



Government Social Research Recruitment Handbook

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The Recruitment Protocol and Handbook were developed by the Government Social Research Unit (GSRU) and the Recruitment Protocol Steering Group.¹

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¹ There is some interchangeability between a 'failure to show sufficient positive evidence' and negative evidence, particularly in some contexts. However, practically in an assessment situation, it is useful to hold on to the distinction between these two. Another way of describing them is as errors of omission and commission.

Foreword

The Recruitment Protocol for Government Social Research (GSR) provides departments with all the tools and information they need to deliver fair and efficient assessment processes which comply with the Civil Service Commissioners' Recruitment Code and relevant legislation.

Developed and trialled by GSRU in consultation with departments, devolved administrations and a consultant occupational psychologist, the Protocol will help improve standards in assessment and achieve greater consistency across GSR. It is underpinned by the GSR Competency Framework and reflecting HR best practice will enhance departments' ability to identify the most suitable candidate(s) from the field of applicants.

The case for good assessment is so self-evident that it scarcely needs to be made. The effectiveness of any organisation depends on the quality of its staff, which in turn depends on the effectiveness of its assessment processes for selection and development. There is a solid evidence-base which shows that organisations make better selection decisions by using the assessment methods included in the GSR Recruitment Protocol with the consequent impact on individual, team and organisational performance.

This handbook is designed to help you with the design of your selection processes, and offers guidance on the different selection tools and the skills of assessment. It is designed to accompany the GSR Recruitment and Objective Assessment training course, which is recommended for anyone involved in planning and/or delivering a recruitment exercise in GSR.

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What is the GSR Recruitment Protocol?

The following recruitment principles are critical to anyone involved in the assessment of Government Social Researchers:

1. **Best practice** – assessment for the selection or development of Government Social Researchers below the Senior Civil Service (SCS) should be done in accordance with the GSR Recruitment Protocol.
2. **Professional standards** – the GSR competencies are the core standards for the Protocol below Principal Research Officer (PRO) (Grade 7) in GSR. The assessment tools provided for PRO and Senior Principal Research Officer (SPRO) (Grade 6) test the Professional Skills for Government (PSG) requirements for Leadership, the four core skills, and ‘Professional expertise’.
3. **Diversity and fairness** – adoption of the assessment practices in this handbook encourages fair staff selection. The tools and guidance are based on best practice, encourage transparency, have specific relevance to social research jobs, and have proved to be acceptable to a range of social research candidates (see Part 1).
4. **Training** – is compulsory. At **least** one member of a GSR selection panel **must** have attended the GSRU Objective Assessment training course. Full guidance and assessment tools are available only to trained assessors (see Introduction).
5. **Continuous improvement** – feedback is a feature of any assessment exercise in GSR. Departments should routinely collect feedback from candidates and assessors, and report it to the Government Social Research Unit (GSRU).
6. **Wider perspective** – ideally, one member of the assessment panel will be a social researcher from another government department.
7. **Communication** – departments should communicate to GSRU when they are going to recruit staff, either internally or through open competition, and provide details on the number of positions available and at what grades.

Introduction

Recruitment Handbook structure

The handbook is divided into three parts:

- **Part 1** – how to plan and design a selection process (assessment centre);
- **Part 2** – guidance on the selection tools available and the skills of assessment; and
- **Part 3** – CD-ROM accompanying this handbook, containing the toolkit of recommended selection exercises for Research Officer (RO) and Senior Research Officer (SRO). **The CD is a resource restricted for use only by those who have been trained to use the Protocol. Additional exercises for Principal Research Officer (PRO) and Senior Principal Research Officer (SPRO) grades are available by request from the Government Social Research Unit (GSRU).**

Recruitment training

To access and use any of the selection tools contained in Part 3 of this handbook, it will be necessary for at least one member of a GSR recruitment panel to have attended the GSR assessor training.

Training courses in Recruitment and Objective Assessment are organised centrally by GSRU and delivered by a consultant occupational psychologist. Departments and devolved administrations may also organise bespoke training in using the Protocol direct with the consultant occupational psychologist who is approved to deliver training. GSRU hold a register of trained assessors which you may use to source assessors to sit on your assessment panels.

Security guidelines for recruitment materials

Parts 1 and 2 of this handbook are available on the public area of the GSR website. Part 3 is restricted to trained assessors. Access to the materials on the CD-ROM would give a considerable advantage to a candidate in a selection process. The exercises, test materials and marking guidance are restricted documents and should be kept secure at all times. Store paper materials in a lockable cabinet not shared with others, and always collect all papers and notes from candidates at assessment centres when they have finished with them. Do not save electronic materials on any shared drive.

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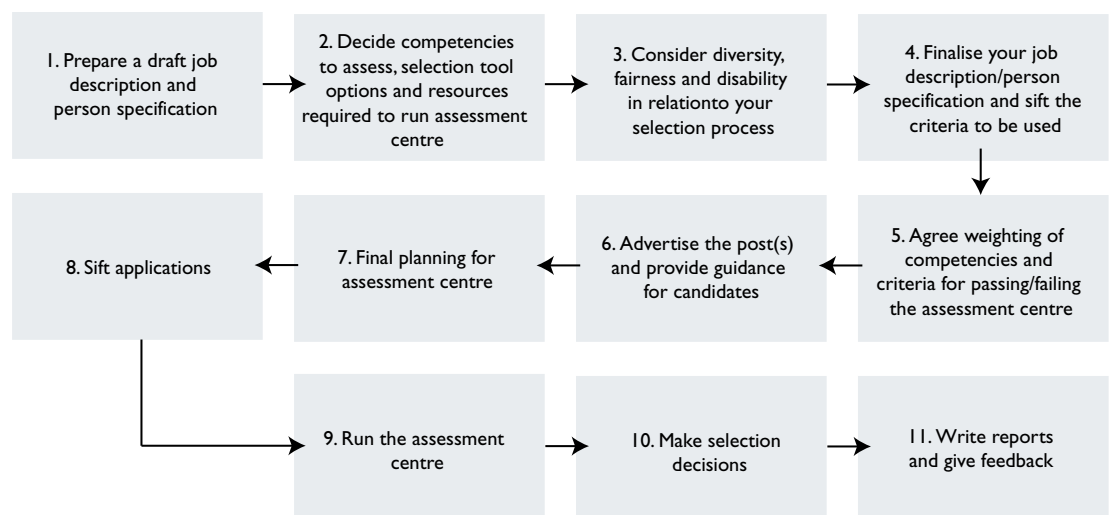
Putting together a selection process/ assessment centre

Assessment centres focus on the systematic and objective identification of behaviours of an individual for the purposes of selection and promotion. There is a solid evidence-base which shows that organisations making use of assessment centres make better selection decisions – with the consequent impact on individual, team and organisational performance – than when using interviews alone. It is important that there is a clear process for how information from different sources is integrated to arrive at consistent decisions.

All assessment centres require careful planning; make sure you allow as much time as possible at the planning stage – this will help you later.

The flow chart shown on page 9 will help you design your assessment centre. The rest of this chapter focuses on each stage of the process. The numbering of each section in this part of the handbook corresponds to the numbering on the flow chart.

Flow chart for designing and running an assessment centre



1.0 Prepare a draft job description and person specification

The first stage is to be clear about the nature of the vacancy, so the starting point should be the job description. Unless you are clear about what you want the person to do, it is difficult to assess whether they will be capable of doing it and will apply themselves to the task with energy and commitment. Prepare a draft first so that you have something on which to base the design of your assessment centre.

A job description outlines the duties required of a particular post holder. A person specification gives the skills, knowledge and experience required to carry out these duties. It is normal to write these in terms of the competencies needed to do the job. The GSR Competency Framework provides the basis for producing the job

descriptions and the person specifications needed in any initial recruitment or promotion selection process within departments/devolved administrations. The framework should be helpful both in structuring the description and in providing a clear 'behavioural' language in which it can be expressed. The framework is now incorporated within the *GSR Continuing Professional Development Handbook*, an interactive tool which can be found on the GSR website at: http://www.gsr.gov.uk/downloads/professional_development/cpd_handbook_181006.pdf.pdf.

It is important to note here the implications of the Employment Equality (Age) Regulations introduced in October 2006 in relation to recruitment and selection. You should avoid references, however oblique, to age both in the job description and in the person specification. For example, avoid asking for 'so many years' experience'. This may rule out younger people who have the skills required but have not had the opportunity to demonstrate them over an extended period. A job seeker could challenge any time requirement and you may have to justify it in objective terms. Also, in GSR we look for graduates with relevant social science degrees. 'Graduates' can be interpreted as code for someone in their early twenties, but graduates can of course be almost any age. Make it clear that you are interested in the qualification and not the age of the applicant.

Recruiters should be open and honest in the picture presented to candidates to encourage them to make an informed self-assessment of themselves against the requirements of the job and the organisation. Candidates could be provided with some sort of 'realistic job preview'. This can be provided online or on paper in the application pack that is sent out to candidates. Examples include:

- providing a description of a 'week in the life of a Research Officer'; and
- providing a description of the social research knowledge that candidates will need to demonstrate at the assessment centre they will attend.

You can make it less likely that the 'marginally interested' will apply by making candidates invest a fair amount of work in the application process. Those who are not that motivated will not complete the application. Equally, there is a balance to be struck. It is important to avoid making the selection procedure so onerous that suitable candidates with other attractive job opportunities will not bother applying in the first place.

2.0 Decide competencies to assess, selection tool options and resources required to run the assessment centre

The second stage is to decide what competencies are to be assessed and what methods are to be used to assess them.

2.1 How to choose your competencies and selection tools

Each selection tool in the Recruitment Protocol assesses particular competencies. To find out more about the tools, see Part 2 of this handbook.

The best way of starting to choose which exercises you will use is to refer to the competency-exercise matrices at section 2.4. To use these matrices effectively, you will need to have a clear understanding of the job you are advertising and therefore the competencies you may want to prioritise (your *key competencies*).

Ideally all competencies should be assessed at least once, although it is not uncommon to focus on or leave out particular competencies based on the particular requirements of the job or grade. For example, candidates applying for Research Officer (RO) posts may struggle with the ‘policy and delivery focus’ competency due to lack of experience, particularly external candidates. For ROs, the leading and directing competency may also not feature as a key competency; however, this competency may be particularly important for more senior posts where there is a significant management responsibility in the post being advertised. Some assessment centres use as little as two exercises, some up to eight, most between four and six. You should avoid any one exercise assessing more than four to five competencies; any more would make the process of recording and evaluating evidence too difficult for the assessors.

The minimum requirement for recruitment using the GSR Protocol is to use the following competency-based exercises:

- application form;
- oral briefing exercise or written analysis exercise; and
- competency-based interview.

However, think carefully about the job you are trying to fill before finally choosing the combination of selection tools. Additional exercises are recommended to explore fully the range of competencies, for example written analysis exercises or group exercises. Some tools, such as personality questionnaires, may be particularly informative in recruitment exercises for senior positions.

Competencies are the building blocks of effective performance but, as with a set of ‘Lego’ bricks, some people are able to use the building blocks to better effect than others. It is the way that the competencies are used in combination which really determines overall effectiveness in a job. Competencies should therefore be regarded as simply a useful framework for gathering and collating information which is relevant to selection decisions. Judgement is still required in weighing this information up to reach the right selection decisions. All assessment activities should involve a comparison of each candidate against the job requirements in as objective a manner as possible. There is more on the skills of assessment in Part 2.

Overall:

- Ensure balance across the Competency Framework so that all the key competencies for the role are being assessed by at least one exercise.
- Some roles may emphasise a particular competency, for example, policy focus. If so, then ensure that the exercises you set, or the interview questions you ask, take that into account.

- Use a variety of evidence – do not just look at one aspect of a competency, for example, in assessing communicating with impact make use of a written exercise as well as an oral briefing.
- Introduce variety for the candidate – candidates are likely to feel that they have been fairly assessed if the exercises cover a broad range of activities. It also reduces candidate fatigue.
- Consider resource issues – some exercises are more time consuming to administer and/or score, or require more assessors than others.

2.2 Stages of assessment – when to use a pre-assessment stage

You should consider your local circumstances and likely number of applications, as this may affect how you plan your assessment centre.

For external/open competitions or internal recruitment exercises where you expect a high volume of applications (e.g. more than 20), it can be helpful to run a pre-assessment centre stage, in which candidates are asked to complete a short exercise and are sifted out if they do not reach a particular minimum standard. Examples of exercises used at a pre-assessment stage would be those that are relatively cheap to use, such as psychometric tests, a knowledge test, or possibly a written exercise (in which case the marking might be outsourced to reduce the cost). This approach will reduce the number of applications, but there needs to be consensus that what you are assessing at pre-assessment is what is essential in any candidate.

GSRU recommend the use of verbal and numerical reasoning/critical thinking tests in pre-assessment to help shortlist a large number of candidates. These tests are an effective indicator of potential and predictor of future job performance.

The descriptions of these type of exercises in Part 2 and the materials in Part 3, in particular the advice on sourcing critical-thinking (psychometric) tests (file 2.0), will be helpful here. The main assessment centre follows pre-assessment and includes the more 'assessor intensive' expensive-to-run exercises, such as oral briefings and interviews.

For small internal/cross-departmental recruitment exercises (e.g. where fewer than 20 applications are expected), sifting based on the competency evidence provided on application forms should be relatively straightforward.

As long as there is careful sifting and numbers are not too great, one day is normally sufficient for an assessment centre. Section 4 in this part of the handbook covers more about sifting. The table below summarises the pros and cons of keeping an assessment to one day or using a pre-assessment stage.

Pros and cons of one-day assessment and/or a pre-assessment stage

Pros/cons of one-day assessment centres with no pre-assessment	Pros/cons of holding pre-assessment as well as a one-day assessment centre
<p>Most appropriate to use when only a few suitable candidates</p> <p>Candidates can prefer them as only one day's leave required (especially external candidates)</p> <p>Evaluating evidence while still fresh in the minds of assessors</p> <p>May be more acceptable to internal candidates who will feel that they are being given a full chance rather than risk being knocked out at pre-assessment. This is much less important for external candidates though</p>	<p>Most appropriate when a lot of potentially suitable candidates and no other sensible way of sifting</p> <p>Some candidates prefer that the assessments are spread over more than one day, especially if it means that the main assessment centre is shorter</p> <p>Can be a more efficient use of assessors' time – less time spent on unsuitable candidates. However, too many stages are expensive (e.g. if paying candidates' travel expenses) and time consuming</p> <p>Lower threshold for entry – as a result may be more likely to take a chance on seeing a candidate who otherwise would have been sifted out</p> <p>Risk of shortlisting too few candidates or shortlisting in a distorted manner. Need to be clear that sifting is fair and valid, and your cut-offs are not too high</p>

2.3 A caution about the repeat testing of candidates

Repeat testing is a minor risk of using off-the-shelf exercises developed for the GSR Recruitment Protocol. GSRU and departments/devolved administrations must endeavour to manage this risk as far as possible by doing the following:

- Recruiters should ask candidates to state if they have previously applied for a GSR post externally or internally whether on a level transfer or promotion (this could be added to the application form). If they have, ask them what exercises they completed and check that you will not be using the same exercise.

- Recruiters could use the assessment 'shells' to develop bespoke scenarios, to eliminate the problem (see Parts 2 and 3 of this handbook for more information on these).
- GSRU will develop different scenarios for the written and oral briefings, which will be added to the Protocol on an annual basis.

If an applicant has taken part in a particular exercise before, then you should use a different exercise for all the applicants because it is important, in terms of fair and open competition, that all candidates go through the same process.

2.4 Avoiding internal candidate advantage

Any advantage that internal candidates have over external candidates probably comes from the following sources:

- Firstly, have the selection exercises and questions been designed sufficiently well so that they are fair to external and internal candidates alike? It is possible that some exercise content can tap into knowledge that can only be acquired by working for the civil service.
- Secondly, internal candidates are more likely to know the jargon and keywords to use which may unduly influence some assessors in a positive direction.
- Thirdly, and related to the second point, is that internal candidates' communication style, whether in writing or orally, is likely to be more 'civil service', which again can have a disproportional positive effect on some assessors.

How can these potential sources of error be managed?

- The Protocol materials are regularly reviewed and revised where necessary to ensure that the scoring guides for the exercises (written exercise, oral-briefing exercise, etc.) and interview questions are neutral from the perspective of internal or external candidates.
- You need to ensure that the candidate briefing materials are as transparent and clear as possible – perhaps ask an external social researcher, such as a research contractor, to take a look at the material and highlight any lack of clarity. You should avoid using government/civil service terminology (jargon). Consider possible interpretations of competencies by external candidates. For example, with 'communicating with impact' we are not expecting candidates to make a 'grand entrance' and give a 'performance', such as an actor might make on the stage! The essence of this competency is that the candidate should demonstrate that they can communicate clearly, concisely and in a way that is persuasive, i.e. persuades the assessors to a particular course of action depending on the nature of the exercise.
- It is also important that assessors familiarise themselves with the assessment tools and benchmark themselves with the exercises so that everyone is clear about what a good answer looks like, i.e. what is relevant and what is irrelevant.

