

# **Curriculum guidelines for training programmes on research commissioning**

**Report to the Social Research Association**

**Curriculum guidelines for training  
programmes on research  
commissioning**

**A report prepared for:  
Social Research Association**

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## **Preface to SRA report on training for research commissioning**

Barbara Doig, Chair of the SRA

The Social Research Association has been facilitating a special Initiative on *Research Commissioning and Funding* since May 2004. Led by a long-standing SRA member, Janet Lewis, this Initiative is building on the SRA's Good Practice Guide on commissioning social research, published in 2002. A mailing list of interested people has been built up and meetings are held once or twice a year to discuss issues around good commissioning practice and how to promote it. Out of these discussions and some subsequent enquiries it emerged that the nature and scale of training provision on commissioning research was very uneven in terms of frequency, the geographical spread and the different levels of experience covered.

The SRA and the Project Group decided that the Initiative should try to encourage and facilitate more training provision than currently exists, and try to secure improvements in the content of such training. An application to the ESRC at the end of 2005 for a grant to commission a project to pursue these objectives was, successful. This report is the outcome of the project, which was carried out by Janie Percy-Smith and Alison Darlow.

The SRA is very pleased with the work that has been done and the fact that the experience of many of the practitioners interviewed bears out the values and principles, which the SRA believes, underlie good commissioning. The recommendations made about the different types of courses and how they might be developed are now being discussed within the SRA. We hope to be able to move forward, in collaboration with others, so that more courses at different levels will be established throughout the UK. We are also exploring the possibility of setting up a website on 'better research commissioning' which would be source of useful material for training purposes and a more general resource on good commissioning practice.

Finally, you might like to have a look at the debate we are seeking stimulate on the matter of 'disclosure of budgets' in the commissioning process. This is taking part in the forum section of the website.

## SUMMARY RECOMMENDATIONS

### Values and principles of relevance to effective commissioning

The consultation has shown that effective commissioning occurs when the following principles are met and this is the case regardless of the size of the organisation doing the commissioning or the scale of the research being commissioned.

- *The need for, and purpose of, the research is clear.* This underlines the importance of a general understanding of social research and its limitations and where research is useful in relation to specific issues. It also emphasises the importance of discussion between research managers/commissioners and research customers about the rationale for, and purpose of, the research.
- *Maximum use is made of researchers' skills, experience and expertise:* This will involve striking an appropriate balance in preparing the brief between providing sufficient detail about what is required while providing opportunities for researchers to suggest approaches and methods. It also involves the use of dialogue as a key tool in the commissioning process.
- *The commissioning process is open and transparent and the principles of fair play are adhered to.* This involves a balance between making use of the experience of existing researchers while, at the same time, keeping the door open to new research providers.
- *The form of competition is 'fit for purpose'.* This involves an understanding of the different forms of competition, their limitations and their applicability to different types and sizes of research project. It also entails an understanding of the researcher's viewpoint in terms of not wasting their time eg by inviting too many researchers to submit full tenders.
- *The brief is well written and provides clear information to tenderers.* The information provided should include the purpose and aims and objectives of the research; constraints or difficulties that are likely to be encountered ; timescales; and the commissioning process. It is also helpful to provide an indication of budget or the scale of the project so that time is not wasted on developing proposals that are beyond the scope of the budget.
- *There is effective communication between all parties to the process.* This includes dialogue between procurement colleagues and research managers about the nature of the commissioning process; discussion between research managers and research customers about the rationale for, and purpose of the research; discussion with potential tenderers to enable them to prepare appropriate proposals; discussion with successful tenderers to agree the final shape of the research; and ongoing discussion with the researchers throughout the course of the project.
- *Adequate time is allowed both for the commissioning process and for the research itself.* Good researchers are generally busy. In order to secure the services of the best researchers sufficient time needs to be allowed for them to develop a proposal and then, if successful, to undertake the research. Where research is needed urgently a more streamlined commissioning process should be used.

These general principles should underpin and inform all training on commissioning social research.

## Recommendations

On the basis of the consultation we make the following recommendations:

1. The SRA and appropriate partners should work with existing providers to encourage them to take account of these guidelines in the design and delivery of their courses.
2. The SRA and appropriate partners should encourage universities that provide Masters courses in Social Research and Public Sector Management to include modules on Research Management including Commissioning.
3. The SRA, or the SRA together with appropriate partners, should develop the following training:
  - one-day regionally based courses
  - at introductory and next-stage/refresher level (see section 4.4 below for indicative content)
  - with at least some provision available at a cost of around £200 per person per day
  - to be actively marketed to specific groups of organisations and sectors, with relevant partner organisations.
4. There are two ways in which this might work. The SRA could develop standard course materials that they could then contract with individual trainers to deliver with the SRA undertaking the marketing and publicity. And/or existing training providers could design and deliver courses that meet the SRA's requirements in relation to content and, as such, could then receive endorsement from the SRA.
5. Any courses that are developed should be subject to evaluation to ensure that lessons are learned and provision is constantly improved.
6. The SRA should consider developing a web-based tool or checklist, including, where appropriate, templates that can be adapted for use by a variety of users. This should not only support the training but should also be capable of being used as a resource in its own right by occasional commissioners.
7. There appears to be some demand for more advanced training, or 'master classes'. By this we understand discussions of higher level and more complex issues for experienced research managers and commissioners. It is recognised that the demand for this kind of provision is likely to be somewhat limited and very context-specific, however the SRA, together with appropriate partners, should explore the possibility of facilitating such master classes.

