

GSR professional guidance series



Publishing research in government
GSR Publication Guidance



Publishing Research in Government: GSR Publication Guidance

Government Social Research Unit

HM Treasury
1 Horse Guards Road
London SW1A 2HQ

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Foreword

Research conducted by and for government should be of the highest possible standard and represent excellence in social science. One way to ensure this is for all research to be open to scrutiny and challenge as with any other scientific endeavour. Clear planning of outputs and timely publication should increase both the standard and impact of government research.

In answer to the need for transparent, clear and shared practices across government, this guidance has been prepared in consultation with a sub-group of Permanent Secretaries reporting to the Cabinet Secretary, Sir Gus O'Donnell. It has been designed to create standard guidelines on the publication of all government research which does not fall under the definition of 'official statistics' and hence under the scrutiny of the independent UK Statistics Authority (UKSA).

The guidance details the five principles that should be adhered to in the publication and release of all government research products. It clearly sets out how research conducted by or for government should be released; who should be responsible for the release; the timing of the release and the independence of the research. The guidance enforces the principles under [FoI](#) and the [GSR Code](#).

This guidance applies to all government departments and devolved administrations that conduct or commission social science research¹. It is a concise and comprehensive statement of good practice and as such should be applied not only to the publication of social science outputs, but also other analytical outputs.



Paul Wiles
Chief Government Social Scientist
January 2010

¹ The Scottish Government launched its own guidance in December 2007 which is fully compliant with this guidance.

I Introduction

It is essential that research conducted by and for government is of the highest possible standards to ensure that the government of the day can make well informed decisions, leading to better outcomes for society. The Government Social Research Service (GSR) demonstrates its commitment to providing high quality research and researchers through adherence to the [GSR Code](#). This Publication Guidance complements the GSR Code and members of the GSR Service are expected to adhere to the guidance, as they do to the principles under the Code.

The GSR Code was established in 2008 to address the need for shared professional standards across the GSR community and to demonstrate a shared commitment to producing research and analysis for policy and delivery that is scientifically rigorous, relevant and valued.

The GSR Code consists of seven high-level principles and clearly sets out what is expected of GSR staff and outputs. Under each principle further guidance is available to aid understanding and adherence to the Code. The GSR Publication Guidelines described in this paper have been written to support the [Accessibility](#) principle of the Code, however they are also linked to the [Rigorous and Impartial](#) and [Relevant](#) principles.

[Scope of the guidance](#)

In scope

For this guidance, 'research and analysis' is defined as systematic data collection exercises using scientific methods, whether qualitative or quantitative, designed to generate robust information on an issue, policy or group of the population. The definition includes research and analysis to clarify or quantify a policy problem or to evaluate a policy and/or its delivery at pilot or full roll out stage.

This will include:

1. Research and analysis of quantitative data for the express purpose of answering a specific policy question (e.g. strategy development, policy development, policy delivery). This will include the analysis and interpretation of administrative data, analysis of specifically designed ad-hoc surveys, omnibus surveys and secondary analysis of continuous surveys and censuses.

2. Secondary quantitative data analysis involving the interpretation of data following the statistical release of the main findings.
3. Outputs from the analysis of qualitative data. These are data generated by any recognised qualitative method to generate robust data on the population(s) under study.
4. Outputs from the evaluation of policy/delivery initiatives/pilots.
5. Outputs from literature reviews/systematic reviews.

Out of scope

This guidance does not cover research and analysis that falls under the definition of official statistics, nor will it cover informal evidence gathering exercises which are not designed to generate robust data and advice based on analysis. To help all those in the government statistics and social research services determine – in a robust and consistent way – which outputs they produce should be treated as statistics and which as research, the National Statistician and Government Chief Social Scientist jointly developed [guidance](#) on the distinction between statistical and research outputs. Their note also describes who to involve in cases of uncertainty.

Specifically, outside the scope of this guidance are:

1. [Official statistics](#).
 2. Management information.
 3. Briefing for Ministers that draws on research and analysis but addresses a specific information requirement (this is already excluded under FoI).
 4. Briefing for policy/delivery colleagues, which draws on research and analysis but addresses a specific information requirement.
 5. Dipstick/informal information gathering. Ad-hoc and informal evidence gathering which does not constitute a robust picture.
 6. Informal stakeholder consultation. Consulting or discussing policy ideas or issues with stakeholders, for example trade unions, employer's groups, or pressure or interest groups whose views may contribute to a policy decision.
 7. Formal consultations of the general public. BIS has produced a [Code of Practice on Consultation](#) which should be followed.
 8. Analysis of unpublished/confidential papers and documents.
-

Summary of the five principles

Principle 1. The products of government social research will be made publicly available.

The primary purpose of research commissioned and conducted by government is to inform decisions about policy and delivery, but it also plays a role in wider policy debate. The presumption is that products from government research should be made publicly available.