2.5 Competency-exercise matrices

The next few pages are the competency-exercise matrices which illustrate which selection tools/exercises assess which GSR competencies. These are your starting point for putting together an assessment centre.

Key:

- ✓ measure of competency
- ✓ ✓ robust measure of competency
- ✓* these exercises do not directly assess professional expertise, but to do well in them requires underpinning professional expertise skills

RO	Policy and delivery focus	Delivering results	Learning and improving	Critical analysis and decision making	Constructive thinking	Professional expertise	Developing constructive relationships	Communicating with impact	Leading and directing
Competency-based application form (see file 1.0 on CD)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Competency-based interview questions (see files 6.0–6.1 on CD)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Knowledge test items (see file 6.1 on CD)						✓ ✓			
Reasoning tests – GMA, Utopia (see file 2.0 on CD)				✓ ✓					
Written analysis exercise (see files 3.0–3.2 on CD)	✓			✓ ✓		✓ ✓		✓ ✓ written	
Oral-briefing exercise and Q&A session		✓ ✓	✓		✓ ✓	✓		✓ ✓ oral	

SRO

	Policy and delivery focus	Delivering results	Learning and improving	Critical analysis and decision making	Constructive thinking	Professional expertise	Developing constructive relationships	Communicating with impact	Leading and directing
Competency-based application form (see file 1.0 on CD)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Competency-based interview questions (see files 6.0–6.1 on CD)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Knowledge test items (see file 6.1 on CD)						✓✓			
Reasoning tests – GMA, Utopia (see file 2.0 on CD)				✓✓					
Written analysis exercise (see files 3.0–3.2 on CD)	✓			✓✓		✓✓		✓✓ written	
Written exercise (see files 3.3 - 3.5 on CD)				✓✓				✓✓ written	
Oral briefing and self-assessment (see files 4.0-4.2 and 5.0-5.1)		✓✓	✓		✓✓	✓		✓✓ oral	
Oral briefing and self-assessment (see files 4.3-4.4 and 5.0-5.1)			✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓*		✓✓ oral communication and persuasiveness	

PRO

	Policy/ customer focus	Delivering results	Learning and improving	Critical analysis and decision making	Constructive thinking	Professional expertise	Developing constructive relationships	Commun- icating with impact	Leading and directing
Competency-based application form (see file 1.0 on CD)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Competency-based interview (contact GSRU for files)	✓	✓ ✓ more of a track record to go on	✓	✓	✓	✓ ✓ more of a track record to go on	✓	✓	✓
Reasoning tests (see file 2.0 on CD)				✓ ✓					
Personality questionnaire (see Resources table)		✓	✓ self- awareness	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Written analysis exercise (contact GSRU for files)				✓ ✓		Can be expanded to include this		✓ ✓ written	
Oral briefing exercise and Q&A session (contact GSRU for files)		✓	✓ ✓		✓ ✓	Can be expanded to include this		✓ ✓ oral ommunication and persuasiveness	
Group exercise (contact GSRU for details)		✓ ✓	Can be expanded to include this		✓		✓ ✓	✓ ✓ oral ommunication and persuasiveness	
Role plays (see Resources table)	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓ ✓	✓ ✓ oral ommunication and persuasiveness	✓ ✓

SPRO

	Policy/ customer focus	Delivering results	Learning and improving	Critical analysis and decision making	Constructive thinking	Professional expertise	Developing constructive relationships	Commun- icating with impact	Leading and directing
Competency-based application form (see file 1.0 on CD)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Competency-based interview (contact GSRU for files)	✓ ✓ more of a track record	✓ ✓	✓	✓	✓	✓ ✓ more experience to draw upon	✓	✓	✓ ✓ more of a track record
Reasoning tests (see file 2.0 on CD)				✓ ✓					
Personality questionnaire (see Resources table)		✓	✓ self- awareness	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Role plays (see Resources table)	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓ ✓	✓ ✓ oral ommunication and persuasiveness	✓ ✓

2.6 Planning the resources needed to run your assessment centre

There are a number of key things to bear in mind at the design stage relating to the resources needed to run your assessment centre:

- **Assessors** – how many assessors do you need to run your assessment centre (how many candidates do you expect to shortlist)? How many GSR staff do you have who are trained in recruitment? Do you need to arrange for anyone to attend training before you run your assessment centre? Who will you ask to be a representative assessor from another government department/devolved administration and are they suitably trained/experienced? Will you ‘buy in’ any exercises, for example a cognitive test, or will you outsource any marking, for example for written exercises?
- **Time** – what dates do you/other assessors have available to sift your candidates and later run the assessment centre? When you timetable the exercises and breaks, is the assessment centre day realistic and acceptable for assessors and candidates? (For examples, see section below.)
- **Administrators** – can your assessors also carry out administration during the day or do you need extra help? For example with starting candidates off on exercise preparation; to invigilate exercises; to escort candidates to and from reception or to the toilet; to arrange refreshments throughout the day. Identify who might be able to assist you and ensure they are well briefed and have full copies of any assessment centre timetables you produce.
- **Accommodation** – how many individual rooms do you need to run your assessment centre timetable? (For example preparation rooms, interview rooms, break/lunch areas.) Do you have enough suitable rooms in your local situation to manage an assessment centre or do you need to book appropriate accommodation elsewhere?
- **Materials** – do you have all the electronic/paper materials you need to run your assessment centre exercises, for example candidate instructions, assessor marking guides and evidence recorders? Are you ‘buying in’ any exercises, for example cognitive tests? Do you have the right number of copies of all the materials? Do you have a secure place to store the materials and your candidate reports?

Refer to the Resources table on pages 31-34 for additional information about resourcing assessment centre exercises.

2.6.1 How to timetable an assessment centre

There are many ways of organising an assessment centre. The exact configuration depends in part on the number of assessors available and therefore to what extent exercises can be completed in parallel. It may not be possible to keep the order of exercise completion the same for each candidate, but as much as possible you should aim for candidates to have a similar number of breaks spread throughout the day. Important things to consider are:

- the number of assessors you have and the time available to them; and

- the number of exercises used and whether they are completed individually (e.g. oral briefing, interview) or completed/administrated in groups (e.g. group exercise, cognitive tests, written analysis exercises).

It is good practice to produce individual timetables for all assessors and candidates involved, indicating how long each activity (e.g. exercise, lunch break) lasts and which rooms they should go to for each activity.

Two examples of an assessment centre timetable can be found on pages 25-30.

Example 1

Below is a basic illustration of how an assessment centre might be organised when candidates do not complete an exercise in the same order due to constraints of time and/or the number of assessors available. For an assessment centre like this you would need five assessors – two pairs for each interview/oral briefing running in parallel, and another to administrate the additional exercises in parallel.

Example 2

This is of an internal PRO recruitment exercise involving a panel of two assessors and three candidates who have been pre-sifted by application form. **A minimum requirement of oral briefing (OB) and competency-based interview has been used in this case.** As you can see, you may need the help of an administrator briefed in how to introduce the particular exercises you are asking candidates to complete, and possibly somebody else to escort candidates between rooms and around the building, depending on the local situation of available accommodation and available ‘helpers’.

2.6.2 Order of candidate assessment

In an ideal world, candidates would all go through the assessment centre in the same order. However, this is rarely practical unless there are enough assessors to run parallel sessions or assessors have the availability and the accommodation to run the assessment centre on lots of different days. It is more important to ensure that all candidates have a balanced ‘workload’ of exercises on the day with the same number of breaks, so avoiding any one candidate being placed temporarily under more pressure than another. This is really a question of judgement by the assessment centre organiser, for example avoid having two written exercises one after the other for some candidates but not others. When timetabling an assessment centre with candidates doing exercises in different orders, the following should be considered:

- Allow time between each exercise for the candidate to avoid becoming too tired, for example at least a 10-minute break for every hour of assessment and a 45-minute break at lunchtime. Unnecessary pressure should be avoided.
- Reflect on what is required of the candidate in each exercise to ensure that there is no obvious ‘order effect’ in terms of technical content, for example does one of your interview questions relate to a question on the written exercise or oral briefing so priming the candidate to give a better answer. This would rarely be the case but should be checked.
- Assessors should ensure that no feedback is given to candidates until the assessment process is finished.

- Consideration also needs to be given to the needs of the assessors if errors are to be avoided. The same rest periods as for candidates should apply.
- Where possible have a run through of the assessment centre day to see how well the timetable works and gain feedback from the volunteer 'candidates'. Do not be too ambitious about timing and pacing activities. If possible, put out your suggested assessment timetable to the assessors for them to comment on prior to implementation.

2.6.3 Number of assessors needed

The more sessions you run in parallel, the more assessors are required. It is recommended to put together an interview board of two assessors (or three as a maximum). At least one assessor on each board should have attended the GSR Recruitment and Objective Assessment training course. It is also good practice that one of the assessors is from another government department/devolved administration.

GSRU hold a register of GSR members who have attended the GSR Recruitment and Objective Assessment training. Contact GSRU at gsrcareers@hm-treasury.x.gsi.gov.uk to request an up-to-date copy of the register.

Group exercises may need one assessor to each candidate in the group, although experienced assessors may be able to record evidence on two candidates simultaneously. The administration of written analysis exercises can normally be done by anyone who has been instructed on the format/content of the exercise and the timings, etc., so that they can explain this to the candidate and answer any simple questions about it. The administration of cognitive tests and personality questionnaires usually requires additional qualification.

Also consider the number of assessors involved in the process of making final selection decisions (see Section 10 of this part of the handbook for more about making selection decisions).

Timetable example 1

	Candidate 1	Candidate 2	Candidate 3	Candidate 4	Candidate 5
8:30	Board convenes				
8:45	Interview	Oral briefing – candidate preparation			
9:00					
9:15					
9:30		Oral briefing – delivery to assessors			
9:45					
10:00	Oral briefing	Interview	Written exercise	Written exercise	
10:15					
10:30					
10:45					
11:00					
11:15					
11:30	Critical-thinking test				
11:45					
12:00					
12:15					
12:30					
12:45					
13:00	Written exercise	Written exercise	CBI interview	Oral briefing	Written exercise
13:15					
13:30					
13:45					
14:00					
14:15				CBI interview	
14:30					Oral briefing
14:45					
15:00					
15:15					
15:30			Oral briefing		CBI interview
15:45					
16:00					
16:15					
16:30	Finish marking written exercises/finish writing notes Start 'integration' (sometimes called wash-up or final conference), i.e. decision-making process				
16:45					
17:00					
17:15					
17:30					

Timetable example 2

	Candidate 1	Candidate 2	Candidate 3	Assessor panel (based in G/36)	Oral briefing (OB) administrator	Escort	Second escort
08:45	Arrives 1HGR reception					Receive call from 1HGR reception to collect Candidate 1	
08:50	Escorted to G/37					Escort Candidate 1 to G/37	
08:55	Receives OB instructions in G/37				Instruct Candidate 1 in G/37		
09:00	Starts OB preparation in G/37						
09:05	OB preparation in G/37						
09:10	OB preparation in G/37						
09:15	OB preparation in G/37						
09:20	OB preparation in G/37						
09:25	OB preparation in G/37						
09:30	Finishes OB preparation/ escorted to G/36					Stop Candidate 1 OB preparation and escort to G/36	
09:35	Delivers OB to panel in G/36			Receive OB from Candidate 1			
09:40	Delivers OB to panel in G/36			Receive OB from Candidate 1			
09:45	Receives questions from panel in G/36			Question Candidate 1 on their OB			
09:50	Receives questions from panel in G/36			Question Candidate 1 on their OB			
09:55	Receives questions from panel in G/36			Question Candidate 1 on their OB			
10:00	Receives questions from panel in G/36			Finish questioning Candidate 1 on their OB			
10:05	BREAK (based in G/37)			Write up evidence from Candidate 1 OB		Ensure Candidate 1 in based in G/37 Escort to toilet if necessary	
10:10	BREAK (based in G/37)			Write up evidence from Candidate 1 OB			
10:15	BREAK/escorted to G/36	Arrives 1HGR reception		Write up evidence from Candidate 1 OB/prepare for interview		Receive call from 1HGR reception to collect Candidate 2	Ensure Candidate 1 goes to G/36 for interview
10:20	Interviewed by panel in G/36	Escorted to G/37		Interview Candidate 1		Escort Candidate 2 to G/37	
10:25	Interviewed by panel in G/36	Receives OB instructions in G/37		Interview Candidate 1	Instruct Candidate 2 in G/37		

10:30	Interviewed by panel in G/36	Starts OB preparation in G/37		Interview Candidate 1			
10:35	Interviewed by panel in G/36	OB preparation in G/37		Interview Candidate 1			
10:40	Interviewed by panel in G/36	OB preparation in G/37		Interview Candidate 1			
10:45	Interviewed by panel in G/36	OB preparation in G/37		Interview Candidate 1			
10:50	Interview finishes/ escorted to exit 1HGR	OB preparation in G/37		Finish interview/ start writing evidence on Candidate 1		Escort Candidate 1 to exit 1HGR	
10:55		OB preparation in G/37		Write up evidence from Candidate 1 interview			
11:00		Finishes OB preparation/ escorted to G/36		Finish writing up evidence from Candidate 1 interview/ prepare to assess Candidate 2 OB		Stop Candidate 2 OB preparation and escort to G/36	
11:05		Delivers OB to panel in G/36		Receive OB from Candidate 2			
11:10		Delivers OB to panel in G/36		Receive OB from Candidate 2			
11:15		Receives questions from panel in G/36		Question Candidate 2 on their OB			
11:20		Receives questions from panel in G/36		Question Candidate 2 on their OB			
11:25		Receives questions from panel in G/36		Question Candidate 2 on their OB			
11:30		Receives questions from panel in G/36		Finish questioning Candidate 2 on their OB			
11:35		BREAK (based in G/37)		Write up evidence from Candidate 2 OB		Ensure Candidate 2 is based in G/37. Escort to toilet if necessary	
11:40		BREAK (based in G/37)		Write up evidence from Candidate 2 OB			
11:45		BREAK/escorted to G/36		Write up evidence from Candidate 2 OB/prepare for interview		Ensure Candidate 2 goes to G/36 for interview	
11:50		Interviewed by panel in G/36		Interview Candidate 2			
11:55		Interviewed by panel in G/36		Interview Candidate 2			
12:00		Interviewed by panel in G/36		Interview Candidate 2			
12:05		Interviewed by panel in G/36		Interview Candidate 2			
12:10		Interviewed by panel in G/36	Arrives 1HGR reception	Interview Candidate 2		Receive call from 1HGR reception to collect Candidate 3	
12:15		Interviewed by panel in G/36	Escorted to G/37	Interview Candidate 2		Escort Candidate 3 to G/37	
12:20		Interview finishes/ escorted to exit 1HGR	Receives OB instructions in G/37	Finish interview/ start writing evidence on Candidate 2	Instruct Candidate 3 in G/37	Escort Candidate 2 to exit 1HGR	
12:25			Starts OB preparation in G/37	Write up evidence from Candidate 2 interview			
12:30			OB preparation in G/37	Finish writing up evidence from Candidate 2 interview			

12:35			OB preparation in G/37	LUNCH BREAK		
12:40			OB preparation in G/37	LUNCH BREAK		
12:45			OB preparation in G/37	LUNCH BREAK		
12:50			OB preparation in G/37	LUNCH BREAK		
12:55			Finishes OB preparation/ escorted to G/36	LUNCH BREAK/ prepare for Candidate 3 OB		Stop Candidate 3 OB preparation and escort to G/36
13:00			Delivers OB to panel in G/36	Receive OB from Candidate 3		
13:05			Delivers OB to panel in G/36	Receive OB from Candidate 3		
13:10			Receives questions from panel in G/36	Question Candidate 3 on their OB		
13:15			Receives questions from panel in G/36	Question Candidate 3 on their OB		
13:20			Receives questions from panel in G/36	Question Candidate 3 on their OB		
13:25			Receives questions from panel in G/36	Finish questioning Candidate 3 on their OB		
13:30			BREAK (based in G/37)	Write up evidence from Candidate 3 OB		Ensure Candidate 3 is based in G/37. Escort to toilet if necessary
13:35			BREAK (based in G/37)	Write up evidence from Candidate 3 OB		
13:40			BREAK/escorted to G/36	Write up evidence from Candidate 3 OB/prepare for interview		Ensure Candidate 3 goes to G/36 for interview
13:45			Interviewed by panel in G/36	Interview Candidate 3		
13:50			Interviewed by panel in G/36	Interview Candidate 3		
13:55			Interviewed by panel in G/36	Interview Candidate 3		
14:00			Interviewed by panel in G/36	Interview Candidate 3		
14:05			Interviewed by panel in G/36	Interview Candidate 3		
14:10			Interviewed by panel in G/36	Interview Candidate 3		
14:15			Interview finishes/ escorted to exit 1HGR	Finish interview/ start writing evidence on Candidate 3		Escort Candidate 3 to exit 1HGR
14:20				Write up evidence from Candidate 3 interview		
14:25				Finish writing up evidence from Candidate 3 interview		
14:30				FINISH		

Resources table: GSR selection tools – RO to SPRO

Where these are available from the Recruitment Handbook please refer to Part 3 on the accompanying CD.

