of greatest need and of unfulfilled potential and opportunity.

An important advantage of IMD is in focusing on small areas. This will be greatly enhanced by using super

output areas in the next version. It can be difficult to target the areas required when constrained by administrative boundaries. The evaluation of the Communities First programme will be fed into the development of the IMD 2005 for Wales.

David Kerrigan, Harrow Council, described how the council has been among the first to use IMD 2004 for their 'vitality profiles' (which are presented in a book, as well as on an interactive website). These statistical profiles on areas of Harrow enable pockets of deprivation to be highlighted – the availability of super output areas was critical in this in providing far greater detail than possible with wards. The profiles also give the regional and national context for key measures. The council had developed its own version of SOAs ('grouped output areas') which happily dropped it when SOAs were released.

Measures available at SOA level were the most useful, but they did encounter difficulties with those only at ward level such as birth weight. Validating data sources were found for some measures. For example, council tax benefits data were found to be in line with the income IMD 2004 data. This is promising as these benefits data are available monthly and so provide a more frequent update to the IMD picture.

David described how the modular aspects of the IMD were extremely helpful and more important than the composite aspect of the index. They did find difficulty in using the barriers to housing and services, when comparing with patterns found under IMD 2000. Overall, David was enthusiastic about using IMD 2004 – that it is highly versatile, with a wide variety of data sources that provide greater insight into local need.

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Can Britain close the digital divide?

By *Catherine Bromley*, Research Director, Scottish Centre for Social Research and co-director of the British Social Attitudes survey.

Many claims have been made about the potential impact of the internet on people's ability to connect with politicians, public services and each other. With support from the ESRC's e-society programme, the 2003 British Social Attitudes survey contained a series of questions which looked at the social and political consequences of increased ICT usage, particularly the internet. These will also be repeated in 2005. However, as internet use remains an activity that is far from universal, another key concern for this project has been to explore the so called 'digital divide' between users and non-users. The latest BSA report (below) contains two chapters based on this project. The following summarises one of them.

In 2003, 50% said they used the internet (other than solely for work purposes), in 2000 the figure was 33%. The reason for the large increase was found to be fuelled by more people having internet access at home, rather than using libraries, internet cafes and community centres. Families with children were particularly likely to have hooked up to the net: between 2000 and 2003 the proportion of households with children with home internet access grew from 32 to 54%, whereas the corresponding figures for households without children were 23 and 35%.

There was a striking, though hardly unexpected, relationship between age and internet use. Three quarters (74%) of 18-24 year olds use the net compared with just a sixth (15%) of people over 65. Education level was also important. 72% of graduates use the internet compared with just 9% of people with no formal qualifications.

How and where people use the internet also vary. Younger and more highly educated people were the most likely to say they used the internet for several purposes, including email, banking, shopping or downloading music. Older and less qualified people were most likely to name just one or two uses. Similarly, younger people were more likely to say they used in the internet in more than one location, for example at home, work or in a café whereas it was more common for older users to just log on at home. So, we could say that there is a clear divide *amongst* users when it comes to their degree of internet sophistication.

The study also looked in detail at the characteristics, attitudes and aspirations of those who do not use the internet. They were asked if they would like to use it one day and just under half (46%) said they would. This group was quite distinct. Younger, more highly educated and more wealthy non-users were the most likely to say that they want to use the internet in the future, and this was confirmed by multivariate analysis. So, the social composition of 'aspirant' users quite neatly matched that of existing users. Unless quite radical changes occur amongst the non-users who have little desire to use the internet, the prospects for closing the digital divide between users and non-users appear to be quite slim.

The internet will, eventually, affect how social researchers conduct their studies. Internet polling companies such as YouGov, are already seriously challenging the traditional telephone and street opinion polling. The DFES longitudinal young people's survey offers panel members the opportunity to complete subsequent waves of the study online as well as by post or telephone. These trends present us with two challenges. The fact that rates of internet use vary across the population means that we need to pay particular attention to any moves towards conducting general population surveys online. Weighting can help to correct for the obvious biases inherent in an internet sample, but until the profile of internet users starts to look more like that of the population as a whole we should question the ethics of any method that would systematically exclude older, less well-educated people and those on low incomes. The second challenge is that of mode effects. The differences in response that can arise between face-to-face, self-completion and telephone methods are well documented. Rather than make assumptions about possible internet mode effects based on what we already know about other self-completion methods, the dynamics of internet survey responses should also be rigorously investigated.