Principle 2. There will be prompt release of all government social research.

Government research and analysis should be published promptly, with the normal maximum being 12 weeks from agreeing the final draft of the output. Within this period, the timing of the release can coincide with policy announcements/decisions/events. Findings should not be released in such a way as to create a presumed, or actual, advantage to any group or individual.

Principle 3. Government social research must be released in a way that promotes public trust.

Research products should be clearly based on the data collected. They should reflect the policies they have been designed to investigate, but findings should not be influenced by political concerns relating to those policies. Research products should be kept clearly distinct from Ministerial views, although their release can be timed to coincide with Ministerial announcements.

Principle 4. Clear communication arrangements will be in place for all products.

Departments should publicly announce what research projects are ongoing within their department and publish high-level information regarding those projects. This should include the aim of the research project, timescales and proposed dissemination plans. The information should be kept up to date.

Principle 5. Responsibility for the release of Government Social Research must be clear.

The Permanent Secretary should appoint a named person who has both the authority and expertise to make judgements about whether an output falls within the scope of the guidance and who is responsible for ensuring the guidance is adhered to.

Applying the principles in practice

Individual practice will vary by department, but the following stages can be used as a model of good practice for the publication of research and analysis work.

| Stage | Action | Timing |
|-------|--|--|
| 1 | Decide whether the exercise falls <u>within or outside the scope</u> of this guidance. If outside the scope, identify which other guidelines apply. | At the project initiation stage, before commencing any work (if in-house) or tendering (if commissioned) – or on introduction of this guidance. |
| 2 | If in scope, high-level information on the research project should be made publicly available (e.g. aim, timescales and proposed dissemination plans). | As early as is practicable, or once the contract has been awarded for externally contracted work, or when work commences for in-house research projects – or on introduction of this guidance. |
| 3 | Publication of <u>externally commissioned work</u> . | Subject to satisfying quality criteria, the work should be published no more than 12 weeks after the final agreed draft has been received. |
| 4 | Publication of <u>in-house research</u> . Publication should be in accordance with a departmental strategy (e.g. that research will be published with the publication of the related policy material). | Subject to satisfying quality criteria, the work should be published no more than 12 weeks after agreeing the final draft of the output. |
| 5 | <u>Communication of findings to Ministers</u> : Ministers should have clear sight of the forward-release schedule for all research and continue to have access to emerging findings as appropriate. | Ongoing. |

2 The five principles in detail

Principle 1: The products from government social research will be made publicly available

The primary purpose of research commissioned and conducted by government is to inform decisions about policy and delivery, but it also plays a role in wider policy debate. The presumption is that products from government social research should be made publicly available.

- The primary purpose of research commissioned and conducted by government is to inform decisions about policy and delivery, but it also plays a role in wider policy debate and the wider generation of knowledge. Research will be made publicly available in accordance with the government's commitment to openness (as underpinned by [Freedom of Information](#) legislation).
- The format and content of the published research output remains at the discretion of the commissioning department/organisation and release may be paper or IT-based or both. Publication can be by the department/organisation that commissioned/conducted the work.
- Departments are not expected to publish research on those rare occasions when publication would threaten national security, destabilise the economy, or not be in the public interest. For more information on carrying out a public interest test see [Fol](#) guidance on exemptions.
- Poor quality products can also be omitted from publication. However, such data remains publicly accessible through Fol requests. With such Fol requests, a covering note detailing the limitations of the data being released is advisable. Further information on the release of flawed information can be found in the [GSS/GSR Fol Guidance](#).
- Even without a Fol request, it is good practice to indicate the decisions not to publish as part of the communication arrangements set out under Principle 4.

Principle 2: There will be prompt release of all government social research

Government social research and analysis should be published promptly, with the normal maximum being 12 weeks from agreeing the final draft. Within this period, the timing of the release can coincide with policy announcements, decisions or events. However, findings should not be released in such a way as to create a presumed advantage to any group or individual.

- Government research products should be released promptly, with the normal maximum being 12 weeks from agreeing the final draft of the output. This leaves flexibility on the timing of publication, while ensuring the data are published and released into the public domain within an acceptable timeframe. Publishing more promptly, where possible, is to be encouraged and GSR members should share learning about how this is achieved.
- Publication should be in accordance with Principle 3 (releasing outputs in a way that promotes public trust), and can be:
 - as soon as is practicable once the output is judged to be of acceptable quality
 - timed to coincide with a policy statement on the same/a related subject
 - as part of a 'bundle' of research findings, for example at a specific time each month.
- For research where the department has vested the intellectual property right in the external contractor, the department should encourage the contractor to publish promptly and agree internally how to adhere to the principle of prompt release.
- Where publication is not within 12 weeks, the relevant GSR HoP should be notified and the reason for delay recorded. Reason for delay could be practical or legal, for example during an election period or prior to the budget announcement. The extent to which departments publish within 12 weeks will be one of the criteria used in measuring departmental capability during the annual GSR self-assessment of capability against the GSR Code.
- Research that is due to be published can, if it is considered reasonable and in the public interest, be exempt from release under FoI until the planned publication date, even if this has not been set. The FoI (Scotland) Act and the UK FoI Act differ slightly on this point (in Scotland publication must be within 12 weeks of the request) and so local advice should be taken on this exemption.