Selection tool	Available from	Cost	Time	Other resources
Application form (Competency-based)	Recruitment Handbook	Nil		At least 1 trained GSR assessor to be part of sift panel
Reasoning tests (GMA, Utopia, Rust)	Utopia available on loan from GSRU. GMA from test publisher (ASE, Chiswick), Rust from test publisher (Psychological Corporation, London)	<p>Utopia – via the internet is £200 to set up + £5 per candidate</p> <p>Paper – £1 per candidate + marking fee</p> <p>GMA – Reference Set (contains one verbal, numerical and abstract question booklet and one of each answer sheet, plus manual and user's guide) costs £146 + VAT</p> <p>Thereafter, one can buy answer sheets at a rate of £74 plus VAT per pack of 25 answer sheets (will need a pack of each for verbal, numerical and abstract tests). To buy more test booklets (for example for group testing), costs are £109 (re-useable) (will need a pack each for verbal, numerical and abstract tests)</p> <p>Data Supplement (updated norms) £59.00</p> <p>Rust – cost is £188 for an administration pack that includes everything for five administrations. Each additional administration costs £12 plus VAT</p>	<p>Candidate: 1.5–2.25 hours</p> <p>Assessor: 5 minutes</p>	<p>Test room</p> <p>Administrator/marker: qualified test administrators with the British Psychological Society (course lasts up to one day). This qualifies individuals to administer tests to candidate but not to feedback the results to candidates. If administered over the internet, do not need a qualified administrator. Qualified person to provide feedback to candidates. Level A certificate in psychological testing is required, which qualifies individuals to purchase, use and feedback to candidate's critical-thinking tests</p>
Advanced Managerial Reasoning	Advanced Managerial Reasoning available from test publisher SHL	SHL – cost for administration materials is approximately £500, depending on volume required, plus approximately £18 per candidate for bureau scoring	<p>Candidate: 1.5 hours</p> <p>Assessor: 5 minutes administration time</p>	<p>Test room</p> <p>Assessor needs Level A certificate in psychological testing</p>

Scenarios	Scenarios available from test publisher SHL	SHL – cost for administration.	Candidate: Approximately 1 hour Assessor: 5 minutes administration time; 15 minutes per candidate to score	Test room Assessor needs Level A certificate in psychological testing
Personality questionnaires OPQ 32 16PF	OPQ 32 from test publisher SHL – self-report questionnaire 16PF from test publisher OPP – self-report questionnaire	SHL – cost for administration materials variable depending on volume, in region of £500 plus approximately £80 per candidate for bureau scoring OPP – cost for administration materials variable depending on volume, in region of £500 plus approximately £40 per candidate for bureau scoring	Candidate: Untimed but approximately 1 hour Assessor: 5 to 10 minutes administration; 1 hour feedback As above	Quiet room for candidates to complete questionnaire and private room for feedback. Assessor needs to be a registered user As above
Innovation potential indicator	From test publisher OPP – self-report questionnaire	OPP – cost for administration materials variable depending on volume, in region of approximately £400	Candidate: approximately 1 hour Assessor: 5–10 minutes administration; 20 minutes feedback	Quiet room for candidates to complete questionnaire and private room for feedback. Assessor needs Level B Intermediate Plus certificate in psychological testing
Written analysis exercises	Recruitment Handbook/ GSRU test library	Possible cost of script markers – for example, Capita charge £78 per script	Candidate: 1 hour 15 minutes Assessor: Takes 20 minutes to score	Quiet room for candidates to complete exercise. Administrator/marker: markers can be internal staff using Protocol scoring guide or can be outsourced (e.g. Capita) if you provide Protocol scoring guide for them to use. Someone to provide feedback to candidates

<p>Oral briefing exercise</p> <p>Self-assessment (Q&A) exercise</p>	<p>Recruitment Handbook/ GSRU test library</p>	<p>Nil</p>	<p>This may be linked with the written exercise and candidates complete the briefing after the written exercise has been finished</p> <p>The briefing and Q&A lasts up to 30 minutes.</p> <p>Candidates: will also need time to prepare before they deliver their briefing, and about 15 minutes afterwards to complete a self-assessment questionnaire if this is being used</p> <p>Assessors: will need 20 minutes after the briefing to write up their evidence and rate the candidate</p>	<p>One room for assessors to receive the briefing.</p> <p>Someone to provide feedback to candidates</p>
<p>Competency-based interview questions</p>	<p>Recruitment Handbook</p>	<p>Nil</p>	<p>10 minutes per competency, say 4 competencies per interview, so 45 minutes in total with 5 minutes for introductions and questions at the end</p>	<p>At least 1 trained GSR assessor to sit on interview panel</p> <p>Interview room</p> <p>Someone to provide feedback to candidates</p>
<p>Group exercise</p>	<p>Available from GSRU</p>	<p>Nil</p>	<p>Candidates: 45 minutes</p> <p>Assessors: 45 minutes with candidates, plus marking and discussion time afterwards</p>	<p>One room for the exercise and assessor discussion afterwards</p>
<p>Role-play exercise</p>	<p>Generic exercise available from a number of organisations including OPP and AD&C</p>	<p>Cost varies but from about £200 plus £30 per candidate and actor's fee</p>	<p>From about 30 minutes to 2 hours</p>	<p>One room plus actor</p>

2.6.4 Quality assurance of assessment at an assessment centre

For large-scale assessment centres (i.e. more than 20 candidates), a 'quality assurance' (QA) coordinator would normally be appointed. This might be someone suitably qualified who works in the local HR team, or an external consultant, for example an occupational psychologist. The QA coordinator would have the role of ensuring that the assessors are rating candidates consistently and that their evidence is accurately and appropriately recorded. Typically, the QA coordinator will be on hand during the assessment centre and will do the following:

- Check the correspondence between the ratings given by the assessors and the written description provided to justify that score. Any anomaly can then be taken up immediately with the assessors.
- Compile the assessment centre feedback reports for candidates.
- On some assessment centres they will, on a random basis, sit in on various exercises (for example, an oral briefing or interview) and rate the candidate themselves, independently of the assessors. Once the assessors have rated their evidence, the QA can look at the correspondence and verify the accuracy of the assessors' ratings. Feedback to the assessors is usually given after the event unless the difference is substantial.

For smaller departments or where HR or consultancy support is not available, there are some steps that can be taken to quality assure the assessment process. The key in this situation is to ensure that the assessors who are taking part in the assessment centre are (a) well trained and (b) have had the opportunity to benchmark themselves with their co-assessors. The best way of doing this is to bring all the assessors together prior to the real assessment centre and get them to benchmark an exercise. For example, if it is a written exercise, ask two suitable volunteers to complete the exercise and ask the assessors to mark their scripts as though for real. The assessors' ratings and evidence can then be compared and the reason for differences explored directly with the assessors. This can serve as a way of adding to the assessor guidance which is available for that exercise. For non-written exercises, such as an oral briefing, a volunteer should be sourced and the same benchmarking activity carried out. If volunteers are not available, assessors should examine and discuss the exercise and the assessor guidance in order to come to a clear view of what is and is not an acceptable answer. Assessors should be encouraged to do the exercise themselves to give them a better perspective on what is realistic for candidates to achieve in the time available.

By always using two assessors to rate each exercise, it makes it less likely that errors will occur and is particularly helpful for less experienced assessors. Using assessors who have been trained in recruitment and objective assessment will also help to reduce inconsistency.

Usually, the biggest source of difference between assessors is due to competency 'classification' errors and differences in the expectation of what candidates can achieve in the time available. Both of these can be overcome to a large extent by the above.

2.6.5 Running an assessment centre to recruit to only one/a small number of posts, for example for posts in departments where GSR presence is small

It can be argued that it is more crucial that a good selection decision is made in departments where there are few social researchers as the down side of a poor decision will be greater and more noticeable. Clearly though, some proportionality in time, effort and cost of recruitment is required. You should find out if your local HR team can offer any appropriate support to help you deliver your selection process, for example carrying out a first sift of applications based on the criteria you provide. Our advice would be to make simple enhancements to a department's usual selection process by adding one or two tools from the Recruitment Protocol, with the emphasis on assessing professional expertise, for example via a written exercise or oral-briefing exercise. You should make use of the existing off-the-shelf tools in Part 3 of the handbook as much as possible, rather than seeking to adapt the tools yourself. GSRU can provide advice about whether any other departments have used some of the off-the-shelf exercises already. In addition, many departments will have well-established competency-based interview formats, which can be added to by the social researcher leading on the recruitment exercise to include an assessment of professional expertise or other competencies that are important to the social researcher in the context of the post(s) to be filled.

3.0 Consider diversity, fairness and disability

Before making final decisions about selection tools, consider diversity, fairness and disability.

Good assessment is fair assessment and does not discriminate on the basis of irrelevant criteria, such as age, gender, race, religion or sexual orientation. Good assessment is, in the words of the Office of the Civil Service Commissioners' (OCSC) Recruitment Code, 'selection on merit through a fair and open competition'.

Diversity and fairness are at the heart of the Recruitment Protocol. When selecting staff, fairness and diversity are most likely to be compromised when selection methods are subjective, where there is a lack of clarity about what needs to be assessed and a lack of awareness of the potential pitfalls in assessing people. Objective selection methods have been shown, in general, to lead to better and fairer employment decisions.

The main considerations are outlined in Sections 3.1 to 3.4 below.

3.1. Relevance

The information collected about candidates and used for the selection decision must be clearly related to the requirements of the job. For example, a test of knowledge of research methods would be completely justified when selecting Research Officers (ROs); a test of general knowledge would be much harder to justify. While it could be argued that the latter shows the breadth of candidates' interest in the wider world and might make for more interesting discussions at a social level, it is not a key requirement to be an effective social researcher.

3.2 Consistency across the range of candidates and 'adverse impact'

It is important to review the proposed assessment methods to ensure that no particular subgroup of the candidate population would be unfairly disadvantaged by any of the methods. When this happens, 'adverse impact' is said to have occurred. Adverse impact is calculated by comparing the success rates of 'the minority group' and 'the majority group'. Thus, if 10% of candidates from minority ethnic groups are successful compared with 15% of the ethnic majority group, then the adverse impact (AI) ratio is $10/15 = 0.67$.

For example, it is fairly widely known that some candidates from minority ethnic groups and female candidates can perform less well on psychometric tests than White male candidates. Unfortunately this research-based knowledge has snowballed into something of an urban myth to the effect that all psychometric testing is bad and/or unjustifiable. To accept this view is to throw the baby out with the bathwater. So far as gender is concerned, the disadvantage occurs mainly on tests involving numerical material or specific tests of ability in areas such as mechanics. On tests involving verbal material, females usually perform just as well as males. On many personality measures, particularly relating to 'emotional intelligence', females frequently do better.

The situation with minority ethnic candidates is actually very complex. First, some minority ethnic candidates (e.g. those from a Hong Kong Chinese background) perform as well as, if not better than, the majority UK population. Secondly, there are differences in performance between members of the same ethnic group according to whether their family uses English at home and whether they were educated in the West. Thirdly, how the tests are used is important. Used as the basis for identifying and screening out the weaker performers, psychometric tests have less 'adverse impact' than when the tests are used to identify the top 25% of candidates.

The existence of adverse impact does not automatically mean that the selection process is unfair and thus illegal under equal opportunities legislation. However, if the AI ratio works out to less than 0.8, then a case needs to be made for continuing to use that selection process. Again, the key issue is the demonstrable relevance of the assessment methods and selection process to the job for which the selection is being made. **Note that adverse impact can occur with any assessment method (including interviews) – it is not confined to psychometric tests. This is why all selection processes should be carefully monitored for unfairness.**

Top tips

- Be transparent with candidates about the assessment methods to be used, what these are seeking to measure and what they need to do to demonstrate that they meet the person specification. All candidates should be provided with the same knowledge about the selection process and what they need to do to be successful.
- Ask candidates about any background circumstances that may affect their performance on exercises, for example disabilities, first language not being English. These factors should be taken into account when planning the assessment and interpreting the results.
- Consider the possible inhibiting effect of being the only woman present, or being the only person using a wheelchair or the only person from a minority ethnic group. This is more of an issue in exercises where candidates interact with each other. It is good practice, where possible, if one of the assessors represents the minority group.
- Use assessors trained in the skills of observing and evaluating behaviours against objective and job-relevant criteria, who have been instructed in avoiding biases and stereotypes.
- Monitor equal opportunities data in line with local HR requirements.

3.3 Age discrimination

You should base your decisions about recruitment on the skills required to do the job. Remove age/date of birth from your application form and instead include this in a diversity monitoring form to be retained by your local HR team. In addition, review any standard application form to ensure that you are not asking for unnecessary information about periods of time and dates. If you have removed age-related material from your application form, then you will generally not know a person's age although applicants may make reference to their age on the form so this is not always the case. Overall, focus on the applicants' competence and where more than one demonstrates the required competence, the one who is more competent or offers the best skill mix should be appointed. Check decisions made at every stage of the recruitment process for any bias, and make sure assessors have received training in the skills required, especially in relation to equal opportunities/diversity. At every stage where selection decisions are made, record your decisions and retain these records, ideally for 12 months from the date of the assessment centre.

3.4 Candidates with disabilities

The Disability Discrimination Acts (1995 and 2005) say that the duty to make reasonable adjustments applies where any physical feature of premises occupied by the employer, or any arrangements made by or on behalf of the employer, cause a substantial disadvantage to a disabled person compared with non-disabled people. An employer has to take such

steps as it is reasonable for them to have to take in all circumstances to prevent that disadvantage.

You need to consider how you will make reasonable adjustments for candidates with disabilities at the design stage so you can ensure you have the resources and flexibility to deliver adjustments or provide candidates with assistance to enable them to participate in the selection process fully and to the best of their ability.

All application forms should include a section inviting applicants to provide information about any disability that will mean reasonable adjustments need to be made for them during an assessment centre. If candidates do not declare a disability and later find they struggle to complete particular selection exercises, it is difficult to implement any kind of reasonable adjustment 'on the spot' and assess their performance.

Always ask the **individual** candidate about the adjustments they think will be appropriate. They know what is best for them. **Never** assume that a 'standard' solution will be appropriate. It is vital to include the individual at all stages of the process, and to agree with the candidate the adjustment(s) that are to put in place. It is the role of the individual to recognise that they may understand their own needs better than anyone else, but that, if appropriate, a trained assessor may need to help them to quantify their requirements.

The most common disabilities of candidates for the Cabinet Office's Fast Stream Assessment Centre are dyslexia and visual impairment. The term 'dyslexia' has changed its meaning over the years. Originally, it is used to mean difficulty with reading, then it was extended to cover difficulty with all the 'three Rs'. More recently, it has come to denote a whole range of difficulties which are typically associated with weakness in short-term memory, sequencing skills and hand-eye coordination. The term 'visual impairment' covers a situation where an individual has some visual impairment or some or total loss of sight, which cannot be corrected by wearing contact lenses, wearing glasses or by having surgery. Examples include impaired vision, sensitivity to light, tunnel vision (can only see straight ahead), blurred or patchy vision, or total loss of sight (blindness).

Reasonable adjustments for the above and other disabilities include:

- extra time to complete exercises;
- rest breaks;
- a change in font size or type on documents;
- an electronic thesaurus/spellchecker for use on PC;
- the provision of a large figure or talking calculator;
- specific software for PC, for example Jaws screen-reading software;
- Braille documents;
- a supportive or adjustable chair;
- the provision of an 'amanuensis' (reader, interpreter or support worker);
- the provision of a supervisor (e.g. for candidates with epilepsy);

- wheelchair access to assessment premises; and
- a taxi to the assessment premises.

It is important to remember that many adjustments are simple and do not actually cost anything. Also remember that some may involve using extra rooms, for example for rest breaks or for candidates who are allowed extra time, so you may need to adjust your assessment centre timetable to accommodate this.

If you need advice on reasonable adjustments, contact your local HR team or GSRU for advice.

4.0 Finalise job description/person specification and decide sift criteria

Once you have made decisions about the key competencies you want to assess and the selection process and exercises you will use to assess them, you should produce a final draft of the job description/persona specification and your sift criteria.

It is always sensible to shortlist or 'sift' the best applicants for the post(s) to invite to an assessment centre. If you are not using a pre-assessment centre stage, for example cognitive tests, then the first sifting task in your selection process will involve scoring application forms.

In all cases of sifting, it is clearly essential that decisions be made on the basis of valid job-related criteria and that any sifting method is compatible with the various recruitment codes that apply (e.g. equal opportunities). Making use of competency-based questions and exercises will make it more likely that this is achieved. It is usual to divide these up into 'essential' and 'desirable' criteria to help narrow the field, especially if you anticipate a large number of applications. Specifying the assessment criteria in this way is necessary in order to minimise subjectivity in evaluating candidates' responses.

