Checklist for small scale research contracts

Introduction

Small-scale research is often commissioned to independent researchers, small agencies and academics, who (unlike large contractors) usually have to manage a range of operational requirements by themselves. Projects tend to be 'needs-based' research focusing on a problem to be addressed in a limited timescale and budget. This checklist aims to help contractors avoid pitfalls and identify key issues with such projects. It is short and not exhaustive – please refer to the SRA's commissioning social research good practice guide (2003) for fuller information.

Points to consider during the bidding process

- When developing a research proposal it is helpful to think through a risk analysis beforehand, to identify the factors on which successful completion depends.
- Check the timescale is realistic and that constraints – such as time to apply for ethical approval, or accessing respondents that require permission or letters of introduction (via 'gatekeepers') – have been taken into account.
- Is the budget realistic? If not what are the implications and how can they be addressed? This may include not submitting a bid or offering alternative options.
- If secondary analysis is required check that the client has permission to use the data (eg from a data archive, administrative data/records or image data). Agree beforehand the types of analysis to be completed.
- If you are working or collaborating with other consultants or researchers be clear about your role, responsibilities, time commitments and fees.
- When costing a project, include additional costs to be met by the client, eg. venues for focus groups, incentives to respondents, travel expenses, transcription services, additional meetings with client, printing/publishing reports. Include VAT where applicable.
- Clarify the client's expectations if these are unstated or unclear. This includes response rate targets, number of interviews/attendees at workshops/groups, number of drafts required before the final report, format of the final report, if a presentation is to be included and the format of respondent data. All these factors have a significant impact on costs.
- Ideally terms and conditions/contract for the project should include a project reference (contract name or reference number), key dates, timetable, researcher day rate if additional work is to be completed, payment terms (usually % on commission, % on completion of fieldwork and % on final report/presentation).
- If you are unsuccessful in your bid do request feedback. This can help you in future bids.

Post-tender negotiations

- Usually clients and contractors meet in person prior to project commencement. It is preferable to meet the individual working on behalf of the client and who you/your team will be liaising with throughout the project.
- If project changes are to be made in, for example, timescale, methodology or sample size, it is advisable to have these agreed in writing before going ahead with the work.
- Agree where and when invoices are to be sent to be signed off and processed by the client.
- Agree with the client how much time they will have to check and sign off questionnaires or discussion guides.

- If permission or letters of introduction are required then request these be provided to you before the start of fieldwork.
- Agree a fieldwork timetable and ask if the client wishes to observe any part of this.
- Agree what data the client requires at the end of the project (ie recordings, full transcripts of discussion groups or a summary of the main findings, anonymised data file in a particular format, full set of tables).

Ethical considerations

- Check if the project needs ethical approval to conduct interviews, particularly with vulnerable people or children under the age of consent. If ethical approval is required then establish who needs to apply, where to apply and how long it may take to get approval.
- Check whether you or an interviewer is required to have a DBS certificate to conduct fieldwork. [1]
- If the client wishes to observe any part of the fieldwork process (ie a focus group, workshop or telephone interview) or if fieldwork is to be recorded then respondents must be informed in advance. Where a client is the observer, explain to them what to expect and how to behave (eg. not to join in). Allow time afterwards to discuss any queries they may have.
- If respondent contact details are to be forwarded to the client, explain this to respondents before collecting data and give them the opportunity to either agree or withhold consent. Respondents have a right not to supply contact details. Further ethical considerations are discussed in the resources below.

Ownership and storage of data

- Fieldwork data is usually supplied to the client as an anonymised aggregated file. However, if raw data includes personal details or if discussion group or image recordings are supplied, respondents must have been told how the data will be used and have either given or withheld consent. Respondent agreement can, depending on circumstances, be either written or recorded.
- Ensure that data protection requirements are fully met before providing data to the client – this includes the Data Protection Act and the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) coming into force in 2018.

Useful resources

- Big data and data sharing: Ethical issues (2017) https://www.ukdataservice.ac.uk/media/604711/big-data-and-data-sharing_ethical-issues.pdf
- Data Protection Act 1998: Guidelines for social research (2013): http://the-sra.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/MRS-SRA-DP-Guidelines-updated-April-2013.pdf
- NCVO comments on guidance from the Information Commissioner's Office regarding the new **General Data Protection Regulations** – at the time of writing this note, the research provisions are yet to be determined.
- Commissioning social research good practice guide (2003) http://the-sra.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Commissioning-Social-Research-good-practice-guide-2nd-ed.pdf
- Market Research Society code of conduct (2014) https://www.mrs.org.uk/pdf/mrs%20code%20of%20conduct%202014.pdf
- Social Research Association Ethics Guidelines http://the-sra.org.uk/research-ethics/ethics-guidelines/
- Social Research Association Research Commissioning http://the-sra.org.uk/sra_resources/research-commissioning/

[1] DBS = Disclosure and Barring Service.