Principle 3: Government social research must be released in a way that promotes public trust

Research products should be clearly based on the data collected. They should reflect the policies they have been designed to investigate, but findings should not be influenced by political concerns related to those policies. Research products should be kept clearly distinct from Ministerial views, although their release can be timed to coincide with Ministerial announcements.

- Research products should be clearly based on the data collected, be neutral and robust. A good way to ensure quality and demonstrate impartiality of research findings is to subject research products to independent scrutiny in the form of peer review.
- There must be no opportunity – or perception of opportunity – for the release of research information (unfavourable or not) to be altered, withheld or delayed for political reasons.
- Ministers and policy/delivery colleagues may be briefed on findings at any point during a study to enable them to draw maximum benefit in making policy and delivery decisions. They must always be cautioned when provided with interim findings about the risks of results changing as more research is completed. Those who have access to research findings prior to their publication should avoid public comment about these findings to avoid undermining the integrity of government research. An early understanding of Ministerial views and policy direction must not lead to a compromising of the impartiality of research products.
- Where executive decisions are made on the basis of research and analysis not yet published, and in cases where public comment is necessary, the Head of Profession for social research will assess whether the relevant research material, or an extract from it, should be published immediately.
- If an analytical press release is deemed appropriate, reporting of the findings should be neutral and analytical (though they may comment on policy implications or contain recommendations where this is an integral part of the research) and be signed off by the research lead before being released.
- A press release of a policy announcement that includes a reference to a social science output published alongside the announcement should also be cleared by the analytical lead before being published.
- The timing of publication can be made to coincide with a policy statement, decision or event, as long as this remains within Principle 2 (prompt release).

Principle 4: Clear communication arrangements will be in place for all products

Departments should publicly announce what research projects are ongoing within their department, and publish high- level information regarding those projects. This should include the aim of the research project, timescales and proposed dissemination plans. The information should be kept up to date.

- Departments should make information about the research projects ongoing within their departments publicly available to demonstrate their commitment to transparency and to encourage public trust in government research products.
- The announcement should be made as early as is practicable, for example by publishing an annual research strategy detailing proposed projects, or by publishing details of contracts once awarded for externally contracted work, or when work commences for in-house research projects. Exemptions specified under Principle 1 also apply here.
- The format in which this information is published remains at the discretion of the department/organisation.
- Dissemination plans should include preliminary proposals for all forms of communication such as reports, conferences, press launches and should ensure that research is released in formats and at times of the day which are convenient to the widest range of users to facilitate widespread access and informed debate.
- It is good practice for departments to preannounce the date of publication. If this is not feasible, it is the department's responsibility to ensure communication arrangements are transparent and instil public trust.
- Once findings are published, information on departmental websites should reflect this, and clearly signpost where research findings can be found.
- The information published on departmental websites should be drawn up in consultation with key stakeholders in the project who have the authority to ensure it is adhered to. All stakeholders should be clear about, and signed up to, what has been agreed. This is in addition to setting up a communication plan, which should be carried out as part of good project management principles.

Principle 5: Responsibility for the release of government social research must be clear

The Permanent Secretary, or equivalent, should appoint a named person(s), who has both the authority and expertise to make judgements about whether an output falls within the scope of this guidance and who is responsible for ensuring that the guidance is adhered to.

- There should be accountability for the publication/release of government social research products. Each department should identify a named individual with responsibility for this. This individual must have the authority and expertise to be able to make sound judgements on release. The named individual must also ensure that their department/organisation has clear processes in place for implementing the Publication Guidance together with means of ensuring the guidance is followed.
- The named person will normally be the Head of Profession for social research in each department, who may seek advice from the Chief Government Social Scientist in cases of uncertainty. They may also need to seek advice from the Head of Profession for Statistics, and the National Statistician may also be consulted where there is uncertainty about whether the Publication Guidance applies. The joint [GSS/GSR Guidance](#) on the distinction between statistical and research outputs will help inform decisions to be made by the Heads of Profession.
- Adherence to this guidance and the GSR Code more broadly will be monitored as part of departmental self-assessment and peer-assessment against the GSR Code.
- It is essential that departmental/organisational press office and communication staff are consulted on the release of government social research.