For more details of the ESRC e-society programme see www.london.edu/e-society/

Park A., Curtice J., Thomson K., Bromley C. and Phillips M. (2004) *British Social Attitudes – the 21st Report*, London: Sage.

Let's Move On: black and minority ethnic older people's views on research findings

Jabeer Butt and Alex O'Neil

Joseph Rowntree Foundation

Price £11.95 or download
from www.jrf.org.uk

May 2004

ISBN: 1 85935 175 1

*Reviewed by: Gary Jones,
Lecturer in the Department
of Applied Social Sciences,
King Alfred's College*



'Let's Move On' gives a brief but interesting insight into the contribution research can make in transforming the lives of Black and Minority Ethnic older people. It has been published as part of part of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's Older People Programme.

The chapter on 'The Process of the Consultation' provides a general overview of the methods employed during the study. This is informative, but it lacks specific information and, at times, clarity. It does not give any information (e.g. age or gender) of the participants involved in the three meetings which took place in Leeds, Bristol and London. Nor is there any explanation as to why the researchers chose these three areas. This means that it is difficult to gain a full picture of the research process.

The report gives a brief overview of the research into Black and Minority Ethnic older people. It concentrates on six areas: demography; household

composition; health and social care needs; poverty and housing; knowledge and use of services; and who cares? I enjoyed the literature review, although it was too concise in some sections. This is a missed opportunity, and could have been given greater weight within the report.

The presentation and analysis of the findings lack depth. For instance, the report notes under the theme: 'mainstream or community services' that: *'There was a great deal of frustration that, in the experiences of the Black and Minority Ethnic older people, the mainstream services did not meet the needs of different minority groups'* (Butt and O'Neil, 2004: 12). But, there is no further elaboration on this issue.

I would recommend the report as of value to students, professionals and academics. However, only the future will tell how far this report allows us to 'move on'!

ITEMS FOR REVIEW

If you would like a copy of any of the following books or reports, simply write a short review of about 300 words. You can then keep the item you review.

Cognitive Interviewing: a tool for improving questionnaire design

Gordon B Willis
Sage

The Opportunities of a Lifetime: model lifetime analysis of current British social policy

Martin Evans and Jill Eyre
Policy Press
Download free copy from
www.jrf.org.uk

Researchers and their 'Subjects': ethics, power, knowledge and consent

*Edited by Marie Smyth
and Emma Williamson*
The Policy Press

Socio-Economic Research in the Information Society: a user's guide from the RESPECT project

U Huws
Institute for Employment Studies

The Sociology of Ethnicity

Sinisa Malesevic
Sage

Volunteering Impact Assessment Toolkit

(includes CD with word
questionnaires)
Volunteering England

KEEP UP TO DATE : For the latest diary dates, why not subscribe to the SRA's monthly e-bulletin at www.the-sra.org.uk

SRA Training

For details of all SRA training and events and booking forms see www.the-sra.org.uk

London

These will be held at the London Voluntary Sector Resource Centre, 356 Holloway Road, London, N7 6PA.

24 February

Introduction to Qualitative Research

2/9 March

Research Ethics: principles into practice

15 March

Telephone Research Methods

12/13 May (1/2 day courses)

Data Protection

18 May

Further Sampling

tba

Media Training for Social Researchers

Edinburgh

To be arranged – see www.the-sra.org.uk for update.

SRA Events

London

23 February

That 'Aha Moment': qualitative research methods which stimulate new insight

Suzanne Hall and Sarah Castell from Mori. Starts at 5:00pm (light refreshments from 4:30pm) at the Nuffield Foundation, 28 Bedford Square, London WC1B 3JS

Edinburgh

25 February

What's Working? Improving the Contribution of Research and Evaluation to Organisational Learning

Joint SRA/UKES workshop (supported by the Scottish Executive) at Dynamic Earth in Edinburgh

Conferences

21-23 March

The Life Course: Fragmentation, Diversity and Risk

The British Sociological Association Annual Conference. University of York. Details: www.britisoc.co.uk/conference; Conference2005@britsoc.org.uk