Ideally, all those who will be involved in the sift process or subsequent interviews should have the opportunity to comment on the sift criteria. You also need a process to follow and a scoring/marking guide.

4.1 Sifting – stage one

The first stage of any sifting process should be based on essential criteria, for example:

- meeting basic nationality requirements for civil service employment;
- holding a first degree or second degree (e.g. Masters) in a relevant social science subject (i.e. social research methods, social policy and/or statistics have usually formed an important part of the course);
- essential requirements for the particular post(s) for which you are recruiting, for example experience of working in a particular policy area, having a relevant skill such as using SPSS statistical software; and

- in line with the Disability Discrimination Act[AQ: Add 1995 or 2005?], you should offer a guaranteed interview to applicants with a disability who satisfy the most basic criteria.

Note, you should take care not to inadvertently discriminate on grounds of age, and anyone involved in sifting should be reminded of their responsibility not to discriminate on age (or any other) grounds.

4.2 Sifting – stage two for small-scale recruitment exercises

The second stage of any sifting process depends on the number of applications you anticipate. Picking up on the points made in Section 2.2 of this part of the handbook, if you are running a small internal/cross-government ‘recruitment exercise’ and expect fewer than 20 applications, we recommend that you combine the analysis of essential criteria provided on the application forms with an assessment of the evidence provided on the forms relating to each competency you are assessing. Evidence can be scored using the five-point rating scale below, which has been designed for GSR selection. The mark awarded summarises the extent to which a candidate demonstrated the behaviours which indicate effective performance on a competency.

Refer to the detailed behaviours of the GR Competency Framework (contained in the *Continuing Professional Development Handbook* – see http://www.gsr.gov.uk/professional_development/competencies.asp) for positive and negative behaviours/indicators for each competency.

Five-point rating scale for GSR selection

Mark	Description
5 (Very good/ well above the required standard)	Strong positive evidence seen across the key competency indicators with few weaknesses and no, or very little, negative evidence. Overall, a highly acceptable (very good) performance that comfortably exceeds an acceptable standard in the competency.
4 (Good/above the required standard)	Good, positive evidence seen across the key competency indicators. There may be some negative evidence but this is slight or occasional, and in any event is easily outweighed by the positive. Overall, a good performance, which indicates a more than acceptable achievement in this competency.
3 (Reasonable/ reaches an acceptable standard)	Positive evidence seen across much of the competency although there may be some inconsistency in performance (e.g. candidate may sometimes fail to show sufficient positive evidence or may occasionally show ‘good’ positive evidence). Negative evidence is relatively minor and is outweighed by the positive. Overall the candidate’s performance was acceptable even though they may need some further development.

2 (Poor/below the required standard)	Some positive evidence seen but this was insufficient or the positive evidence was outweighed by the negative evidence. The candidate's performance showed significant weaknesses for this competency and indicates that he/she needs development to perform at the required standard. Overall, performance is generally below the standard required for this competency.
1 (Very poor/ well below the required standard)	Little positive evidence seen for this competency or the candidate demonstrates significant negative evidence. On balance, a weak (very little positive evidence) or unacceptable performance (significant negative evidence) which indicates that the candidate is well short of the required standard for this competency.

Once the evidence provided for each competency has been scored, the scores should be added up to get an overall score for the candidate. It is useful to brief a panel of assessors to do the tasks of scoring. They can work together and benchmark their scores to ensure consistency and fairness. Once all the evidence for all the candidates has been scored, you can rank the candidates by score from highest to lowest. As a panel you should review the ranked list and discuss any doubtful cases. You should decide on a cut-off point, bearing in mind the competencies you weight most strongly, and the time and resources (human and material) that you have available to run your assessment centre. Before moving on to the next stage of the recruitment process, you should check that no bias, deliberate or unintentional, has influenced decisions. You should record your decisions and retain these records, ideally for 12 months.

4.3 Sifting – stage two for large-scale recruitment exercises

For recruitment exercises advertised to open competition or in any exercise where you expect more than 20 applications, you may consider using a pre-assessment stage after your sift of essential criteria rather than performing a detailed evaluation of each application form. As explained in Section 2.2 of this part of the handbook, a pre-assessment exercise such as a psychometric test, knowledge test or written exercise can be used to further shortlist candidates. GSRU recommends the use of verbal and numerical critical-thinking or 'reasoning' tests (a type of psychometric test) because these are a very good indicator of future job performance. See Section 2.2.1 of Part 2, and file 2.0 in Part 3 (on CD) for more on these.

4.4 Using candidates' appraisal reports in assessment

In theory it makes sense to use appraisal information as part of the selection process. However, there are some issues:

- how objective and/or comprehensive are the appraisals?
- appraisals are not always relevant to a new job, they assess current ability and not potential; and
- what about external candidates?

Generally, performance appraisals and assessment exercises are measuring different things. It is probably fair to say that not all appraisals are equally reliable or valid, and that there will probably always be inconsistencies between the outcomes resulting from the use of the two processes.

5.0 Agree weighting of competencies and criteria for passing/failing the assessment centre

It is vital that departments discuss and agree in advance of the assessment centre the final rating scale to be used, which will reflect the criteria for passing/failing the assessment centre.

Once the candidate's performance for each of the competencies has been assessed and agreed, an assessment of the candidate's overall performance at the assessment centre will then need to be made, i.e. whether they passed and, if so, how well. Some departments/devolved administrations may have their own set of categories for this. Below is an example, which sets out the range of ratings and the guidance to those ratings.

Competency assessment rating scale and guidance

Rating	Meaning	Relation to overall competency ratings, examples
A	Excellent candidate, well exceeds the standard for the competencies in all areas	All 5s and 4s, more 5s than 4s
B	Very good candidate, exceeds the standard for competencies in all areas	Some 5s, mainly 4s, one 3 (max)
C	Good candidate, meets, or exceeds, the standard in every competency area	4s and 3s, more 4s than 3s
D	Acceptable candidate, meets the standard for most competencies, may need some development	More 3s than 4s, maybe one 2, but only if balanced by at least one 4 and not in key areas
E	Below acceptable, meets the standard in some competencies, but would need too much development	Two or more 2s, or one 2 in a crucial area
F	Well below acceptable, meets the standard in a few competencies only	Mostly 2s and 1s, perhaps one to two 3s

Note: to distinguish this final rating of the candidate as a whole from the earlier rating of the competencies during sifting/scoring exercises, it is advisable to use a different nomenclature, for example, letters rather than numbers.

6.0 Advertise the post(s) and provide guidance for candidates

To get the widest field of candidates, departments/devolved administrations are advised to advertise prominently in the appropriate media. Your choice of media will depend on whether you intend to fill the post(s) via internal competition for existing suitably-qualified civil servants or via open competition.

6.1 Where to advertise

Take a broad recruitment strategy. Take care not to indirectly discriminate by age, for example by limiting your advertising to university 'milk rounds' only. If you use a recruitment agency, you need to be sure that the agency acts appropriately and in accordance with civil service equality and diversity policies. Your local HR team may assist you in advertising your vacancy.

Open competitions for employment in central government departments and devolved administrations usually make the national press and their associated websites, for example *The Guardian* in Wednesday's 'Society' section and at <http://jobs.guardian.co.uk/>. You could also make use of job notification services provided by related professional organisations, for example the Social Research Association (see <http://www.the-sra.org.uk/vacancies.htm#>).

Internal or external recruitment exercises should be advertised on the GSR website (www.gsr.gov.uk; email advertisements to gsr-web@hm-treasury.x.gsi.gov.uk) and the Civil Service Recruitment Gateway website (<http://www.careers.civil-service.gov.uk/>). Do not forget your internal departmental websites and jobs notice boards too.

6.2 When to advertise

It is important to factor into your planning the time that needs to be allowed between advertising your vacancy and your application deadline. External recruitment exercises usually attract a significant number of applications. An application deadline about 2–3 weeks from the placement of a major newspaper advertisement is usually sufficient to generate a wide field of applicants. However, internal recruitment exercises usually require a longer application 'window' to allow time for internal candidates to see the advertisement and respond to it. If you do not allow an appropriate amount of time, you may not get the field of applications that you might have hoped for. For internal recruitment exercises, we recommend allowing 4–6 weeks between the date the advertisement is placed and the application deadline.

6.3 Branding

You should also consider using the GSR brand to market your vacancy, in addition to the branding of your department/devolved administration. This may help attract applicants and will indicate to them that they would be joining not just a department, but also a professional group.

Contact GSRU to obtain the GSR logo and branding guidance to use it in your advertisements.

You may need to join up with your local HR team to ensure that whoever is responsible for typesetting the advertisement has all the information they need.

6.4 Candidate guidance

It is important to know exactly how you will select candidates and what you will assess them on in advance of advertising your vacancies because you should provide guidance to applicants on this in advance of their application, usually in the form of an application pack.

An application pack should ideally include:

- an application form with notes about how to complete it and a named contact if they have any queries about completing it;
- guidance suitable for both internal and external candidates, providing briefing on how to approach their competency-based application, i.e. what competency-based selection is and what constitutes competency evidence. You should avoid using government/civil service terminology (jargon);
- information about the GSR Competency Framework – refer candidates to the GSR website (http://www.gsr.gov.uk/professional_development/competencies.asp) for guidance on GSR competencies and what is expected of Government Social Researchers;
- information on how their application will be assessed/sifted and when they are likely to hear if they have been shortlisted – it is useful to specify in advance on what dates the assessment centre(s) will be held; and
- information about the Guaranteed Interview scheme – contact your local HR team for advice.

Refer to the guidance at Annex 1, which would be useful information to send out to all candidates at the application stage.

7.0 Sift applications

If you are sifting your applications by scoring an application form, it is good practice to decide in advance of advertising your vacancy on a date (or several dates if necessary) to do your sift, as soon as possible after the application deadline you have set. This should ensure that all your assessors can be involved.

To carry out your sift, refer to your pre-prepared criteria and rating scale detailed earlier in Section 4.

8.0 Final planning for the assessment centre

At the final planning stage, you should do the following:

- Invite your shortlisted candidates to your assessment centre on the date(s) you had allocated for this.
- Provide detailed briefing sessions or written guidance for your shortlisted candidates who will be attending the assessment centre. This should help to level out the varying degrees of experience that candidates have of participating in assessment centres. Good practice would be to prepare an assessment centre guide to send to candidates prior to their attendance at an assessment centre, for example with their invitation. This would make clear any preparation work required, for example preparing a presentation.

See Annex 2 for an example assessment centre guide for a Research Officer (RO) assessment centre. You should ensure that assessment centre guides provide both internal and external candidates with a thorough briefing on how to prepare effectively for competency-based assessment.

- Put together an assessment pack for assessors, including guidance, evidence recorders, timetables and any other instructions. If you did not do this earlier in the planning stage, decide on your final pool of interview questions.
- Allow time to set up the rooms you are using for the assessment centre, for example with the right number of chairs/tables, arranged appropriately for the exercises you are running. Signpost/number particular rooms as necessary.

9.0 Run the assessment centre

It is important when running your assessment centres to pay attention to detail, especially when welcoming your candidates, so be prepared! Assessment can be a stressful experience for anyone but there are a few things that you can do to help put candidates at ease.

Each selection tool has its own administration procedures, but any initial briefing of candidates prior to completion of any test should include the following:

- Welcoming them/telling them how long the session will last.
- Asking them to make themselves comfortable – if they wear glasses/contact lenses to put these on, asking if they are too hot/too cold, telling them where the toilets are, asking them to turn their mobile phones off, providing basic refreshments (water is essential – put water bottles and cups in the preparation room and the assessment room).
- Briefly explaining the purpose and rationale for the exercises, for example designed as a work sample, to reflect certain aspects of their job (although it will not reflect their job exactly).
- Explaining about confidentiality and when selection decisions are likely to be made.
- The administrator's manner should become more formal once the test papers have been handed out.
- Ensuring that there is a clock in the room so that candidates can pace themselves.
- Put appropriate warning signs up on doors, for example 'Do not disturb – interviews in progress'.
- Ensuring that candidates leave all their papers behind and telling them to clearly label their final scripts with their unique reference number/name, as appropriate.
- It may be helpful for candidates to complete written exercises on a word processor (this makes it easier to print off and read/mark). Some candidates with disabilities, for example dyslexia or visual impairment, may require a PC with certain software.

10.0 Make selection decisions

To summarise, there are four decisions that need to be made by assessors during an assessment centre:

1. Marking each exercise (each exercise normally provides evidence for at least two competencies). This is almost always done on the day of the assessment centre.
2. The overall mark for the competency (made up of more than one exercise).
3. The overall mark for the candidate (have they met the minimum standard and passed the selection centre?).
4. The final rank order of candidates (for those that have met the minimum standard).

Depending on how you organise the process, you can have different assessors for each of the above 'decisions'. The second and third stages of decision often require a lot of discussion, particularly for borderline candidates. The key is to understand what it was about

their performance that made them borderline and to reach a judgement as to whether these weaknesses could be overcome through development.

Some assessment centres have decision stages two to four on a separate day to the assessment centre itself.

10.1 The 'integration' process

The process of making a selection decision is sometimes called the 'wash-up', the 'conference' or the 'integration'. It is where all the information from the various exercises is 'integrated' together for each candidate and a decision is made about whether to promote or select that individual. Some assessment centres require that all the assessors be present so as to give more in-depth feedback if required. Others separate completely the assessors from the final decision-makers. Decisions may be made by consensus or by the 'chair'.

Before the integration it is helpful to put the candidates' range of scores onto a grid, similar to the assessment grid on page 51. Some assessors find it useful to do this on a computer and project the results onto a screen so that all those assessing can comment and view.

The benefit of doing it this way is that you can see how performance varies across the competencies and within competencies (i.e. across the exercises). This is helpful in identifying a candidate's strengths and weaknesses, particularly in borderline cases and when writing feedback reports.

Once the ratings for each exercise are available, it becomes possible to rate the overall competency. This does not have to be an average score from the exercises, although it often is. Also at this point it is important that assessors (or decision makers) acquire a clear sense of the reason for any shortcomings in the candidate's performance so that an informed rating of the competency as a whole can be given. For example, the candidate may have poor written communication skills but excellent verbal ones. Through discussing the pros and cons of the candidate's performance for each competency, assessors can gain good insight into the development messages they may want to communicate later to the candidate.

This procedure would normally be repeated for each of the competencies and each of the candidates. Once all the candidates have been assessed, the final decision on promotion or selection can then be made.

Assessment grid

Candidate name:					
Competencies	GMA reasoning test)	Written exercise	Oral briefing + self-assessment	Interview	Final
Policy focus		4		3	
Delivering results		3	3		
Learning and improving			4	4	
Critical analysis and decision making	5	3-	2		
Constructive thinking		3	3-		
Developing constructive relationships				3	
Communicating with impact		4	2		
Leading and directing				2	
Overall rating of candidate					

10.2 Final rating of candidates' overall performances

Once the candidate's performance for each of the competencies has been assessed and agreed, an assessment of the candidate's overall performance at the assessment centre will then need to be made, i.e. whether they passed and, if so, how well. Below is the rating scale suggested earlier to determine success/failure, which should have been agreed in earlier planning stages.

Competency assessment rating scale and guidance

Rating	Meaning	Relation to overall competency ratings, examples
A	Excellent candidate, well exceeds the standard for the competencies in all areas	All 5s and 4s, more 5s than 4s
B	Very good candidate, exceeds the standard for competencies in all areas	Some 5s, mainly 4s, one 3 (max)
C	Good candidate, meets, or exceeds, the standard in every competency area	4s and 3s, more 4s than 3s
D	Acceptable candidate, meets the standard for most competencies, may need some development	More 3s than 4s, maybe one 2, but only if balanced by at least one 4 and not in key areas
E	Below acceptable, meets the standard in some competencies, but would need too much development	Two or more 2s, or one 2 in a crucial area
F	Well below acceptable, meets the standard in a few competencies only	Mostly 2s and 1s, perhaps one to two 3s

11.0 Write reports and give feedback

Once all the assessment information has been collated and interpreted (integrated), and selection decisions have been reached, a report is often written and/or feedback is provided to each candidate. It is considered good practice to offer feedback to candidates and doing so reflects well on the employing organisation. The offer of oral feedback is now mandatory in many government departments and devolved administrations. One of the key benefits of an assessment centre approach is that there is a good evidence-base to draw upon when providing feedback to candidates.

11.1 Written feedback reports

Written reports can fulfil two basic functions:

- to provide the organisation with a record of the candidate's performance to justify the selection decision; and
- to provide candidates with information that will help them identify their strengths and their weaker areas which need to be improved, i.e. constructive feedback.

These two functions are not always fully compatible. For example, in the case of a weak candidate who generally performed poorly, a detailed analysis of all their deficiencies could be devastating. However, if they were to appeal a selection decision, then a detailed analysis would be required to defend that decision.