# 1 INTRODUCTION

This report presents the findings of a consultation on training provision on research commissioning undertaken by Alison Darlow, Policy Research Institute, Leeds Metropolitan University and Janie Percy-Smith, independent researcher, for the Social Research Association (SRA) and funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). Recommendations are made on the basis of the consultation findings for the future development of training provision in relation to commissioning of social research.

## 1.1 Background and context

The purpose of the project was to develop guidelines for training courses and modules on research commissioning. The SRA, as a key organisation in the development and delivery of social research training programmes, wishes to develop a range of different courses and modules which would be widely available to those involved in commissioning at different levels and in different types of organisation.

This is part of the SRA's initiative to promote good practice in the commissioning of social research - in particular through the development of "intelligent commissioning" - that was started in May 2004. This initiative is intended to build on the *Good Practice Guide on Commissioning* published by the SRA in November 2002 and the ongoing work of the Working Group that is taking forward the initiative.

The amount of research being commissioned, especially by public agencies appears to be increasing in response to the requirements of good practice to demonstrate that: policy and practice are "evidence-based"; the views of service users are being listened to in the design of services; and that initiatives and programmes are subject to evaluation. The experiences of both commissioners and researchers suggests that commissioning practice is variable, with implications for the quality and utility of the research undertaken. Developing training in effective commissioning is, therefore a means to the end of improving the quality and utility of the research commissioned

## 1.2 Aims and objectives

The overall purpose of this piece of work was to develop curriculum guidelines for a training provision on research commissioning of relevance to those working in a range of different settings and at different levels of experience. More specifically the objectives were:

- To research the availability and content of existing training provision on social research commissioning
- To investigate the areas that should be covered in new training
- To develop guidelines on curriculum content for new training provision in relation to the commissioning process.

In addition the research was intended to:

- Provide a preliminary indication of possible providers for new training and the demand for that training.

## 1.3 Approach

The findings and recommendations in this report are informed by the following information sources:

- A search of existing training provision and consideration of the content of that provision, target audience and mode of delivery
- Discussions with the SRA group overseeing this piece of work
- Discussions with a group of training providers convened by the SRA
- Consultations with 62 users, commissioners and providers of research drawn from central and local government, voluntary organisations, providers of research services and training and local partnership organisations. A full list of consultees can be found in the Annex; this shows that the main stakeholder groups were reflected in the consultation. These consultations were undertaken by email, telephone and face to face interview using a structured questionnaire.

#### **1.4 The report is organised as follows. In the next section - Section 2 - we summarise Content and Structure of the Report**

The report is organised as follows. In the next section – Section 2 – we summarise existing training provision on research commissioning. Section 3 summarises the findings from the consultation and examines the need and demand for training; skills required; and views on mode of provision. In the final section of the report the findings are discussed and detailed recommendations made on future training provision. It should be noted that where we refer to “research” we mean not only social research but also evaluations that make use of social research skills and methods.

## 2 EXISTING TRAINING PROVISION

A comprehensive search of existing training provision around the area of social research commissioning was undertaken. This includes both short courses and modules within masters courses. This section summarises this material to present a picture of what is currently on offer.

### 2.1 Providers

Table 1 summarises the training provision that is currently available. As can be seen existing training is provided by:

- Universities - generally in the form of modules on Masters level courses
- Professional organisations and associations (including the SRA) that provide one or two day introductory training courses
- Government Social Research Unit providing masters level modules that are open to all those working in government
- Individual trainers and organisations (eg Rod Laird, BMRB) that regularly run courses open to all those interested. In some cases such organisations are contracted to provide training on commissioning by specific organisations. For example the Institute for Employment Research was contracted to provide training for the Skills for Business Network.

### 2.2 Level and content

Existing courses are pitched at either introductory level or at Masters level. There appears to be little or no short course provision at “next stage” or “refresher” level aimed specifically at more senior officers who do not wish to undertake a Masters level module.