Early release to reviewers

- Peer review is an important means of quality assuring government social research. If peer review is to be used, this should be built into the timing for the work, with the date of the agreed final draft including time required for peer review and revisions on the basis of this review. This will mean that the 12-week publication window should commence from the end of the peer review process.
- Where external peer review is used, early access to unreleased outputs must be given to the reviewer.

- Where peer review is used, the team producing the research should keep an accurate audit trail of distribution, including what is sent, to whom, when and where. Those receiving unreleased material will be obliged to guarantee the confidentiality of that material until it is formally released.

Translation

- Some research outputs are published in two or more languages. If translations are required, they should be built into the timing for the work. The final draft is not agreed until the translated version is finalised. It is good practice to give an indication at the beginning of the project of how long translation will take.

Embargoes

- Embargoed access to research products may be given to accredited journalists and others where it is deemed necessary to provide them with a period of time to assimilate and comprehend research in order to provide for informed comment at the time of release.
- Embargoed access will usually be given for complex reports where informed and considered comment at the time of release will facilitate public understanding. In consultation with the Press Office, the departmental Head of Profession or nominee shall determine when embargoed access is appropriate. As a general rule of thumb this should be no more than 48 hours before release.
- The embargo period will span usual office hours, so that those with access can reach the relevant departmental researchers or press office for clarification or briefing. The period will not usually include a weekend.

Accidental and wrongful release

- Any accidental or wrongful release of research information must be reported to the departmental Head of Profession for social research (or nominee) and the Press Office immediately it is discovered, so that appropriate action to limit loss of confidence can be quickly taken.
- Accidental or wrongful release includes providing any indication of the content of the release, including suggestions as to whether the research findings are 'favourable' or 'unfavourable' with regard to a particular government policy.
- Where there is clear proof of wrongful or accidental early release of a research product, the departmental Head of Profession (or nominee), in consultation with the Press Office, may judge it necessary to arrange for its release at the earliest possible time.

Research support to Press Office

- Support from the relevant government social researcher should be made available to the Press Office to provide advice on the research and to comment on interpretation and relevance. Special conditions apply in the run-up to elections; separate [general election guidance](#) is issued by the Cabinet Office.

Annex A: Glossary

There is a potential for some confusion or different interpretations of terms used in this guidance. This glossary has been prepared to ensure all are working to the same definitions.

Government social research products

All outputs from the research, analysis and interpretation of government social research activity, be that in written format, as live or recorded presentations, or any other release activity.

In-house

Work from a planned programme of social research in-house analysis or synthesis that has been agreed with policy colleagues and/or Ministers.

Launch

This can differ from the publication of a research report, and is the formal announcement and presentation of the outputs from government social research activity.

Agreed final draft

The agreed final draft is the end point of a project at which a final draft/version of the output has been received and accepted. This will be after any internal review / peer review and revisions as a result of these peer review comments. Peer reviewers would normally be given up to a month to review a research report, and the authors no more than a month to revise their findings.

Publication

Publication is the date on which a government social research product is released to the general public. This can be online only or in the form of a printed research report or other medium. There does not need to be an official launch of the product, or a different launch date could be set. Whatever the medium used, publication should be transparent and clearly evident to the external community.

Annex B: Sources

Freedom of Information Act

The issue of publication is closely linked to that of Freedom of Information (FoI) and this guidance has drawn on the principles behind the FoI Act. The Freedom of Information Act gives a general right of access to all types of recorded information held by public authorities and sets out exemptions from that right. It also places a number of obligations on public authorities, for example requiring that departments adopt a [publication scheme](#) containing information about products that are routinely made available, and ensure that information is published in accordance with the scheme.

The Act is intended to encourage organisations to publish more information pro-actively and to develop a greater culture of openness. The Act differs between [England, Wales, Northern Ireland](#) and [Scotland](#).

The Government Statistical Service has produced [guidance](#) for government statisticians and social researchers on implementing the FoI Act and this has been taken account of in the production of the guidance detailed here. More general guidance on the FoI Act is available on the [Ministry of Justice](#) website.

The Code of Practice for Official Statistics

Two other sources for guidance are, firstly, the Code of Practice for Official Statistics (Statistics Code) published in 2009 by the UK Statistics Authority (Protocol 2 in particular) and, secondly, the four Pre-Release Access Orders published by the four UK Administrations which are treated as an integral part of that Code. The GSR guidance aligns, where appropriate, the publication policy of government social research with that of GSS, while at the same time recognising the ongoing role of social research in informing decisions on policy and delivery. Like the Statistics Code, it also recognises the role of social research data in wider policy debate.

Election Guidance

Special rules apply in the run-up to elections. The Cabinet Office issues [General Election Guidance](#) which contains a specific section (section J) on statistical and research activity (including publication) during a general election.