When writing reports it is therefore important to know who the report is being written for and, as with all communication, to tailor it to suit the needs of the audience. Where written feedback is to be provided to the candidate, then it is suggested that a full report is produced first and stored with the other records of the selection process. If this report is largely negative, then an edited version may need to be prepared for the candidate, concentrating on the areas which are capable of improvement. For example, a candidate may not be able to do much about their cognitive abilities but they should be able to improve their written communication or inter-personal skills.

Often one member of the assessment team will be tasked with writing the report on a particular candidate. In this case, the report writer should be careful to ensure that the report is an accurate reflection of the collective views of the whole assessor team, not just their own view. It can be useful to get a fellow assessor to read through your draft report as a check that you have captured the general view accurately.

It is also good practice to state the purpose and 'shelf-life' of the report. For example, 'This report has been compiled on the basis of evidence gathered at the SRO promotion Assessment Centre held on [dd/mm/yy]. The aim of the report is to provide a fair and objective assessment of the candidate's strengths and weaknesses in relation to the competencies and professional knowledge required for the job. The information contained in the report is valid for a maximum of 2 years.'

Departmental HR divisions may prescribe a specific format for reports but, in the absence of this, the following provides a useful generic structure:

- a **short summary section** highlighting the candidate's key strengths and development needs, and indicating the extent to which the candidate met the standard required for appointment or promotion (in terms of the overall marking scale);
- the **main body of the report structured around the competencies**, which summarises the evidence found. The evidence should include specific illustrative examples of actual behaviour, stating where these were observed. For example, when commenting on 'Critical analysis and decision making' one might comment: 'X [the candidate] provided a very brief initial presentation in the oral-briefing exercise and was unable to develop this very far in reply to the assessor's questions'. Such examples should be drawn directly from the assessors' notes;
- a final section with **specific suggestions for personal or professional development** (e.g. needs more experience of staff management; needs a better understanding of qualitative research methods). These should follow from the comments made in the main body of the report.

An example feedback report is at Annex 3.

11.2 Oral feedback

Oral feedback is often simpler to provide than a written report. When offering feedback, many organisations give candidates a time window in which they can call and receive feedback over the telephone. This is a way of cutting down on time as it puts the onus on the candidate to call. A significant percentage will probably not be sufficiently interested to call. This, of course, would only be suitable for situations where only external candidates were being assessed.

11.3 Giving feedback

A useful acronym to bear in mind when planning and giving feedback is CRIMSON. The letters refer to the attributes of good feedback:

- C constructive
- R relevant
- I informative
- M manageable
- S specific
- O open
- N non-judgemental

The giving and receiving of feedback should be positive experiences for both giver and recipient. The recipient of the feedback (the candidate) is likely to accept the information and act on it when the intention of the feedback giver is to be helpful and that intention is communicated. You can indicate your constructive intent through verbal and non-verbal signals, e.g. by looking at the person (if in a face-to-face situation), addressing them by name, checking that they have understood what you have said, and giving them the opportunity to comment. If the feedback is being given over the telephone, then take your time and check their understanding regularly. Do not be afraid to allow silences to occur and do not rush to fill them – the candidate may be thinking about what you have already said prior to commenting.

Feed-back strengths as well as development needs. Being constructive is easy when covering a person's strengths but is more of a challenge when referring to their development needs. Tell the candidate what you liked about their behaviour before moving to what needs working on. When looking at these areas for improvement, try to avoid using the word 'weaknesses'. This is not because of 'political correctness' but because 'weakness' has a negative rather than constructive connotation. An open, positive approach by the feedback giver is more likely to elicit a similarly constructive response from the recipient.

Relevance relates to the requirements of the job. If the feedback is given in relation to the competencies, then irrelevant issues are unlikely to creep in. Bland generalisations are unhelpful. The feedback needs to be specific and direct if it is to be informative and useful.

Feedback should not resemble the clues in a cryptic crossword puzzle. It also needs to be manageable in terms of scale. Focus on the two or three key points that the candidate might be able to do something about. For example, in the context of 'Building constructive relationships', you might suggest that they talk less and listen more, that they try to be open minded to what people are saying and to put themselves in the position of others when evaluating what they hear.

Avoid generalisations and always try to give examples when providing feedback. Describe what you saw in as much detail as possible without being judgemental. After describing the behaviour, state its impact on you and say how it might have been perceived by others. For example, in relation to 'Communicating with impact' you might say that you noticed that the candidate delivered their briefing in a downbeat manner and avoided eye-contact with the assessors. This made you feel that the candidate did not believe the message that they were trying to put across. Then invite the candidate to comment. Explore whether they interpret the evidence as you did and, if not, why not and how their perception differs. If they accept that there is scope for improvement, try to elicit ideas for achieving this from the candidate rather than prescribing the solution yourself.

If, however, the candidate does not accept your interpretation then do not push it. Acknowledge the other person's right to be different and move on to another area. Do not allow your emotions (e.g. irritation) to influence your approach, as these are likely to amplify and/or distort the message unhelpfully. Instead try to maintain an interested but calm and business-like approach.

11.4 Ethical issues for assessors

The ethics of assessment and selection boil down to treating people fairly and with respect during a process in which they have little control. Like it or not, the assessment process involves a power relationship in which the assessors' power greatly exceeds that of the candidates. The latter have to comply with the assessors' demands if they are to be successful in the process. It is therefore incumbent upon assessors not to abuse their own power and to ensure that their colleagues do not.

However much pressure you feel as an assessor, try to remember that the candidates will be feeling worse. Some candidates find assessment situations highly stressful. So try at all times to present a human face to candidates and do not add to candidates' stress – the situation itself is quite stressful enough.

Sections 2 and 3 of Part 1 of this handbook covered the principles and skills involved in fair and effective assessment and selection. If these principles are followed, then there is little danger of unethical practices being followed. If in doubt, ask yourself the following question:

'Would I want to have my future career determined by what I am doing to this candidate?'

11.5 Confidentiality

During the course of a selection process a considerable amount of confidential information about the candidates will be collected. This must be treated with great care, just as you would any other officially confidential material. Candidate information should be kept secure at all times – even when going for coffee or to the lavatory. It should only be shared with your fellow assessors and others who may have a legitimate need to know, for example the Head of Profession or specific contacts within the HR team. Peculiar incidents arise during selection processes which could provide the basis for humorous and other anecdotes. Try not to succumb to such temptation as such stories often get back to the candidate.

11.6 Sharing learning points and best practice

You should always take the time to review the success of your assessment centre and overall selection process in order to learn from your experience. GSRU would like to hear about your experience too, in particular any feedback you may have on using the guidance in this handbook and the recommended selection tools themselves.

2

The recruitment toolkit and skills of assessment

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Predicting future performance

The purpose of assessment in recruitment and promotion processes is to predict future performance and identify which of the candidates is most likely to perform best if offered the post(s) in question. This is not an easy task as an individual's performance in a job depends on a number of factors, primarily their ability to do the job, their interest in the job, the immediate circumstances, such as organisational climate and management support, and wider circumstances, such as their health, family and other commitments.

Predicting an individual's future performance will never be perfect because there will always be some factors which the assessors are unaware of, and measuring the aspects of past and current performance is also subject to error. Consequently, much occupational assessment is about **reducing the risk of selecting the wrong person** and maximising the chances of selecting people with good potential. At its simplest level then, **performance = capacity x motivation**. Thus, most of the tools typically used in occupational selection are designed to assess either capacity or motivation.

1.2 Criteria used to select tools for the Protocol

Overall, the aim was to produce a menu of selection tools that was relevant, challenging and acceptable to candidates. It was also important that they were relatively easy to administer and use. More specifically, the criteria used to select the exercises were:

- that the commercially available psychometrics had a good psychometric pedigree, i.e. good predictive validity across a range of professional contexts with 'norm' groups that were relevant to social research;
- that there was little or no adverse impact, i.e. that exercises did not discriminate unfairly against minority ethnic groups or those for whom English is a second language;
- that the exercises had sound content validity – this is the degree to which the intellectual operations required to do well in the exercise are directly relevant to the skills required to be an effective social researcher;
- that the exercises had high face-validity, i.e. they appeared to measure something of value – a key measure of the success of a recruitment programme is the degree to which candidates feel they have been fairly assessed;
- that the exercises were sufficiently challenging;

- that candidates and assessors easily understood the exercises and that the assessor scoring guide was easy to use; and
- that the exercise outputs could map onto the GSR Competency Framework.

1.3 The selection tools

Selection tools are methods of objectively assessing the suitability of a candidate for a particular role. Interviews, application forms and presentations are all selection tools.

The selection tools in the GSR Recruitment Protocol are:

- the model competency-based application form;
- reasoning tests and personality questionnaires;
- written analysis or 'in-tray' exercises;
- oral-briefing exercises and related self-assessment exercise;
- suggested competency-based interview questions;
- professional expertise questions/test; and
- group exercises.

The rest of Part 2 provides further explanation and guidance on these tools.

2.0 The selection tools in detail

2.1 Application forms (reference files beginning 1.0 on CD)

All public-sector selection procedures will use an application form. They provide:

- factual information (e.g. degree(s) obtained) in addition to qualitative information, such as previous jobs and skills gained; and
- some sort of self-assessment by the candidate against a set of required competencies.

Candidates expect to complete application forms and feel that these provide an opportunity to make their case for being offered the job. A simple application-form format may contain a series of tables/text boxes, one for each competency being assessed (**sees file beginning 1.0 on CD**). Candidates are asked to provide one or two examples to evidence their competence in each table/box. It is sensible to state a word limit for each competence example, such as 250–300 words.

Application forms often provide the basis of the first sift when there is a large number of candidates for advertised posts. In addition to being used for initial sifting, the information on application forms is often followed up at later interviews with shortlisted candidates to collect or verify evidence on the competencies.

Departments/devolved administrations usually have their own standard application forms which are used for recruiting new staff, but when recruiting Government Social Researchers it will be appropriate and useful to link the competency information to the GSR competencies. Questions could also be added which reflect the local situation/requirement. For example, requiring specific management or technical skills.

HR units may have guidelines on collecting standard biographical, contact and diversity information. See the diversity section in Section 3 of Part 1 of this handbook for more information, **paying particular attention to the advice on eliminating age discrimination.**

2.2 Psychometric tests (reference files beginning 2.0 on CD)

There are two main types of psychometric test: cognitive reasoning tests and personality questionnaires. The first type – often called ‘critical-thinking tests’ – is the type most commonly used in selection.

2.2.1 Critical-thinking tests

Most critical-thinking tests assess a range of verbal, numerical and abstract or graphical reasoning. Typically they measure someone’s ability to evaluate the logic of various kinds of arguments, or to make correct decisions or inferences from numerical data. Reasoning tests largely cut through prior academic learning – even when verbal and numerical material is involved – to give a sense of the candidate’s intellectual aptitude and **potential**, particularly for speed and efficiency of thinking in a new situation. Although they are not strictly speaking ‘intelligence’ tests, performance on these tests is clearly related to general intelligence. Reasoning tests do not measure creative problem-solving or lateral thinking. They are also very different to knowledge tests, where it is the candidate’s existing specialist knowledge that is being assessed rather than their ability to solve intellectual problems per se.

The chief advantage of cognitive tests is that they are standardised and allow an objective comparison to be made between the candidates on a job-relevant criterion (e.g. logical reasoning). These tests have good reliability and validity, and relevant comparison groups (e.g. general graduate or professional pool) for norm-referencing purposes. Such ‘norms’ enable assessors to see whether a candidate’s abilities lie within the top 20% or bottom 10% of graduates, for example.

Well-constructed cognitive-reasoning tests are the single most effective predictor of job performance. Even so, they are probably more useful for screening out unsuitable candidates than for picking the best ones. They ensure a basic level of reasoning among the shortlisted candidates who may be going forward to the more costly assessment centre stage.

These tests do not reflect any one particular job but assess the underpinning intellectual ability required for success as a social researcher. We recommend that verbal and numerical

reasoning tests will probably be most relevant. They can be used to assess the **critical analysis and decision-making competency**. The following are recommended for use in the selection of Government Social Researchers at Research Officer (RO) and Senior Research Officer (SRO) grade:

- graduate and managerial assessment battery (GMA); and
- Utopia power test.

See files beginning 2.0 on CD for more information about these tests and where to obtain them, as well as the Resources table in Part 1.

As they are quick and easy to administer and score, these tests can be used at a pre-assessment stage (sift) before candidates attend a full assessment centre. Reasoning test results can also be integrated into a complete assessment centre. When used in this way they can temper the weight given to other sources of evidence. For example, a relatively poor performance on a reasoning test may suggest that a candidate with an excellent academic qualification may not be very intellectually flexible when in an unfamiliar situation. They can also be very helpful when assessing the potential of those who have relatively poor academic qualifications.

Reasoning tests are probably of more use for external recruitment, especially when there is a large field of applicants and academic ability or when prior achievement may be questionable. However, they may also be useful in internal recruitment, particularly when candidates are applying from different government departments/devolved administrations.

The time-consuming development process needed to produce a psychometric test is the reason they are relatively expensive. Since the value of such tests would be completely undermined if either the questions or answers entered the public domain, there are fairly strict controls on the access to these tests.

Normally the suppliers of these tests restrict access to individuals who have been specifically trained in their use. This training covers the rationale for such tests, how to administer them in a standardised manner and how to interpret the results obtained. Those who successfully complete a training programme can register with the British Psychological Society (BPS). This registration is then accepted by all the major test suppliers who will supply tests to registered users subject to certain conditions of use, which includes the secure storage of both the materials and the scores achieved by anyone taking the tests.

For further information on psychometric testing, readers can visit the following websites:

- the BPS's on-line Psychometric Testing Centre (<http://www.psychtesting.org.uk>); and
- the British Test Publishers Association web-site (<http://www.btpa.co.uk>).

2.2.2 Personality questionnaires

The second type of psychometric test is the group known as 'personality questionnaires'. There is a very wide range of such measures, often based on quite different theories of personality. Research findings show that personality questionnaire results are less reliable than reasoning tests, although when used in combination with other methods, they can

add useful value to the selection decision. They are also very well-suited to a development context.

Personality questionnaires allow you to examine leadership and team-working style, and provide insight into a candidate's self-awareness, and are therefore more suitable for aiding in the selection of Principal Research Officer (PRO)/Senior Principal Research Officer (SPRO) grades. They are also particularly useful when assessing external candidates for senior positions.

It is better to use them only with a shortlist of candidates, as they can be expensive to use. This is because they need to be interpreted in relation to the competencies required for the job by an expert in their use, normally an occupational psychologist or HR professional.

The following are recommended for the selection of Government Social Researchers to PRO/SPRO/other Senior Civil Service (SCS) posts:

- OPQ 32;
- 16PF; and
- innovation potential indicator.

For more information about where to obtain these, see the Resources table in Part 1 of this handbook.

2.3 Work-simulation exercises

The term 'work-simulation exercises' refers to a wide range of exercises all of which simulate some aspect of the job to be performed, and thus provide a basis for assessing the behaviours and competencies required in the job. A key advantage of such exercises over psychometric tests is that they appear to candidates to be highly relevant – this is referred to by psychologists as 'face validity'. Approximately 45% of graduate recruiters use some form of 'behavioural simulation' in their assessment processes.

There are six broad categories of work-simulation exercise:

1. **In-tray exercises** (where the candidate has to deal with a range of items in a short time).
2. **Scheduling/resource-allocation exercises** (where time or money has to be allocated between competing priorities).
3. **Policy or programme analysis exercises** (normally a complex analytical problem involving a lot of paper-based material and requiring a written answer, often a policy recommendation).
4. **Role plays/simulated interview situations** (e.g. a disciplinary interview or meeting with a contractor).
5. **Presentations and oral-briefing exercises** (can be on any topic; often followed by a question and answer session led by an assessor).

- 6. Group exercises** (normally involving between four and eight candidates; can be 'leaderless' or roles can be assigned by the assessors).

These different types of exercise have evolved to assess different competencies and to reflect, as closely as possible, the actual situations that will be faced in the job. While some work-simulation exercises are better suited to assessing some competencies, in general there is a good deal of flexibility depending on how the exercise is set up and the kind of output required from the candidates.

The work-simulation exercises developed for the Recruitment Protocol are:

- written analysis exercises;
- oral-briefing exercises; and
- group exercises.

No prior knowledge is required for any of the work-simulation exercises. Everything candidates need will be given to them in their exercise instructions and any supporting information/materials.

2.3.1 Written exercises (reference files beginning 3.0 on CD)

Written exercises require activities that are generic for social researchers. The context varies with the grade and the department/devolved administration, and the content of the exercises (e.g. policy area) may be different to the actual job advertised. However, the essential intellectual operations and judgements required are very similar.

In these exercises candidates are required to analyse, interpret and compile a report or briefing note based on varying amounts of information (verbal, numerical and graphical), for example in the form of memos, letters, surveys or research papers.

All social researchers need to be able to use these types of data to address particular questions and give advice. This advice needs to take into account the quality of the evidence and may need to be communicated in writing in a way that it has impact.