A review of the content of existing courses shows that the following broad areas are covered:

#### *Introductory courses*

- Key elements in the commissioning process
- Understanding the needs of policy clients
- Preparing a research brief
- Deciding on a commissioning strategies
- Selection criteria
- Evaluating proposals
- Interviewing and selecting researchers
- Roles and responsibilities
- Ethical issues
- Quality assurance

#### *Masters modules*

- The role of research in the policy process
- Commissioning and its role in relation to research management
- The client-researcher roles
- Resource planning, management and costing
- Quality assuring research

- Appreciation of methodological issues
- Drawing up a contract
- Post-tender negotiations

### 2.3 Cost and mode of provision

All the provision reviewed is face-to-face training. Short courses are typically one or two days with masters modules variable in terms of the balance between face to face teaching and individual study. The cost varies quite considerably from the £50 per person per day charged by BMRB to £870 for a two day course charged by the Market Research Society (lower price available for MRS members). Masters modules are priced in accordance with university post-graduate fees.

In addition to this face to face provision the only other resource found (besides the SRA's own Good Practice Guide) was the book written by Helen Kara and Paul Muir, *Commissioning Consultancy. Managing outside expertise to improve your services* (2003, Russell House Publishing).

### 2.4 Summary of key issues

- There are essentially three types of existing training provision:
  - Masters modules, where commissioning is typically one part of a more general course on managing social research. These courses are typically extensive - stretching over a number of weeks - and require a considerable commitment. They also require the submission of work for assessment.
  - Introductory courses, typically one or two days, face to face, provided by professional organisations (eg the SRA, MRS) and private sector organisations. These courses are generally aimed at those who are new to the commissioning role and tend to cover the main stages in the commissioning process.
  - Courses aimed at Government research and policy officers at Masters level which address specific issues around research commissioning in a government context.
- While there is a range of introductory provision this tends to be generic in nature and does not seem to address the needs of particular sectors (eg local government or the voluntary sector). Some of the provision is priced beyond the reach of smaller organisations.
- There is little in the way of short course provision at either “next stage” or “refresher” level or at an advanced level with the exception of the GSRU course (largely relevant only to Government departments) and masters level modules which require a commitment over a period of time which is not always attractive.
- There are no accessible web-based training or toolkits available as a resource for the occasional commissioner, although the SRA's *Good Practice Guide*, the book by Kara and Muir (referred to above) and the Government Social Research Unit's *Procurement of Government Social Research* (GSR, 2006) are all useful resources.

**Table 1: Summary of existing training provision**

Provider	Title	Mode of delivery/Length	Level	Target audience	Cost	More information
British Market Research Bureau (BMRB)	Commissioning Research	1 day	Introductory	Junior executives	£50 + VAT	<a href="http://www.bmrb.co.uk/?component=page&amp;id=813#">http://www.bmrb.co.uk/?component=page&amp;id=813#</a>
University of Manchester, School of Social Sciences	MA Social Research (Applied)	Face to face; extensive - ie regular sessions over a number of weeks	Masters	Graduates	University post-graduate fee levels	<a href="http://www.manchester.ac.uk/postgraduate/taughtdegrees/courses/atoz/course/index.htm?code=PMTF1-H80311">http://www.manchester.ac.uk/postgraduate/taughtdegrees/courses/atoz/course/index.htm?code=PMTF1-H80311</a>
University of Bristol, School for Policy Studies	MSc Policy Research, Managing & Commissioning Research	Masters course module	Masters	Graduates	University post-graduate fee levels	<a href="http://www.bris.ac.uk/prospectus/postgraduate/2006/prog_details/SSLF/304">http://www.bris.ac.uk/prospectus/postgraduate/2006/prog_details/SSLF/304</a>
Market Research Society (MRS)	Developing an effective client-side role	2 days	Introductory	Those with up to 2 years' client-side research experience. Particularly relevant to those new to the client-side	Members £580 + VAT; Non-member £870 + VAT	<a href="http://www.mrs.org.uk/training/2006/essential-esc.htm">http://www.mrs.org.uk/training/2006/essential-esc.htm</a>
Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion	Commissioning Research & Consultancy	1 day, occasional	Introductory	Those responsible for commissioning research & consultancy	Vol orgs & Trade Unions: £145; public/private/academic institutions: £225	<a href="http://www.cesi.org.uk/Events/showevent.asp?evid=102">http://www.cesi.org.uk/Events/showevent.asp?evid=102</a>
Social Research Association	Commissioning & Managing Research	1 day, occasional	Introductory	Appeals to a wide audience of researchers from different sectors	Members £115 and non-members: £170	<a href="http://www.the-sra.org/training/htm">http://www.the-sra.org/training/htm</a>

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Government Social Research Unit (GSRU)	Research & Research Management for Government	Masters module	Masters	Graduates working in government		<a href="http://www.gsr.gov.uk/professional_development/msc/prospectus/index.asp">http://www.gsr.gov.uk/professional_development/msc/prospectus/index.asp</a>
Rod Laird Organisation	How to commission and manage research	1 day	Introductory		£315	<a href="http://www.rodlaird.co.uk/default.asp?page=129">http://www.rodlaird.co.uk/default.asp?page=129</a>