6-8 April

Building on the Past: Visions of Housing Futures

Housing Studies Association University of York. Further details: www.york.ac.uk/inst/chp/hsa/spring05/index.html

24-26 June

What a Difference a Pedagogy Makes: Researching Lifelong Learning and Teaching

Centre for Research in Lifelong Learning. Venue: University of Stirling. Details: <http://crl.gcal.ac.uk>; c.a.scott@gcal.ac.uk

8 November

'Race' and Social Research: issues of methodology, ethics and practice

Centre for Social Inclusion and Social Justice in conjunction with the Institute for Applied Ethics,

University of Hull, York. Details: Social Research Conference, CASS, University of Hull, Hull, HU6 7RX. Enquiries: G.Craig@hull.ac.uk

Up to 20 bursaries valued at up to £50 each to contribute towards the costs of postgraduate students or low-income organisations. Further 20 places to be available with the fee waived. Closing date for applications is July 31. The closing date for receipt of bids to lead workshops is July 31.

Courses

CASS Courses

Details: Jane Schofield, Division of Social Statistics, University of Southampton. Tel: 023 8059 5376. cass@socsci.soton.ac.uk www.socstats.soton.ac.uk/cass

13-15 April

Regression Methods for Survey Data

Venue: University of Southampton

19-21 April

Pre-testing Survey Questionnaires

Venue: Royal Statistical Society, London

3-5 May

Survey Sampling

Venue: Royal Statistical Society, London

The Cathie Marsh Centre for Census and Survey Research

Details: Margaret Martin: 0161 275 4589. ccsr@man.ac.uk www.ccsr.ac.uk/courses/external/2004-2005

Through funding awarded as part of the ESRC Research Methods Programme, the centre can offer a limited number of bursaries for their short courses, to cover course fees and a contribution to travel and subsistence.

28 February

Conceptualising Longitudinal Analysis

2 March

Data Reduction and Classification

9 March

Surveys and Sampling

16 March

Introduction to Longitudinal Analysis

30 March-1 April

Longitudinal Data Analysis

6 April

SPSS for Social Scientists

13 April

Introduction to Data Analysis Part 1

14-15 April

Introduction to Demographic Concepts and Methods

20 April

Introduction to Data Analysis Part 2

25 April

Introduction to Population Estimating and Forecasting

4 May

Data Reduction and Classification

9 May

Multidimensional Regression

11-12 May

Multidimensional Scaling

16 May

Logistic Regression

23-24 May

Demographic Forecasting with POPGROUP

Centre for Population Studies

London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine. Details: huyette.shillingford@lshtm.ac.uk

11-15 April (short course)

Ageing, health and wellbeing in older populations

Lancaster University Centre for Applied Statistics in conjunction with Information Systems Services

Statistics Short Courses
Details: 01524 593064
statistics@lancaster.ac.uk
www.cas.lancs.ac.uk/short_courses

3-4 March

Applied Social Science Research II

21-22 April

SPSS for Windows I

12-13 May

Methods for Missing Data

19-20 May

Data Mining Techniques

2-3 June

SPSS for Windows II

Market Research Society

Offers a range of courses in market research, graded from introductory to advanced thinking.

Details are on the MRS website at www.mrs.org.uk/training/trainindex.htm

University of Reading SSC

The Statistical Services Centre offers a wide variety of courses in applied statistics for a range of audiences. A selection is listed.

Details: Statistical Services Centre, The University of Reading. Tel: 0118 378 8689 Fax: 0118 975 3169
statistics@reading.ac.uk
www.rdg.ac.uk/ssc/

23-24 February

MS-Excel for Statistics? What you can and cannot do

25 February

Taking MS-Excel Further: Macros for Data Management and Statistics

1 March

Multilevel Modelling

2 March

Multilevel Generalised Linear Models

5-6 April

A Review of Basic Statistics

7-8 April

Introduction to the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA)

9-10 May

Investigating Relationships in Data

University of Surrey Department of Sociology

Offers a regular series of one-day courses on research methods in the social sciences for professional and postgraduate researchers.

Details: www.soc.surrey.ac.uk or e.stutchbury@surrey.ac.uk or 01483 689458



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