Written exercises typically elicit behaviours which can be evaluated against a range of competencies:

- Policy focus;
- Delivering results;
- Critical analysis and decision-making;
- Constructive thinking;
- Professional expertise; and
- Communicating with impact.

Some written exercises have an additional 'in-tray/e-tray' component, in which the candidate is given the in-tray of a predecessor which must be managed. The contents can

include letters or emails relating to complaints, staffing issues, products, health and safety, new procedures and protocols, and customer demands. This is really a test of management skills, including:

- delegation;
- planning and organising;
- problem analysis;
- written communication;
- judgement; and
- interpersonal sensitivity.

See files beginning 3.0 on CD for written exercises.

2.3.2 Oral-briefing exercises (reference files beginning 4.0 on CD)

In these exercises the assessor or assessors take on a role, normally that of a policy colleague or senior research manager. The aim is that the exercise simulates an internal or external meeting or briefing. Candidates are required to read and analyse research information (e.g. surveys) relating to a particular policy area, and then brief the assessor according to their instructions. This is followed by a question and answer session to allow the assessor to probe the candidate's depth of understanding of the issues, their ability to 'think on their feet', anticipate likely problems and their persuasiveness.

The complexity and focus of the information/briefing varies according to the grade being assessed. Competencies covered by the oral briefings include:

- Communicating with impact;
- Constructive thinking;
- Delivering results;
- Critical analysis and decision making; and
- Professional expertise.

Presentations

Well-designed presentations can be very similar to an oral briefing. The benefit of an oral briefing is that they are less formal and do not give those with presentation skills training a huge advantage. There would be little point in doubling up on an oral briefing and a presentation. It would be a case of using either one of these rather than both.

2.3.3 Combined written and oral-briefing exercises

Written and oral-briefing exercises can be combined to provide a very thorough assessment.

The link is made by using the same research data/information as the basis for each exercise, but asking candidates to do different things with the data each time. For example, in the written part of the exercise the candidate may be asked to analyse the information and produce a written briefing note. Subsequently they would be given time to prepare and deliver an oral briefing which builds on the analysis they have already done.

In this situation the candidate has a shorter time to prepare for the oral briefing part of the exercise than they would have had if they were doing the oral-briefing exercise in isolation. Where a combined written/oral-briefing scenario is available on the CD accompanying this handbook, the written exercises can be used on their own but the oral briefing needs to be completed following the written exercise. The oral briefing should not be used in isolation.

An oral briefing as an extension of a written exercise allows the assessors to explore one area in more depth with the candidate but assessing different competencies. Practically and logistically it can be easier to administer this instead of presenting a whole new exercise. However, the downside compared with the stand-alone oral briefing is that the brief is more limited to avoid overlap with the earlier written exercise.

2.3.4 Group exercises

Group exercises are also work simulations in that they are a test of how well people work together towards an outcome. They provide evidence for the assessment of four competencies:

- Developing constructive relationships – in particular, how well individuals work with others in their group to come to an agreed conclusion;
- Communicating with impact – in particular, how effective individuals are at convincing others to run with their ideas;
- Constructive thinking – in particular, the quality and range of ideas and recommendations put forward by individuals; and
- Delivering results – in particular how much each individual personally contributes to the discussion and helps the group to reach its decisions.

In other words, as an assessor you are looking for people who can:

- rapidly build rapport and working relationships with others;
- communicate clearly and persuasively;
- generate ideas and/or build on the ideas of others;
- recognise the value of others' inputs; and
- remain focused on meeting the needs of the task.

Group exercises can either involve all candidates being assigned different roles, or no one being assigned a role. In assigned-role group exercises, candidates are given a reasonable length of time to read a brief on the purpose of the group exercise and their role in the group. Individuals may be assigned roles which require them to lobby the others in the group for a particular outcome (which is a test of their skills of persuasion), but a requirement of

the exercise will often also be to reach a conclusion/decision by consensus.

In group exercises where there are no roles assigned to individuals, candidates often have a shorter exercise brief as they will not have a role to learn. The instructions may simply explain that they will be part of a meeting to discuss a particular issue/problem set at work and that the task of the group is to decide on recommendations for tackling it. They may have a small amount of background information to read/analyse.

In either case, candidates should not feel that they are in direct competition with the other members of their group. They should be aiming to work effectively with the group in what is a cooperative undertaking.

The candidates sit round a table and the assessors sit at the edges of the room and introduce the exercise. Candidates are not told which assessor is marking them, and experience has shown that candidates quickly forget they are there! Each candidate will be marked by one lead assessor who will record the evidence of their contribution. However, each lead assessor may record evidence about the other lead assessors' candidates who interact with the candidate they are scoring. When the exercise has finished, the lead assessor will summarise the evidence they have recorded about their candidate's contribution in a written evidence-recorder form and will give a provisional rating against the scoring guide. All the lead assessors will then confer with each other and give a final mark for the competencies of each candidate. The lead assessor for each candidate will also record any additional evidence identified by the other two assessors.

Note, there are no group exercises on the CD. There is a group exercise for PROs available on request from GSRU.

2.4 Self-assessment forms (reference files beginning 5.0 on CD)

A key aspect of the 'Learning and improving' competency is that candidates should be able to correctly assess their own performance and then be able to consider how to improve that performance, i.e. 'quickly learns from observing others and from own experience; is able to reflect on the process and what was learnt from it' (from GSR Competency Framework). The rationale for using a self-assessment form (SAF) is the finding that accurate self-assessment of one's own performance is a cornerstone of being able to learn useful lessons from that experience.

In SAFs, candidates are required to assess their performance in one of the other exercises that they have completed, for example the oral briefing, interview or group exercise, and suggest how they might have done things better/differently. The assessors will compare the candidate's assessment of themselves with their own observations of the candidate's performance. It is important that candidates are as open and objective as possible in their responses to the questions. Glossing over any problems or being over-critical will disadvantage them.

An accurate self-awareness can be positively related to leadership effectiveness and increased promotion prospects. The extent to which a candidate's self-assessment is in agreement with the assessment made by others is a measure of the degree to which the candidate possesses an accurate self-awareness and understands their own strengths and weaknesses. Conversely, the extent to which a candidate's self-assessment is in disagreement

with the assessments made by others is a measure of the degree to which the candidate may lack self-awareness and understanding of their strength and weaknesses. This may be demonstrated in under-rating or over-rating their performance:

- **Accurate rating** – candidates who accurately rate their performance are liable to be naturally self-aware and are typically high performers. They possess the ability to seek, attend to and accept feedback, and are able to incorporate comparisons of behaviour into their self-awareness.
- **Over-rating** – candidates who persistently overestimate their performance are liable to possess high self-esteem, but may not learn from their own mistakes and are more likely to ignore or discount feedback about them.
- **Under-rating** – candidates who under-rate their performance are likely to possess low self-esteem. They may lack confidence in social settings and may distrust their own abilities. They care about self-development, but are less likely to attempt difficult tasks or goals.

See files beginning 5.0 on CD for an oral-briefing exercise SAF for candidates and the assessor's evidence recorder – this can easily be adapted for use in conjunction with other exercises.

2.5 Competency-based interviews (reference files beginning 6.0 on CD)

2.5.1 Introduction to interviews

Interviews are the most common element of selection and promotion procedures in the UK. They are not going to go away because they are flexible and relatively cheap to arrange, and both candidates and their prospective employers/managers expect them. Despite having a number of inherent weaknesses which are difficult to eliminate, interviews provide both sides with a good opportunity to give, and to get, information about each other. This information exchange is often crucial to the employer's decision to offer a job to a candidate, and to the candidate's decision to accept a job offer. Few people really want to put themselves into a job where they will struggle to be successful and happy, so the opportunity for self-assessment and self-selection following an interview should be encouraged.

The major problem with interviews (which also applies to application forms) is that they involve a considerable degree of subjectivity. Interviewers have different styles and candidates will inevitably seek to present themselves in the most favourable light. While the interviewer chooses the questions, candidates can choose how they respond and which examples they use. They can also misrepresent what actually happened. There are counter-measures which can be used to mitigate this inherent weakness. Interviewers can use a structured, competency-based approach and probe initial answers to check their veracity (in the application form factual information and specific examples can be requested). Even so, the rigour and 'predictive validity' of the overall selection process will be increased by the use of additional, more objective methods of assessment described in this handbook.

As they are so ubiquitous, it is all too easy for an assessor to think that it is just another interview and so fail to prepare properly beforehand. Remember the 'five Ps': Proper Planning Prevents Poor Performance. Good preparation will help you to get the best out of a nervous candidate, and will help you to avoid being bamboozled by a candidate with the 'gift of the gab'.

2.5.2 Interview structure and questions

Left to their own devices, different interviewers might use different approaches and a wide range of different questions. Some candidates would get an 'easy ride' while others would get 'a grilling'. This is obviously a recipe for disaster in terms of the consistency and the appropriateness of the selection decision and fairness to candidates.

All interviews which are carried out with a specific purpose in mind (e.g. selection or promotion) should be **structured**. An interview structure helps to ensure consistency between interviewers by providing a supporting framework for the less experienced and by limiting the scope for idiosyncratic approaches among the overconfident. Some idiosyncratic interviewers are brilliant, but many more are lamentably bad.

This is not to say that an interviewer should set his or her personality to one side during interviews. Showing that you are a decent human-being is a good thing and it is important not to confuse structure with depersonalisation of the process. Remember that the candidates are forming an impression of you and the organisation during the interview. Good candidates – the ones you want – will probably have a choice of job offers to choose between. Research has shown that the perceived 'organisational climate' and 'approachability of managers' are key determinants, and are much more important than the salary for most candidates.

Selection and promotion interviews tend to be structured around **competencies**. The GSR Competency Framework will provide the most appropriate basis for structuring your interviews, and on the CD accompanying this handbook you will find many suggested interview questions, most of which were suggested by social researchers during the development of the Protocol. Some competencies have more suggested questions than others. Some departments/devolved administrations may have their own tried and tested questions which they wish to continue using. Our recommendation is that departments pool their questions so others can benefit, by sending them to GSRU so that they can be incorporated into updates of this handbook. We also recommend amending these questions in light of experience.

A competency-based interview focuses on collecting evidence which is directly relevant to the competencies required for the job. The questions can take the form of either examples of previous behaviour (e.g. 'What did you learn from that research project which had to be abandoned?') or relate to hypothetical situations (e.g. 'Suppose that you were posted to a new job in an unfamiliar policy area. How would you go about getting up to speed as quickly as possible?'). Both of these questions would be appropriate for exploring the competency 'Learning and improving'. **There are many example competency-based interview questions in the files beginning 6.0 on the CD. Questions suitable for PROs and SPROs are available on request from GSRU.**

Given the limited time normally available for the interview, typically 35–45 minutes, it is unrealistic to seek to assess more than three or four competencies. Ten minutes per competency is a reasonable rule of thumb if good evidence is to be collected. Some

competencies are, in any case, better assessed through other methods. For example, a complex written task would be a much better way to assess 'Critical analysis and decision making'. If you are using other selection tools, for example written exercise and cognitive tests, you may want the focus of interviews to be on exploring the 'Professional expertise' competency through a variety of types of question, and probing the evidence provided by candidates on their application form relating to professional expertise. **In the files on the CD beginning 6.0** there is a set of social research knowledge questions linked to the interview questions that can be used to ensure that candidates have the foundation knowledge that would be expected of a potential social researcher. The questions are suitable for those applying for RO and SRO roles, and are designed to cover the full range of the 'Professional expertise' competency:

- research methods;
- research design and planning;
- research analysis and reporting;
- research procurement and management; and
- research ethics and legal requirements.

They can also be used as a written test.

The final issue to cover here is one-to-one and panel interviews. The former are more economical in terms of interviewer time but they place a heavy burden on the single interviewer. Panel interviews provide an opportunity to spread the workload and they allow for different views of the candidate to emerge and be discussed. If the assessment procedure rests mainly on the interview, then a one-to-one process becomes less defensible. However, if it is merely one element of an assessment centre then it can be justified, for example candidates for the civil service Fast Stream Assessment Centre (FSAC) are interviewed one to one.

Panel interviews also provide an opportunity for new interviewers to develop their assessment skills in a lower-risk situation, as their more experienced colleagues can provide back-up during and feedback after the event. Planning is essential in a panel interview situation to agree the order of interviewing and who is going to cover which competencies. Do not rely on things going entirely to plan however, as the candidates have not been party to the planning discussions. Also, interviewers should agree that potential leads may be followed-up as they arise, even if this results in covering a competency another interviewer was going to explore with the candidate.

2.6 Exercise 'shells' (reference file beginning 7.0 on CD)

We have also given departments the tools to insert their own technical content into a specified exercise; these are called exercise 'shells'. A shell is a 'blank' exercise (written or oral briefing) with a set of questions and scoring guide, but for which the department can insert their own 'research information', such as research survey results, statistics and short reports. It is advisable to procure the services of an occupational psychologist to assist in the development of any new exercise.

2.7 The relative effectiveness of different selection tools

In reality all of the above assessment tools involve some degree of subjectivity. Partly because of this, these tools have differing degrees of 'reliability' (consistency) and 'validity' (relevance and predictive capacity). Validity is the extent to which the assessment is measuring factors which are relevant to success in the post. As reliability is required for an assessment method to be valid, validity is perhaps the key criterion.

A huge number of research studies into the validity of different assessment methods have been carried out by occupational psychologists over the years. Typically these studies measure various 'predictor variables' at the selection stage and correlate these with 'criterion variables' derived from the performance of the selected individuals after a period in the post. Other researchers have carried out meta-analyses of the correlations found in the empirical studies in order to establish the relative efficacy of different assessment methods. Using the findings of these meta-analyses, assessment methods can be ranked in terms of predictive capacity (r = correlation coefficient) as shown in the table on page 70 below. It must be emphasised that the table indicates the highest predictive relationship that could be hoped for under optimum conditions. **These levels of relationship would not be found where the particular method used was a poor example of its type or was used inappropriately.**

It can be seen that no single method comes close to being a perfect predictor. The best way to counter this weakness in any single method is to use several methods in combination. This is the reason why well-developed assessment centres show the highest levels of predictive capability.

Assessment methods ranked in terms of predictive capacity

$r = 1.00$	Ideal perfect predictor (does not exist)
0.65	Assessment centres (involving multiple methods)
0.60	Work simulation exercises Ability or reasoning tests Knowledge tests
0.50	Structured interviews Personality questionnaires
0.40	Unstructured interviews References
0.30	
0.20	
0.10	
0.00	No predictive relationship

Another issue to be considered when choosing assessment tools is the difference between **maximum and typical performance**. Maximum performance refers to the individual's capacity and is assessed when the candidate is under pressure to perform well. This would apply to all three types of formal 'test' listed in the table above (work-simulation exercises, ability or reasoning tests, knowledge tests).

In the work environment however, the better performers are often those whose performance is typically good rather than those who can perform brilliantly when motivated by high pressure. Typical performance is related to disposition and temperament as much as capacity. A better assessment of typical performance will be provided by structured interviews and/or personality questionnaires. Owing to the relatively low predictive power of these assessments, however, it is unwise to rely on them alone when selecting staff.

2.8 Monitoring the Protocol and keeping exercises up to date

GSRU plans to keep the Protocol under continuous review, making small changes on an ongoing basis. GSRU will also annually review and develop additional scenarios with the aid of a consultant occupational psychologist and the GSR Recruitment Protocol Working Group.

In order to learn about what works and what needs improving, we need feedback from departments/devolved administrations and the candidates they assess about their experience of selection. GSRU will contact departments/devolved administrations to seek feedback from those who run recruitment exercises, and it is good practice for those people to, in turn, seek feedback from the candidates they assessed.

Other content of this handbook, for example best practice interview recommendations, will be updated in line with changing HR practice and new developments within GSR. In addition, we will be actively encouraging departments/devolved administrations who have used the Protocol to send us in recommended changes or new material, for example additional interview questions.

3.0 The skills of delivering objective assessment

This section of part 2 of the handbook describes a model assessment process, which experience has shown to be effective across a wide range of assessment situations. This approach is often referred to as the **ORCE** model, an acronym derived from the initial letters of the four activities involved – **observing, recording, classifying and evaluating**. The general model described below may need to be adapted slightly according to the particular activity or exercise being assessed.

In assessment situations which place heavy demands on the assessor (e.g. group exercises and interviews), the task is made easier by delaying the classifying and evaluating stages until the 'live' phase of the exercise has been completed.

The four activities are:

- **Observing** – looking and listening carefully to everything that the candidate(s) say

and do, and how they say and do (these are called 'behaviours' in an assessment context).

- **Recording** – noting down the 'behavioural evidence' that you see/hear **without interpreting or evaluating it**. As far as possible everything that is observed is recorded.
- **Classifying** – reviewing the observed and recorded behaviours, and allocating them to the appropriate competencies.
- **Evaluating** – sometimes called **rating**, this final stage weighs up the behavioural evidence against the Competency Framework and marking guidance to award competency and/or performance marks.