## 3 CONSULTATION FINDINGS

### 3.1 The commissioning process

The consultation demonstrated that, although commissioning practice varies across organisations, the main determinants of practice are the scale of the research to be commissioned and the size of the organisation undertaking the commissioning. In general large organisations - especially government departments and agencies - are more likely to have guidelines on commissioning than smaller organisations. Where commissioning is effective these recognise that commissioning research is not the same as buying office furniture and therefore procurement rules cannot be applied in quite the same way; however in some organisations this is not acknowledged and, as a result, research commissioning occurs within a rigid procurement framework. For example Scottish Executive Social Research have produced a set of *Procedures for Commissioning and Managing Social Research* aimed at all those within the Executive who have responsibility for directly managing and commissioning social research. The procedures are mandatory and include templates for the key stages in the process.

In larger organisations too there is more likely to be a split between researchers and those whose responsibility is primarily policy and practice so that the need for research originates with the latter but the commissioning process is lead by researchers. In this case discussion between researchers and policy officers is essential in order to clarify the purpose of the research.

The scale of the research to be commissioned is an important determinant of the approach to commissioning adopted and the form of competition used. For example very large government programmes of research or evaluation may well be commissioned from a consortium of organisations perhaps through a framework agreement. Once this is in place individual research projects contracts may be let to researchers within the framework agreement or through a more streamlined competitive process.

In smaller organisations commissioning happens much less frequently and is more likely to be undertaken by those who require the research and who may not have specialist research skills.

The following quotes from those with whom we consulted illustrate typical commissioning processes:

*For each project there will be a responsible project officer who will lead the commissioning process. The project officer will define the detailed governance process for the work - which will often involve the establishment of a steering or advisory group for the project.*

*A project manager is identified, which may be an in-house researcher or policy customer (with advice from researchers), who draws up a specification in consultation with main users. The manager also identifies the organisations to tender. This is then passed to the contracting unit to issue and receive tenders. A steering group is formed to assess tenders, steer and receive final reports.*

*Research manager leads on the development of the brief, commissioning process and project management. A steering group of interested parties from around the organisation work with the Research Manager to oversee the process and respond to research findings.*

*Policy colleagues identify the research issues; then go to the Research Manager who works up the research questions and suggests methods. The draft spec then goes back to policy colleagues and then out to tender. Policy and research people are present in start up meetings with researchers.*

*Ours is a small organisation and research is usually commissioned by the research user or our Strategy and Intelligence Director. Some research which is commissioned in partnership with other organisations has a steering group.*

### **3.2 Need and demand for training**

Most organisations and individuals responding to the consultation thought that they commissioned social research “effectively” or “fairly effectively”. Nevertheless when asked if there was a need for further training of staff within their organisations in relation to commissioning a majority of those consulted felt that there was. However while it was felt that there was considerable *need* it was also felt that the *demand* might be quite low because not everyone who could benefit from training was aware of this. On the other hand there was also a recognition that relatively high turnover of staff could mean that there was likely to be fairly steady demand for introductory and, to a lesser extent, refresher/next stage training.

Those people who only occasionally undertake commissioning of research were, it was felt, unlikely to invest in training. For this group an on-line resource that could be accessed as and when it was needed was felt to be more useful.

It is also worth noting that recent courses on commissioning, including those run by GSRU and the SRA, have been fully subscribed.

### **3.3 Level of courses**

Most consultees thought that the greatest need was for courses at the introductory level. In addition there is also some further need for refresher and next stage provision and for advanced training, or master classes, in relation to specific issues such as contracting, EU procurement regulations, ethical issues and managing framework agreements. However the demand for this kind of provision is quite small and any training would have to be tailored to the specific circumstances of particular organisations. Government departments and non departmental public bodies are the most likely market for this kind of specialist training that relates to the letting of very large research contracts. It is therefore appropriate that this type of provision should be delivered through GSRU, building on their existing training provision in this area. They would also be in a position, where necessary, to buy in the specialist trainers that might be required. However there might be some scope for some further, high level specialist master classes or specific topics.

### 3.4 Skills required by commissioners

Consultees were asked to identify what they thought were the key skills involved in commissioning social research. In so doing they also highlighted both knowledge and attitudes that are important to the process. The following sections summarise the requirements at different levels. However it is important to recognise that this is a schematic summary; in reality the requirements of individuals will vary considerably between organisations. For example in smaller organisations relatively junior research staff or managers with little or no research background may have responsibility for quite complex commissioning processes. Similarly there is considerable overlap in relation to the types of skills and knowledge required at the different levels of responsibility; however the ways in which they are applied and the depth of knowledge required may vary.