3.1 Observing and recording

These first two stages are normally done in quick succession in 'live' assessment situations. Observing behaviour correctly and recording this 'behavioural evidence' are crucial to assessing people objectively. By knowing what a person actually did and the words that he or she used, it is possible to draw valid conclusions about that person's likely effectiveness in a given job.

Noting behavioural evidence accurately is also important for two other reasons. First, a person's capacity for retaining information is limited. Up to 90% of new information is typically forgotten within 24 hours. If assessors record the evidence immediately it happens, then it is preserved for later retrieval. Secondly, having a written evidence record is advisable from a legal point of view in work contexts in case assessment decisions are contested.

3.2 Selective perception – a key issue in accurate observing and recording

Accurate observing and recording of the evidence is crucial if assessments are to be valid. It is therefore important to be aware of the phenomenon of **selective perception**. This term refers to the fact that human beings do not consciously take in all that is going on around them. We also perceive certain things more readily and faster than others. Selective perception is largely a learned process. While most people have learned to react to certain signals in a particular way – for example that red lights are likely to mean danger – our perception of other signals is more variable, often reflecting what is particularly important to us as individuals.

Perception, then, is a subjective process. Information is not passively taken up via the senses, it is actively interpreted in the brain. This information processing is often done rapidly and unconsciously. We learn to do this from an early age in order to manage the vast amounts of data coming in through our senses, filtering out what is unimportant to us so that we can concentrate on what is significant.

Rapid and often unconscious information processing helps us to survive life's dangers. However, it can also result in assessment errors and there are several pits into which we can

fall as we attempt to observe and record behaviour faithfully. Some of the main ones are shown in the table below, together with suggested counter-measures which can be used.

Main sources of errors when observing and recording, and how to avoid them

Pitfall	Definition	Counter-measure
Expectations	We tend to see what we have learned to expect to see. This may lead to unconscious 'filtering out' of conflicting evidence. A common example of this is stereotyping	Attend carefully to the exercise and focus on the specific behaviour of the candidate
Stereotyping (prejudice)	Applying to an individual, characteristics commonly attributed of the group to which you think they belong, e.g. men are logical, women are emotional	We all stereotype and have prejudices. Learn what yours are and watch out for them
Premature judgements	Rushing to evaluate a competency before an adequate sample of behaviours has been observed and recorded. Busy managers learn to make decisions quickly; this can be disastrous in an assessment context	Keep observing and recording evidence throughout an exercise. Do not stop because you think you have enough
Completion	A tendency to assume additional 'evidence' when the observed evidence is limited in order to justify an evaluation mark	Just do not do it!

3.3 Practical tips on recording evidence

Prepare yourself before recording evidence, so that you can focus on what the candidate is saying or doing. Make sure you have plenty of paper and a pen that works! If you are marking a group exercise, you may be recording evidence on more than one candidate, so you may wish to draw up a table format on your paper with a column for each candidate. It can also be helpful to divide the table up into rows to represent each five-minute time period. Write down the evidence of what the candidate is saying or doing, and every five minutes begin writing in a new row. This is helpful because the candidate you are recording evidence about may have 'quieter' moments or times when they are more articulate, especially during an exercise which can last 40 minutes or more. Dividing up your recording format can help you look at how involved the candidate was at different points during the exercise.

If you have the facility, it can be useful to enter your recorded data onto a computer after you have produced a written summary of it. You can set up a document file on each candidate to record the evidence for each competence assessed in each exercise. This

can help when producing written feedback reports for candidates, as evidence can be cut, pasted and edited from the file of evidence collected on their performance. Note that electronic files should be stored carefully to ensure confidentiality.

3.4 Classifying behavioural evidence

Classifying is the analysis of the evidence obtained through observing and recording behaviours during assessment exercises or interviews. It involves sorting the recorded behaviour on the basis of the GSR competencies, deciding which behaviours provide evidence on which competency, and grouping the evidence to provide a summary of how the candidate has demonstrated that competency overall. Classifying is not as simple as might be supposed. It requires the assessor to identify the behaviours that are relevant to the competencies and to ignore the rest. To do this accurately requires a good knowledge of both the competences and the assessment exercises.

3.5 Knowing the competencies

The assessor needs to be thoroughly familiar with the Competency Framework and aware of the differences between the competencies. For example, what is the difference between 'Delivering high quality services to customers' and 'Delivering results'? While we may have our own ideas about this, consistent and fair assessment requires that each competency means the same thing to every assessor. If it does not, then you end up comparing apples with pears. A lot of effort has gone into developing the GSR Competency Framework to help avoid this kind of problem.

3.6 Knowing the assessment exercises

It is also important to know the exercises well and to have a good idea of how each competency might be expressed in these assessment situations. If work-simulation exercises are being used (e.g. a written exercise or an oral briefing), assessors should thoroughly familiarise themselves with these. The purpose of these simulations is to give the candidate the opportunity to demonstrate behaviours which are relevant to the competencies, and assessors need to be fully aware of the opportunities each simulation offers for doing this. Ideally, assessors will complete the simulation themselves to gain this knowledge.

3.7 Consistency between assessors

However thorough your preparation has been, you will always come up against the problem of whether or not to classify a particular piece of behavioural evidence to a certain competency. It is also the case that one example of behaviour can sometimes be classified under two or more competencies. This is not in itself such a problem, provided you have sufficient 'objective' evidence to make it clear why the behaviour in question is appropriate to both or all the definitions. It is possible that your opinion in such respects differs from that

of your fellow observers. Discussing such differences can be very helpful in gaining a better understanding of the competencies and promoting a consensus.

3.8 Positive and negative behaviours

Once a piece of evidence has been identified as relevant to a particular competency, it is then necessary to identify whether it is a positive or negative indication. So, as we classify, we have to answer two questions:

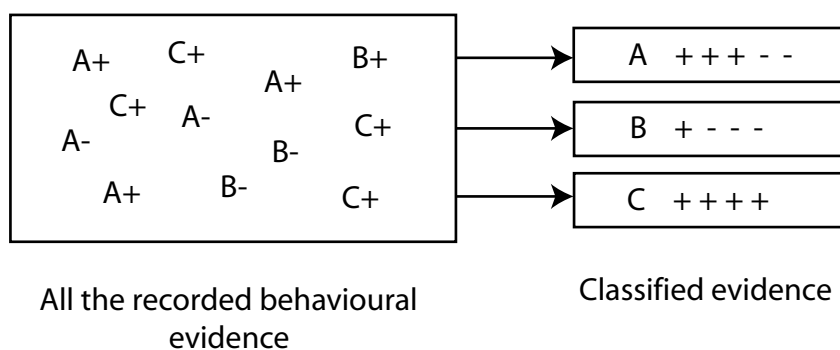
- Is the behaviour I have recorded relevant to a particular competency?
- If it is, is the behaviour a positive or negative indication for that competency?

A method of classifying

You may find the following method useful:

1. Decide which competency you are going to assess. Read the definition again so that you are clear about what behaviours you are looking for.
2. You will have your evidence source on paper, either as your recorded observations in note form or as a written script. Search for positive and negative evidence relevant to that competency.
3. When you come across an example of one of the behaviours you are looking for, circle it and indicate with a letter code which competency it relates to. Then use a plus or minus sign to indicate whether the 'evidence' you have found is a positive or a negative indication of the competency.
4. You may then need to transfer your evidence in the form of summarised statements to a summary results form. When doing so, check that you have the correct form and make sure that the source of the evidence is clear.

At the end of the classification stage the evidence will have been sorted as shown below:



3.9 Evaluating

The final stage in the process of assessing a candidate's performance is to evaluate the classified behaviours – this is most commonly achieved with the use of a numerically- or verbally-defined marking or 'rating' scale.

When evaluating, it is important to consider the opportunities afforded by the assessment exercises for demonstrating the competencies as well as the amount of positive and negative behaviour actually shown. Ratings can be given for the demonstration of competencies within individual exercises and across exercises according to the scale below.

Note: a more detailed description of the rating scale as it is applied to each of the exercises is contained in the individual exercise scoring guides available on the CD accompany this handbook.

Five-point rating scale for GSR selection

Mark	Description
5 (Very good/ well above the required standard)	Strong positive evidence seen across the key competency indicators with few weaknesses and no, or very little, negative evidence. Overall, a highly acceptable (very good) performance that comfortably exceeds an acceptable standard in the competency.
4 (Good/above the required standard)	Good, positive evidence seen across the key competency indicators. There may be some negative evidence but this is slight or occasional, and in any event is easily outweighed by the positive. Overall, a good performance, which indicates a more than acceptable achievement in this competency.
3 (Reasonable/ reaches an acceptable standard)	Positive evidence seen across much of the competency, although there may be some inconsistency in performance (e.g. the candidate may sometimes fail to show sufficient positive evidence or may occasionally show 'good' positive evidence). Negative evidence is relatively minor and is outweighed by the positive. Overall the candidate's performance was acceptable even though they may need some further development.
2 (Poor/below the required standard)	Some positive evidence seen but this was insufficient or the positive evidence was outweighed by the negative evidence. The candidate's performance showed significant weaknesses for this competency and indicates that he/she needs development to perform at the required standard. Overall, performance is generally below the standard required for this competency.
1 (Very poor/ well below the required standard)	Little positive evidence seen for this competency or the candidate demonstrates significant negative evidence. On balance, a weak (very little positive evidence) or unacceptable performance (significant negative evidence) which indicates that the candidate is well short of the required standard for this competency.

3.10 'Shading' the ratings

Some assessment centres allow assessors to 'shade' their ratings, for example to award a '3-' rather than a 3, in order to suggest that someone was just at the bare minimum for that level, i.e. a weak 3. The disadvantage of this is the difficulty in distinguishing between a '2+' (strong 2) and a '3-' for the same competency.

In practice, shadings can be useful, particularly when weighing up evidence from more than one exercise. Shadings can be used without compromising the robustness of the assessment system so long as it is remembered that an award of '2+' means a strong 2 and still a poor performance (although not as poor as a solid 2) rather than an admission that you are unable to decide between a 2 or 3. Likewise a '3-' is a 3 and therefore has reached the standard, albeit just about, and is not an in-between 2 and 3 score.

3.11 A note about high performance

New assessors, in particular, should bear in mind that in an assessment situation it is unusual for even the best candidates to demonstrate all the relevant behaviours. A mark of 5 should be awarded for a superior (very good) performance even though it is not flawless and some aspects of the competency may not have been demonstrated.

3.12 Distinction between negative and positive evidence

In rating a candidate's performance, it is important to bear in mind the difference between negative evidence and weak or insufficient positive evidence.¹ Where appropriate, the assessment exercises in the Protocol provide examples of relevant positive indicators and negative indicators. Usually, poor performance in a selection context is due to candidates 'failing to show sufficient positive evidence' on a competency, as opposed to providing negative evidence. However, negative evidence can be much more destructive of performance and it may be a higher risk from a selection perspective. Negative evidence can be relatively minor, or it can be so strong as to derail a performance.

It is worth noting that insufficient or weak positive evidence can be due to:

- too little of it, too inconsistent and not enough positive examples;
- some good evidence but across a very narrow range of the competency; and
- some positive evidence was there, but it was weak and unconvincing.

When making an assessment, the assessor needs to weigh up both positive and negative evidence. Candidates can get the same rating for the same exercise but for quite different reasons, as suggested in the example below where all candidates get rated a 3 (acceptable) for a written exercise:

- **Candidate A** – reasonable examples of positive evidence across the competency and no negative evidence;

- **Candidate B** – good positive evidence but only across a very narrow range of the competency;
- **Candidate C** – good positive evidence, but offset by an almost equal amount of negative evidence (although this was minor);
- **Candidate D** – some very strong positive evidence seen but this was too infrequently displayed; and
- **Candidate E** – generally displayed strong positive evidence, but let down by one or two examples of strong negative evidence.

The point of this is to show that even with clear marking guides and rating scales, assessors will always need to use their judgement to be able to justify a rating or decision based on the evidence before them.

Finally, the situation where an assessor is unable to identify any evidence for a particular competency is very unusual and rarely occurs. In making sense of and assessing such performance, assessors would want to look at the opportunities the candidate had to display positive behaviours.

3.13 Getting bogged down in detail

An easy mistake for an inexperienced assessor to make is to get bogged down in the detail of behavioural observations and to neglect to consider whether the overall competency has been met.

There is always the risk when assessing that the focus on competency indicators (which are examples of the behavioural expressions of the competency) becomes too detailed and blinds the assessor to the bigger picture. Competency indicators simply suggest where the evidence for a competency could come from. When using a competency as the yardstick to assess a candidate performance, it is important to return to the 'high level' description of the competency to avoid 'missing the wood for the trees'.

A two-stage approach is suggested to avoid this occurring. Firstly, to give a provisional rating based on the detailed analysis of the evidence (i.e. a bottom-up approach). Secondly, to re-read the overall (top line) description of the competency (or the key aspects of it) and ensure that you are comfortable that your rating reflects this (a top-down approach). If it does not (and gut instinct can be useful here), you need to go back and re-visit the evidence to work out why there is this mismatch until you are satisfied. This is one reason why it is of benefit to have a lead assessor and a second assessor, especially when assessors are inexperienced.

Two common reasons for having this mismatch are:

- giving too much weight to one or two examples of good or negative behaviour; and
- being unsure what behaviour is relevant to what competency (classification issues).

Further information on common assessment errors is provided below.

3.14 Sources of error in evaluation

As with the other assessment activities, the evaluation stage is also subject to error. The following table indicates the main errors and suggests ways to avoid them.

Evaluation-stage errors

Pitfall	Definition	Counter-measure
Harshness/leniency	Harshness is the consistent tendency of an assessor to award all candidates a lower mark than most other assessors. This can be the result of unrealistically high expectations or some other bias. Leniency is the opposite tendency	Stick to the marking guidance and set your standards to those of other assessors and avoid thinking that you know best
Halo effect/horns effect (or cloven-hoof effect)	Occurs when one particular positive or negative characteristic unduly influences the overall evaluation, e.g. a person who has strong research skills will be successful as a research manager. (This may be a necessary condition for success but it does not guarantee it)	Keeping the full set of competencies in mind when assessing overall performance and taking account of them all when evaluating
Like me/not like me	Similar to halo/horns but here it is perceived similarity to the assessor which is the crucial factor	As above
Generalising	Assuming on the basis of limited evidence that a competence is lacking (or present), e.g. that making one poor decision means that judgement is generally poor	Getting a good evidence-base, knowing all the behaviours relevant to each competency and taking a balanced view when evaluating
Stereotyping (prejudice)	Allowing personal biases and prejudices arising from stereotyped views of groups of people to distort the evaluation of an individual's performance, e.g. men are logical, women are emotional. May result from selective perception and/or ignoring evidence which conflicts with the stereotype	We all stereotype and have prejudices. Learn what yours are and guard against them

First impressions	Allowing the behavioural evidence observed first to have the most influence on your judgement	Keep observing and recording evidence throughout the exercise. Do not stop because you think you have enough
Recency	Allowing the evidence observed towards the end of an assessment exercise to have the most influence on your judgement	
Completion	Where additional evidence 'is assumed' on the basis of some observed behaviour	Just do not do it!

3

CD Toolkit

CD containing a toolkit of recommended selection exercises for Research Officer and Senior Research Officer – enclosed with handbook

The CD is a resource restricted for use only by those who have been trained to use the Protocol. Additional exercises for PRO and SPRO grades are available by request from GSRU.

Annex 1: General guidance on completing competency-based application forms

During the recruitment and selection process for the majority of posts in the Government Social Research service (GSR) you will have to at some point complete an application form in order to give information about yourself and why you believe you would be suitable for it. Recruitment and selection to the civil service, of which GSR is a part, is *competency-based*.

What is competency-based selection?

Whereas business plans and the setting of personal work tasks and objectives help us to be clear about what we are expected to achieve in our job, competencies describe the attributes we need to do the job i.e. they answer the question ‘what do I need to do to be effective in my job?’ Competencies are individual abilities or characteristics that are key to our effectiveness in work.

The aim of competency-based selection is to obtain precise and verifiable information about when applicants, in a previous role or job, have displayed the particular behaviours at the level required for the vacancy. It is widely accepted as best practice, based on past behaviour being the most effective indicator of future performance. This type of selection can also be used to assess potential through the use of hypothetical scenarios or applied questions. In this case, candidates may be asked to describe what they would do if faced with a particular situation, but you would not usually find this approach used on a competency-based application form.

The Competency Framework for GSR describes the skills, knowledge and behaviours which everyone needs in order to be effective in their job as a social researcher in government at all grades, for example Research Officer (RO), Senior Research Officer (SRO), etc. This includes technical competence (e.g. social research professional expertise) and behavioural competence (e.g. developing constructive relationships). See http://www.gsr.gov.uk/professional_development/competencies.asp for the *GSR Continuing Professional Development Handbook*, which incorporates the GSR Competency Framework.

What is evidence of competence?