#### ***Those with overall responsibility for commissioning social research; regular commissioners***

- Understanding of the place of commissioning within overall research project management.
- Understanding of different approaches to commissioning and the different types of competition including:
  - knowledge of organisational procurement procedures
  - understanding of different options for each stage in the procurement process.
- Ability to clearly articulate:
  - the purpose of research
  - roles and responsibilities of contractor and commissioner
  - issues relating to intellectual property and ownership of data
  - expectations with regard dissemination.
- Understanding of different research methods including their relevance to different research questions
- Ability to write a research brief or specification including:
  - Articulation of statement of purpose based on an understanding of the rationale for the research
  - Clear research questions
  - Clear statement of outputs including expectations around dissemination and publication
  - Clear and reasonable timescales
  - A balance within the specification between tightly defined purpose and flexibility for tenderers to suggest approaches, methods etc.
- The ability to make best use of researchers' expertise by:
  - allowing flexibility for tenderer to suggest, where appropriate, approaches and methods
  - knowing/identifying suitable providers
  - understanding of the contractor's viewpoint.
- The ability to effectively assess proposals including:
  - the development of selection and evaluation criteria
  - deciding on when to use interviews/presentations

- making judgements about quality, cost and value for money
- probing beneath the gloss.
- Communication skills including:
  - with research customers about the brief
  - with procurement colleagues about the process
  - with potential tenderers about the process
  - with advisory/steering group
  - with short listed tenderers about requirements for interview/presentation
  - post tender negotiations with successful tenderers after formal process is complete to agree a detailed work programme
  - during period of contract.
- Understanding of the legal, financial and ethical aspects of commissioning including:
  - ensuring openness and fair play
  - understanding of the legal and ethical contexts
  - understanding of what needs to go into a contract
  - understanding of the requirements in relation to managing a research budget.

***Those with a role to play in relation to commissioning; infrequent commissioners of smaller research projects***

- Basic understanding of the place of commissioning within overall research project management.
- Understanding of different research methods including their relevance to different research questions
- Ability to write a research brief or specification including:
  - Articulation of statement of purpose based on an understanding of the rationale for the research
  - Clear research questions
  - Clear statement of outputs
  - Clear and reasonable timescales
  - A balance within the specification between tightly defined purpose and flexibility for tenderers to suggest approaches, methods etc.
- Communication skills including:
  - with research customers about the brief
  - with procurement colleagues about the process
  - with potential tenderers about the process
  - with advisory/steering group
  - with short listed tenderers about requirements for interview/presentation
  - post tender negotiations with successful tenderers after formal process is complete to agree a detailed work programme
  - during period of contract.
- Basic understanding of the legal, financial and ethical aspects of commissioning including:
  - ensuring openness and fair play
  - understanding of the legal and ethical contexts

- understanding of what needs to go into a contract
- understanding of the requirements in relation to managing a research budget.

**Skills required for effective research commissioning: a provider's view**

*The ability to think about what you already have or know; to find suppliers who understand the subject and build a relationship with them to check out their staff - who will actually be doing it, not the salesperson; to think about resources so that you can give an idea of the scale of the exercise (ideally some budget guidelines); to think about how you are going to communicate with tenderers; to seek some form of Quality Assurance; to state the issues, not the method; to set out a clear timescale and deadlines; to allow tenderer time to prepare a proposal; and to be accessible during the commissioning process. Technical knowledge of research methodology is not always necessary, knowledge of the desired outcome is.*

**Skills required for effective commissioning: a user/commissioner's view**

*Knowing what a research brief should contain - being clear in your research objectives and the outcomes you expect the research to deliver. Understanding of research practices - what different types of research can and can't deliver; being able to work with consultants and internal customers to ensure that expectations are managed and met; project management skills to manage the project and deal with practicalities and any contingencies; understanding of research contracts and what needs to be written into them.*

### 3.5 Mode of provision and cost

A majority of those consulted expressed a strong preference for training that could be accessed with a minimum of travel time. A number said that they would prefer to attend somewhere that was relatively local to them. This was of particular relevance at introductory and next stage/refresher level.

Face to face training of one or possibly two days duration was the preferred mode of delivery although a significant number of those consulted said that access to web-based materials - perhaps to support face to face training - would also be helpful. A web-based toolkit or guidelines was also felt to be a useful resource for those people who commissioned research very infrequently and would therefore be reluctant to invest in training for that eventuality.

Very few people said that accreditation was important for them. More important was felt to be the quality of the training and, to that end, endorsement by an authoritative organisation (such as the SRA) was felt to be useful. This was reflected in responses to a question about preferred type of provider. Professional organisations/associations were favoured together with individual trainers and, to a lesser extent, universities. More important than the sector providing the training was the skills of the trainers and that they should have insight into the viewpoints of both commissioners and researchers.

There was a slight preference for bespoke training rather than off-the-shelf training. However, in addition a significant number of consultees said that they had no preference.

When asked about the cost of training provision those consulted split into two broad groups. The first group came predominantly from large organisations and government departments; these people said that cost was really not an issue provided that it was broadly “reasonable”. For the second group cost was very much an issue; this group consisted primarily of those from small organisations, local government and the voluntary sector. Their preferred price range - per person, per day - ranged from £50 to around £300.

## 4 DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### 4.1 Discussion

The way in which social research is commissioned is recognised as being a complex and important process that has implications for the quality and utility of the research itself. While it is widely recognised that the process of commissioning cannot be entirely abstracted from the overall management of research projects it is also the case that there is a set of attitudes, skills and knowledge which can contribute to effective commissioning.

The processes through which research is commissioned vary considerably; the main determinants are the size of the organisation undertaking the commissioning and the scale of the research to be undertaken. Where large organisations are commissioning large and complex research and evaluation projects the process is more likely to be subject to procurement rules which, if too rigidly applied, can militate against effective commissioning by restricting opportunities for flexibility and dialogue with contractors.

There is an increasing awareness of the need to engage in more effective commissioning and recognition that there is considerable need in relation to training in this area. However need is not the same as demand and any training provision would have to be actively marketed to those deemed to need it. Most of the need is for training at introductory level. While there is already some training available at this level it is patchy in terms of geographical coverage, especially given an expressed preference for locally or regionally based training, and insufficiently tailored to the needs of specific sectors eg local authorities, voluntary organisations. There is also a need for refresher/next stage training.

Commissioning by government departments and agencies is often large-scale and is subject to particular rules and procedures. While generic introductory training would be helpful for more junior staff, next stage and more advanced training would be better provided by the GSRU, building on existing provision. Similarly much of the need and demand for advanced training and/or master classes is from government departments and non-departmental public bodies and would need to be focused on very specific issues. Again these could best be provided by GSRU. However there is scope for additional specialist seminars or workshops.

### 4.2 Values and principles of relevance to effective commissioning

The consultation has demonstrated a broad consensus around the proposition that effective commissioning occurs when the following principles are met and this is the case regardless of the size of the organisation doing the commissioning or the scale of the research being commissioned.

- *The need for, and purpose of, the research is clear.* This underlines the importance of a general understanding of social research and its limitations and where research is useful in relation to specific issues. It also emphasises the importance of discussion between research managers/commissioners and research customers about the rationale for, and purpose of, the research.

- *Maximum use is made of researchers' skills, experience and expertise:* This will involve striking an appropriate balance in preparing the brief between providing sufficient detail about what is required and providing opportunities for researchers to suggest approaches and methods. It also involves the use of dialogue as a key tool in the commissioning process.
- *The commissioning process is open and transparent and the principles of fair play are adhered to.* This involves a balance between making use of the experience of existing researchers while, at the same time, keeping the door open to new research providers.
- *The form of competition is 'fit for purpose'.* This involves an understanding of the different forms of competition, their limitations and their applicability to different types and sizes of research project. It also entails an understanding of the researcher's viewpoint in terms of not wasting their time eg by inviting too many researchers to submit full tenders.
- *The brief is well written and provides clear information to tenderers.* The information provided should include the purpose and aims and objectives of the research; constraints or difficulties that are likely to be encountered ; timescales; and the commissioning process. It is also helpful to provide an indication of budget or the scale of the project so that time is not wasted on developing proposals that are beyond the scope of the budget.
- *There is effective communication between all parties to the process.* This includes dialogue between procurement colleagues and research managers about the nature of the commissioning process; discussion between research managers and research customers about the rationale for, and purpose of the research; discussion with potential tenderers to enable them to prepare appropriate proposals; discussion with successful tenderers to agree the final shape of the research; and ongoing discussion with the researchers throughout the course of the project.
- *Adequate time is allowed both for the commissioning process and for the research itself.* Good researchers are generally busy. In order to secure the services of the best researchers sufficient time needs to be allowed for them to develop a proposal and then, if successful, to undertake the research. Where research is needed urgently a more streamlined commissioning process should be used.

These general principles should underpin and inform all training on commissioning social research.

### **4.3 Recommendations**

On the basis of the consultation we make the following recommendations:

1. The SRA and appropriate partners should work with existing providers to encourage them to take account of these guidelines in the design and delivery of their courses.
2. The SRA and appropriate partners should encourage universities that provide Masters courses in Social Research and Public Sector Management to include modules on Research Management including Commissioning.
3. The SRA, or the SRA together with appropriate partners, should develop the following training:
  - one-day regionally based courses

- at introductory and next-stage/refresher level (see section 4.4 below for indicative content)
  - with at least some provision available at a cost of around £200 per person per day
  - to be actively marketed to specific groups of organisations and sectors, with relevant partner organisations.
4. There are two ways in which this might work. The SRA could develop standard course materials that they could then contract with individual trainers to deliver with the SRA undertaking the marketing and publicity. And/or existing training providers could design and deliver courses that meet the SRA's requirements in relation to content and, as such, could then receive endorsement from the SRA.
  5. Any courses that are developed should be subject to evaluation to ensure that lessons are learned and provision is constantly improved.
  6. The SRA should consider developing a web-based tool or checklist, including, where appropriate, templates that can be adapted for use by a variety of users. This should not only support the training but should also be capable of being used as a resource in its own right by occasional commissioners.
  7. There appears to be some demand for more advanced training, or 'master classes'. By this we understand discussions of higher level and more complex issues for experienced research managers and commissioners. It is recognised that the demand for this kind of provision is likely to be somewhat limited and very context-specific, however the SRA, together with appropriate partners, should explore the possibility of facilitating such master classes.