Competency evidence is a specific example that describes explicitly what you did and what the outcome was. Evidence can be drawn from your experience either at or outside work. When providing evidence, you might usefully follow an approach which is referred to by the acronym ‘**STAR**’. For example, when completing a competency-based application form you will usually be provided with a description of a competency, and then be asked to describe:

- a specific **S**ituation you were in when you demonstrated the competency in question;

- the **T**ask or role you took on in this situation; what responsibilities you had;
- the **A**ction which you took – what you did, how you did it, why you did it, who else was involved, etc.; and
- the **R**esult that this action achieved, for example how successful was it, what feedback did you receive.

The **STAR** approach has been shown to decrease the subjectivity inherent in interviews and to be more effective at helping applicants demonstrate their abilities. It is very important that you understand this approach so that you provide evidence in the format that those assessing your application are looking for. Application forms will usually be 'sifted' by a panel of assessors so the quality of the information you provide will affect whether or not you are shortlisted to attend the next stage of selection. Ensure that your evidence shows how you have satisfied the selection criteria or shown the potential to do so. Your examples must be relevant to the competencies being assessed and it can be helpful to choose examples which are also relevant to the description of the job you are applying for. Do not be reticent in promoting yourself: your evidence should refer mostly to 'I' not 'we'. Also, you should be prepared to explore any example of competency evidence you provide if you are asked to attend a competency-based interview, as the interviewers may have been provided with a copy of your application form.

What is NOT evidence of competence?

The following examples would **not** be considered as valid evidence of competence:

- generalisations/being non-specific, for example 'In cases of this type, I usually...';
- not owned, for example 'We decided to adopt the last option';
- passive, for example 'A meeting was called...';
- job descriptions, for example 'My job/role involves...';
- a process, for example 'First I input customer details into the computer...';
- an assertion, for example 'It is very important to deal with complaints promptly';
- paraphrasing the competency descriptions, for example 'I communicated concisely and persuasively...';
- unnecessary technical detail, for example 'Considered case suitable for OC to enable Decree and Inhabitation...'; and
- a pen picture, for example 'I am a very loyal and committed member of the team'.

Annex 2: A guide to the Research Officer assessment centre

You have already completed a competency-based application form for the role of Research Officer (RO) and have been shortlisted to attend an assessment centre.

What is an assessment centre?

An assessment centre is a process for assessing candidates against the skills, or competencies, required for particular roles. They have been extensively researched and we know that they are a highly valid method for predicting how someone is likely to operate in certain roles in the workplace. As a candidate you have more than one opportunity to demonstrate your skills and competencies in a variety of different situations, through completing a variety of different exercises. The assessors have the opportunity to observe you in different situations in order to make a fully rounded assessment of your skills, and how they might be appropriate to the roles for which you are being recruited. You are likely to feel that you have been worked quite hard, but you should also find the experience rewarding.

This assessment centre consists of the following **[xx insert number here and list them below, e.g. two exercises]**, completed in the following order:

- oral-briefing exercise; and
- competency-based interview.

The competency evidence you provided in the application form **will/will not [delete as appropriate]** be taken into account as part of the assessment centre process. This covered the competencies of **xxxxx** etc. **[Explain here any other relevant details of how the sift was carried out.]** Further information on the exercises is provided later in this guidance.

Reasonable adjustments

If you have any particular needs in terms of helping you to cope with any disability, please inform us **before** you attend the assessment centre. We will endeavour to ensure that all candidates are provided with any reasonable adjustments they need in order to complete the exercises. Please contact **xxxxxxx** to discuss your needs.

Who are the assessors?

You will be seen by **xx** assessors who are existing members of the Government Social Research (GSR) service and who have been specially trained in recruitment. **[If you know the names and roles of the assessors that the candidate will see, then insert them here.]** Some panels may include an HR representative, or someone from HR may observe but not participate in the actual assessment.

What are the assessment criteria?

Each element of the assessment centre is assessed independently by the assessors. No decisions are taken about candidates until all of the exercises have been completed and assessed; only then is all the competency evidence recorded about each candidate discussed. You are likely to find that you feel you have performed better in some exercises than in others; this is entirely normal. The assessors will base their final assessment on your performance in all of the exercises.

Throughout the assessment centre you will only be assessed in the exercises. Within the exercises you will be assessed against a set of key competencies chosen from the GSR framework as follows **[insert the key competencies you have chosen below and their high-level competency descriptions]**:

- **Professional expertise** – demonstrates the detailed knowledge and experience skills necessary for the job of a Government Social Researcher; expressing the core technical capability, knowledge and awareness in terms of behaviours.
- **Delivering results** – plans work activities, reviewing and prioritising as necessary, to achieve high standards and meet deadlines; is proactive and uses initiative when problems arise or progress is slow. Shows resilience under pressure and does not let setbacks affect performance.
- **Critical analysis and decision making** – critically evaluates data and information with accuracy and perception, and is able to synthesise and use data from a variety of different methods appropriately. Makes sound evidence-based decisions (and/or helps others do so); assesses risk and defends decisions and action; responds effectively to unforeseen situations.
- **Communicating with impact** – communicates written and oral information clearly, concisely and persuasively; communicates own viewpoint succinctly and defends it appropriately; facilitates discussions effectively to achieve clear outcomes.
- **Developing constructive relationships** – uses interpersonal and other communication skills to build rapport with others; shows awareness of the effects of own behaviour on others and understands their situations and concerns; values diversity and shows flexibility of style.

What is competency-based selection?

Whereas business plans and personal work objectives help us to be clear about what we are expected to achieve in our job, competencies describe the attributes we need to do the job – that is to say, they answer the question ‘what do I need to be effective in my job?’. Competencies are individual abilities or characteristics that are key to our effectiveness in work.

The aim of competency-based selection is to obtain precise and verifiable information about when applicants, in a previous role or job, have displayed the particular behaviours at the level required for the vacancy. It is widely accepted as best practice, based on past

behaviour being the most effective indicator of future performance. This type of selection can also be used to assess potential through the use of hypothetical scenarios – candidates may be asked to describe what they would do if faced with a particular situation.

The Competency Framework for GSR describes the skills, knowledge and behaviours which everyone needs in order to be effective in their job as a social researcher in government at all grades, for example Research Officer (RO), Senior Research Officer (SRO), etc. This includes technical competence (e.g. social research professional expertise) and behavioural competence (e.g. developing constructive relationships). See http://www.gsr.gov.uk/professional_development/competencies.asp for the GSR *Continuing Professional Development Handbook*, which incorporates the GSR Competency Framework.

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Competency evidence is a specific example that describes explicitly what you did and what the outcome was. Evidence can be drawn from your experience either at or outside work. When providing evidence, you might usefully follow an approach which is referred to by the acronym '**STAR**'. For example, in a competency-based interview you will be asked to describe:

- a specific **S**ituation you were in when you demonstrated the competency in question;
- the **T**ask or role you took on in this situation;
- the **A**ction which you took – what you did, how you did it, why you did it, who else was involved, etc.; and
- the **R**esult that this action achieved, for example how successful was it, what feedback did you receive.

The **STAR** approach has been shown to decrease the subjectivity inherent in interviews and to be more effective at demonstrating your abilities. It is very important that you understand this approach so that you provide evidence in the format that the assessors are looking for. Ensure that you are familiar with this structure but also be prepared to be flexible and explore any example of competency evidence you provide, as the assessors may ask follow-up questions. Ensure that your evidence shows how you have satisfied the selection criteria or shown the potential to do so. Above all, do not be reticent in promoting yourself. Your evidence should refer mostly to 'I' not 'we'.

What is NOT evidence of competence?

The following examples would not be considered as valid evidence of competence:

- generalisations/being non-specific, for example 'In cases of this type, I usually...';

- not owned, for example 'We decided to adopt the last option';
- passive, for example 'A meeting was called...';
- job descriptions, for example 'My job/role involves...';
- a process, for example 'First I input customer details into the computer...';
- an assertion, for example 'It is very important to deal with complaints promptly';
- paraphrasing the criteria, for example 'I communicated concisely and persuasively...';
- unnecessary technical detail, for example 'Considered case suitable for OC to enable Decree and Inhabitation...'; and
- a pen picture, for example 'I am a very loyal and committed member of the team'.

In some assessment centre exercises, hypothetical/theoretical examples or those describing future situations may be asked for in order to explore potential in particular competencies, but this will be clearly signposted and explained. In general, and particularly in interview situations, you should avoid hypothetical examples, for example 'I would deal with the complaint by first...' or those describing future situations, for example 'When the proposed reorganisation of my team has taken place, I will...' unless specifically asked to answer from those perspectives.

The exercises

Oral-briefing exercise

The oral-briefing exercise is what is termed a 'work-simulation exercise', i.e. it is designed to simulate aspects of the job to be performed and thus provide a basis for assessing the behaviours and competencies required in the job. The competencies assessed in this exercise are **xxxxxx [insert below]**:

- Professional expertise;
- Critical analysis and decision-making; and
- Communicating with impact.

The aim is that the exercise simulates a briefing you might be asked to do for a senior research colleague or a policy maker. You will have 40 minutes to prepare for this exercise at the assessment centre. You will be given a room to prepare in, instructions and research information to work with, and you will have to prepare an oral briefing based on the information provided. In the time allowed for preparation, you will be required to read and analyse research information (e.g. surveys) relating to a particular policy area and prepare notes that will allow you to brief the assessors according to the instructions for the exercise.

You will then move to a room where the assessors will be based and will deliver the briefing to them for up to 10 minutes. The assessors will take on the role of a policy or senior research colleague. Before you begin your briefing, they should introduce themselves and the roles they will be playing and allow you the chance to sit down, make yourself comfortable with your papers and have a glass of water. The set-up will usually consist of you sitting on one side of a table with the assessors on another, so that you can spread your papers in front of you. The assessors will be keeping time and if your briefing goes over the allotted time of 10 minutes, then one of the assessors will politely ask you to stop. You should take care to plan what you are going to say so that you can make all the key points you want to make in the amount of time available to you. During the briefing it can be helpful if you take your watch off and put it in front of you on the table so that you can see how long you have left. When you have finished delivering your briefing, the assessors then have up to 20 minutes to ask you further questions, exploring the ideas you have presented. This question and answer session is intended to allow the assessors to probe your depth of understanding of the issues, your ability to 'think on your feet', anticipate likely problems and your persuasiveness.

Please note that you are not expected to have any prior knowledge; all the information you will need to complete the exercise is given to you with the instructions and any supporting information/materials supplied on the day.

Break

[After the oral briefing exercise is finished you will be allowed a 15-minute break before moving on to the competency-based interview. You will see the same/different [delete as appropriate] assessors for the interview.]

Competency-based interview

The competency-based interview will last for up to **xx minutes [insert time]**. You will be interviewed by a panel of **xx [insert number]** GSR assessors, who will evaluate your performance against **xx [insert number]** competencies:

- Professional expertise;
- Developing constructive relationships; and
- Delivering results.

The assessors should introduce themselves to you and tell you all you need to know about how they will conduct the interview, for example how they will organise the questions between them, that you can clarify any questions which seem unclear to you, and that you will have the opportunity to ask questions. It is the assessors' job to try and put you at ease from the beginning and then throughout the interview. They are not trying to put you under pressure, they want to give every candidate the chance to show himself or herself in the best possible light. They will want to know as much about you and your suitability for the post(s) as is possible in a limited period, so ensure that you make them aware of everything that you feel is relevant.

The most common seating arrangement for the interview is a table with the assessors sitting

together on one side opposite the candidate. Interviewers sometimes prefer a less formal setting, so do not be too surprised if you are all sitting in armchairs around a coffee table. The assessors will want you to be as comfortable as possible in the circumstances so that you give your best at the interview. If you are not comfortable with the room layout or setting, say so at the outset.

The interview is your chance to talk candidly about your abilities in relation to the competencies being tested. The questions have been designed to tell the assessors more about specific job-related abilities and will be looking to you to give relevant examples of your past experience. This can be experience from work, higher education or personal activities. In line with the explanation of the 'STAR' model above, you will need to tell the assessors in each case about the context of the situation, what you did and why you chose your course of action, and what the outcome was. Everyone's interview should be similar: they will be asked the same core questions. Obviously, any follow-up questions will depend on the answers you give and will not necessarily be the same as those for other candidates.

The questions could take the form of either examples of previous behaviour, for example 'Can you give me an example of where you deliberately chose to do something differently, or new to you, because you felt you would learn from it?' or 'What did you learn from that research project which had to be abandoned?'. Some questions might relate to hypothetical situations, for example 'Suppose that you were posted to a new job in an unfamiliar policy area. How would you go about getting up to speed as quickly as possible?'. Both of these example questions would be appropriate for exploring the 'Learning and improving competency' (which you will **not** be assessed on at this assessment centre). **[This might not be the case with your assessment centre so delete as appropriate.]**

If the assessors are trying to find evidence of knowledge and skills, and you have little/no relevant experience in those areas from the work setting, they may test to see if you have gained such knowledge and skills outside work. For example to test the 'Developing constructive relationships' competency, you might be asked 'Can you give me an example of where you had to work with others on some joint activity or project? It could be one of your jobs, at University, or socially'.

Remember that you can offer information without having to be asked. For instance, if asked 'How much scope is there for you to write complex reports in your current role?', you could answer 'Hardly any I'm afraid. However, for the last few years I have been Chair of my village community project and I write letters and reports to individuals and businesses, usually for fund-raising purposes'.

Remember that you can decide what you are willing to discuss in your interview, and you can ask for information to be treated as confidential. You will not be penalised for not wanting to talk about issues that are sensitive to you. Any information that you ask to be kept confidential will only be shared with the other assessors if it has a direct bearing on the selection decision.

At the end of the interview you will usually be asked if you have any questions or whether there is anything else you want to add. Take your time to think. Ask any question you would like answered but do not ask just for the sake of it. If you realise you could have given a better answer to one of the assessors' earlier questions, tell them briefly what you meant to say. If there is some relevant information that you neglected to mention – or a major achievement that you think is pertinent – do so at this point, but briefly.

Finally, do not read too much into any interview that is slightly longer or shorter than the time estimated as assessor panels sometimes differ in how they divide up their questioning and use their time.

How can you prepare for the exercises?

Although an assessment centre is about your performance on the day, research has shown that those candidates who prepare for an assessment centre can improve their chances of success. Before you attend you should therefore do the following:

- Read this guidance and familiarise yourself with what you can expect on the day. Being familiar with this should help to reduce any anxiety you might otherwise experience.
- Thinking about how you can deal with a lot of material efficiently will help you for the oral-briefing exercise.
- You can prepare for the interview. Think about your experiences which demonstrate the competencies which the assessors will ask about. Think about what the situation was, what it was that **you** did and how that affected the outcome. Think about the skills you have shown. You might not have ever been a manager, but have you used the skills of management in helping a team to achieve its goal? What situations have you been in which were difficult and required a lot of you? How did you cope? You may think you 'just did' something, but what was it that you did, how, why and what impact did you have?_

General points on attending assessment centres

- Read all the instructions carefully and ensure that you understand what is required. If you do not, ask the administrator.
- Assessment centre exercises are tightly timed. It is your responsibility to manage your own time to ensure that you deliver the required output.
- The assessors are not looking to catch you out but to try to give you every opportunity to perform to the best of your ability.
- Ensure that you declare on the day if you are suffering from any problem which may affect your performance.
- Relax and be yourself.

Feedback from the assessment centre

This is not compulsory – and your right not to seek it out will be respected. You are however encouraged to view the assessment centre as a learning experience and to ask for feedback in that context. It can be obtained in a form to suit you when all the assessment centres have been completed, and details of who to approach to obtain feedback should be given to you at the point of finding out whether or not you have been successful. Any feedback you receive can be invaluable and is designed to help you. You can use this information to inform your development needs and future plans.

Appeals

[If your department has an appeals policy you should describe it here.]

Annex 3: An example of a written feedback report

Summary

Mr Shaw fell below the standard required at the assessment centre, particularly in the competencies of 'Developing Constructive Relationships' and 'Communicating with impact', although he showed real strength in 'Professional expertise'.

In the written exercise he communicated in a concise, easy-to-read manner but he failed to provide enough supporting evidence for his recommendations. His arguments also lacked sufficient breadth, and he needed to develop them further and to make more appropriate links. In the oral-briefing exercise, although the research content of his brief was accurate, he struggled to think on his feet when applying this to a new area. His brief would also have benefited from more structure. At interview he impressed the board with his knowledge of social research methods and analysis, and in his capacity to cope with a demanding work schedule. However, the evidence he gave on building relationships with others, particularly in working as part of a team, was not convincing.

Strengths

- Able to remain calm and unflustered in challenging situations.
- Excellent knowledge of research methods and analysis.

Areas for development

- When working as part of a team, especially at the beginning, to invest time in getting to know people and to actively contribute to a cooperative atmosphere, for example by looking as though he is fully engaged, asking people how they are, rather than just providing technical input.
- In briefing work (whether written or oral) to look at the issues from the perspective of the audience and present arguments in a way that has impact on that audience.