#### 4.4 Indicative course specifications

All courses should be informed by the values and principles set out in section 4.2. These should be reflected in both the content and the general attitudes to commissioning informing the training.

##### 4.4.1 Introductory course

**Target audience:** Research officers; those who have recently acquired a role in relation to research commissioning; small-scale commissioners.

**Mode of provision:** A minimum of one day face to face training with supporting web-based materials that could function as stand-alone guidelines for occasional commissioners. Ideally this training should be:

- actively marketed to specific sectors eg local authorities, voluntary organisations perhaps with/through appropriate partner organisations
- provided at a number of different regional locations to increase accessibility and take-up.

**Providers:** Locally-based individual trainers with SRA endorsement; where there is sufficient demand within an individual organisation this could be provided as bespoke training.

##### Learning objectives:

On completion of the training participants will:

- Understand the place of commissioning within overall research management

- Understand the process of research commissioning and the principles that should inform it
- Be aware of appropriate methodologies
- Be able to write a clear research specification
- Have the skills to critically evaluate research proposals
- Know where to go in their own organisation or elsewhere to get additional help
- Have a basic understanding of the key legal, financial and ethical considerations of relevance to commissioning.

**Indicative course content:**

- The process of commissioning social research
- Relating approaches to research to purpose
- Developing a research specification
- Assessing tenders
- Effective communication
- Relevant legal and ethical frameworks.

**4.4.2 Refresher/Next level course**

**Target audience:** Senior staff with responsibility for overseeing the commissioning process; those with some experience of research wanting to develop their commissioning skills.

**Mode of provision:** One/two day face to face training tailored as far as possible around specific needs of participants.

**Providers:** Locally-based individual trainers with SRA endorsement; where there is sufficient demand within an individual organisation this could be provided as bespoke training.

**Learning objectives:**

On completion of the training participants will:

- Understand the place of commissioning within overall research project management
- Understand, and be able to apply effectively, different approaches to commissioning and forms of competition
- Be able to design a good research specification
- Have the ability to critically appraise tenders
- Be able to draw up selection criteria
- Appreciate the importance of effective communication
- Have a good understanding of the key legal, financial and ethical considerations of relevance to commissioning.

**Indicative course content:**

- Commissioning and its relationship to research project management
- Designing a commissioning strategy; advantages and disadvantages of different approaches
- Matching methods to purpose; ensuring that research is fit for purpose
- The tendering and selection process
- Effective communications with: research customers; procurement colleagues; potential providers; contractors
- Drawing up a contract including issues relating to Intellectual Property Rights

- Ethical issues in research commissioning.

#### **4.4.3 Master classes**

**Target audience:**

Senior research managers and other senior staff with responsibility for commissioning large and complex research and evaluation programmes

**Mode of provision:**

One or two day seminars or workshops either around specific themes eg EU procurement regulations, gaining ethical approval, or tailored around the needs of specific organisations eg a government department.

**Providers:**

The SRA together with appropriate partners could facilitate seminars; GSRU for government departments and/or specialist input around specific areas.

**Learning objectives:**

Following attendance at the master class participants will:

- Have a detailed knowledge of the specialist area covered by the training
- Be able to apply that knowledge to their own commissioning practice

**Indicative course content:**

This will vary according to the theme. However likely areas where there will be demand include:

- EU procurement regulations
- Balancing intelligent commissioning with the requirements of procurement procedures
- Gaining ethical approval
- Managing research and evaluation projects undertaken by consortia
- Designing and implementing framework agreements
- Intellectual Property Rights and other copyright issues

**ANNEX: LIST OF ORGANISATIONS RESPONDING TO THE CONSULTATION AND/OR PARTICIPATING IN THE SEMINAR ON TRAINING PROVISION**

Individual respondent	Organisation	Research user	Research commissioner	Research provider
Jack Winchester, Head of Strategic Research	Aberdeen City Council	✓	✓	✓
Simon Northmore, Practice Development & Research Manager	Age Concern England	✓	✓	
Leslie Sopp, Head of Research	Age Concern Enterprises Ltd	✓	✓	✓
Roger Sykes	Audit Commission	✓	✓	✓
Ali Coates, Senior Consultant	Avante Consulting Ltd	✓		✓
David Horner, Project Director	Beeston Hill & Holbeck Regeneration Partnership	✓	✓	✓
Steve Browning, Head of Evaluation and Research	Big Lottery Fund	✓	✓	
Sarah Mistry, Head of Evaluation & Research	Big Lottery Fund	✓	✓	
Julie Chalmers, Consultant	Blake Stevenson Ltd			✓
Gerry Rose, Senior Fellow	Cambridge University			✓
Helen Kara, Consultant	Children's Workforce Development Council	✓	✓	✓
Lee Bryer, Senior Research Analyst	CITB - Construction Skills	✓	✓	✓
Ken Roy, Director of Rural Analysis	Commission for Rural Communities	✓	✓	
Noreen Orr, Research Officer	Culture South West	✓	✓	
Kathy Murphy, Head of Evidence & Appraisal Unit	Department for Education & Skills	✓	✓	
Tim Shiles, Principal Research Officer, Head of Research Intelligence Team	Department for Education & Skills	✓	✓	
James Rushbrooke, Research Officer	Department for Education & Skills	✓	✓	
Jenny Collier, Senior Research Officer	Department for Work and Pensions		✓	
Adrian Alsop, Director of Resources	Economic and Social Research Council		✓	✓
Research Team	General Teaching Council	✓	✓	
Elizabeth Symons, Research Officer	Glasgow Housing Association	✓	✓	✓
Siobhan Campbell	Government Social Research	✓	✓	

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Clare Simkin	Hampshire Police	✓	✓	✓
Mary Hickman, Head of Research	HM Revenue & Customs		✓	
Sue Duncan, Chief Government Social Researcher	HM Treasury	✓	✓	
Lindsey Poole, Effective Practice Manager	Home Office	✓	✓	✓
Claire Lightowler, Head of Research	Improvement Service	✓	✓	✓
Jim Hillage	Institute of Employment Research			✓
Chris Goulden, Principal Research Manager	Joseph Rowntree Foundation		✓	
Sue Williams, Research Manager, Adult Social Services	Kent County Council	✓	✓	✓
Steve Crowther, Research Co-ordinator	Learning & Skills Council, W. Yorks	✓	✓	✓
Ian Swain, Y&H Regional Research Manager	Learning & Skills Council, Yorkshire & Humber	✓	✓	✓
Maggie Greenwood, Head of Research	Learning & Skills Network	✓		✓
Pascoe Pleasence, Head of the Legal Services Research Centre	Legal Services Commission	✓	✓	✓
Andrea Sellars, Research Analyst	Local Government Analysis & Research	✓	✓	✓
Marko Stojovic, Research & Information Officer	London Borough of Tower Hamlets	✓	✓	✓
Nigel Bilsborough, Finance and Resources Manager, Centre for Research in Social Policy	Loughborough University			✓
Louise Oakley, Customer Research Manager	Midland Heart	✓	✓	✓
John Wicks, Director	MVA Consultancy			✓
Janet Biggar, Managing Consultant	MVA Consultancy			✓
Kandy Woodfield, Research Director	National Centre for Social Research			✓
Paul Allin, Director, Social & Economic Micro-Analysis & Reporting	Office for National Statistics	✓	✓	✓
Viv Nunn, Learning Evaluation & Development Services	Open University			✓
Sara Daniels, Research Consultant	Paul Zealey Associates			✓

**Curriculum guidelines for training programmes on research commissioning**

David Horner, Project Director	re'new	✓	✓	
Cathy Sharp, Director	Research for Real	✓		✓
Jane Delorie, Managing Director	Research Solutions Ltd			✓
Lynsey Smith	RICS	✓	✓	
Diana Wilkinson	Scottish Executive	✓	✓	
Hamish Clark, Transport Social Researcher	Scottish Executive	✓	✓	
Jo Garrett, Research Officer	Scottish Legal Aid Board	✓	✓	
Lesley Giles, Head of Research	Sector Skills Development Agency	✓	✓	✓
Alison Hill	The Countryside Agency	✓	✓	✓
Pam Macpherson, Research Advisor	The Countryside Agency	✓	✓	✓
Connie Smith, Senior Research Specialist	The Scottish Parliament	✓	✓	✓
Kate Berry, Senior Research Specialist	The Scottish Parliament	✓	✓	✓
Pat MacLeod, Director, Social Research	TNS System Three			✓
Ailsa Cameron, Senior Lecturer	University of Bristol	✓		✓
Gary Craig, Professor of Social Justice	University of Hull			✓
Sarah Jarvis, Research Officer	Volunteer Development Scotland	✓	✓	
Jenny Clark, Research Officer	Workforce Hub, National Council for Voluntary Organisations	✓	✓	✓
<b>Attendees at meeting of training providers</b>				
Annette Boaz	Kings College London			
Sue Brooker	BMRB			
Melanie Jugdev	BMRB			
Chris Creegan	Independent researcher			
Alan Hedges	Independent researcher			
Helen Kara	We Research It			
Eleonore Kofman	Middlesex University			
Cathy Sullivan	London Metropolitan University			
Kandy Woodfield	National Centre for Social Research			

