

## Writing a Research Brief

### Options when commissioning research

If you wish to commission a quantitative survey, for example, a survey to explore the proportion of GP surgeries that have offered flu vaccination, please use the framework agreement for fieldwork.

If you wish to commission analysis of existing data please use the framework agreement for analysis.

The framework agreement is a list of approved suppliers. It enables work to be commissioned more swiftly.

Any other research or evaluation should be commissioned using these guidelines.

***NOTE: It is important to decide on your aims and objectives before you decide on your method***

### Advertise or not?

There are rules in the standing financial instructions for when you must advertise work (see link below).

<http://www.staffnet.ggc.scot.nhs.uk/Corporate%20Services/Finance/Documents/SFI%27s%20%20Revision%206.pdf>

If in doubt, consult procurement.

However, you can advertise work for any value. The advantage of advertising is that you will get people who are interested in the area. The disadvantage is that you sometimes can be overwhelmed by the number of responses.

To advertise work write a brief description of the project (see Appendix 1 for an example) and the work you are offering and send either to procurement (to advertise on Public Contracts Scotland website) or email to [nhs.HealthScotland-Contracts@nhs.net](mailto:nhs.HealthScotland-Contracts@nhs.net) to advertise on the Health Scotland website

You will receive expressions of interest back. It is a good idea to use a template in which expressions of interest should be returned. Example templates are in appendix 1.

Expressions of interest should be scored using the criteria you published in the advert. For example see Appendix 1.

The purpose of the expression of interest is to discover the research agencies experience in the area you are commissioning.

## Writing a brief

When you have shortlisted your expression of interest, the brief is sent to the shortlist. Aim to shortlist at least 6 companies in order to get 3 full tender back. The brief should describe the work and ask the research agencies to respond with a proposal (also called tender, bid or quote) that described exactly what they will deliver for you. If you don't want to advertise and have a list of 6 companies you would like to quote. You can use the quick quote service via procurement. At the time of writing (27.2.15) this is offered by Elaine Gray in Procurement. **WARNING: It is important to check the current system with procurement for each piece of work as systems change frequently and without warning!**

A 'brief' is the formal document from the client (you) to all agencies you are inviting to quote for research. Writing a brief allows you to formulate your ideas. It indicates what will be expected of the agency (research company) if it is contracted to conduct the research. A clear brief is essential in ensuring the success of your work.

A research brief should normally contain the following sections:

- Background to the research
- Research aims and objectives
- Research design and methods
- Reporting requirements
- Required timetable
- Budget / payment
- Scoring criteria
- Other contractual issues

These are guidelines for writing your brief but each piece of research is different and a brief should reflect the specific requirements of the research.

### Background to the research

Background information about the project / topics area of interest should always be provided. This is extremely useful in "setting the scene" for the agency. Some of the background information you may wish to include might be as follows:

- Details of how the project / intervention / area of research came about
- Broad aims of the project / intervention (if you wish to evaluate it)
- Recent developments / brief details of timescales for the project/ intervention
- Description of the intervention
- Target group / audience intended for

- Who “steers” the project / intervention

If there is quite a lot of background information, it may be worth appending some of it. It is useful to indicate why you are doing the research and how the results / information from the research will be used.

## **Aim**

The aim of the research should be stated. An aim is an overall broad statement of intent, that is, the purpose of the research, for example:

“The aim of the research is to assess the health needs of asylum seekers in .....CHCP “

“ The aim is to evaluate the impact of the..... youth health service”.

## **Objectives or Research Questions**

Objectives or research questions are then formed from the overall aim. They are more detailed than the aim.

Objectives are a list of specific statements you want answered from your research. Objectives should always start with the word “To”, e.g. “To assess the impact of the education package on the students” or “To identify and critique the referral mechanisms used by the project”.

Alternatively, objectives may be written as research questions, e.g. “What was the impact of the education package on the students?” or “What are the referral mechanisms used by the project and how effective do these mechanisms appear to be?”

## **Equality issues**

Your brief should enquire about equalities issues from two perspectives, the agency and the research participants.

The research agency should be able to demonstrate through their policies how they treat employees fairly and appropriately with specific reference to the characteristics that are protected in law. These are: age; gender; disability; ethnicity; sexual orientation; faith, pregnancy and maternity.

However, if the agency has only one employee policies are not necessary. Very small agencies with only one or two employees should **not** be treated less favourably.

From the perspective of research participants the agency should comment how they will ensure participants from a range of background and experiences are included in their work. For example, how will people who do not speak

English as a first language be included in their work; how will “easy to ignore groups” such as asylum seekers; carers; people with disabilities be included in the work.

Research that perpetuates stereotypes should be avoided for example gay men and AIDS.

It is important that all health systems are open and inclusive and this should be considered when commissioning work. Further, it is important to recognise the heterogeneity and the multiple identify issues.

## **Methods**

An important point to note is that the proposed methodology should always follow on from your aims and objectives.

You may have some ideas of what methods you think are most appropriate to answer your research questions – put these in (e.g. the research is qualitative: you would like individual interviews, followed by two focus groups), but state that you are open to consideration / suggestions from the research company themselves.

Alternatively, you may keep the methods section very open and invite the research company to come up with their proposed methods based on the aims and objectives / research questions.

You can however, be specific about the exact methodology you want used e.g. two focus groups and questionnaires to all people on the database (total 100). If you decide to do this, it is advisable not to put in the budget, as when tendering, you want to be able to compare costs between research companies.

No matter whether you intend to prescribe the methods you wish the agency to use, or you have invited them to suggest the methodology used, the target group(s) should always be defined.

If you decide to put in details of suggested methodologies, some of the things you should consider are listed. (Even if you don't put in specific details of the methodology in the brief, you should still have an idea of the following details).

For quantitative methods -

- Specify the type and size of any sample that is to be used. You might ask that the agency discusses this in its proposal, and what implications the sample size and breakdown might have for the setting of confidence intervals if appropriate, and cross-tabulations by age / gender etc.
- Indicate whether and in what respects the sample must be representative of the population group in question.
- Indicate what sampling frame is to be used and how it is to be accessed. Caution needs to be exercised in relation to the constraints of the Data Protection Act. e.g. the Act prohibits Health Board staff from passing any

- If the agency will be required to obtain a sampling frame from elsewhere, this should be indicated so that an appropriate costing can be included in its proposal.
- Define who is to produce the questionnaire and how it is to be administered (e.g. postal, interview, telephone). If the questionnaire is drafted in-house by the client before the research is commissioned it should be included as an appendix to the brief, as its nature and length will affect the overall cost.
- Specify whether the questionnaire has to be piloted and who it should be involved in the pilot. Alternatively, the agency can be asked to specify how it proposes to pilot the questionnaire.

For qualitative methods –

- Specify the number of interviews required.
- Indicate how interviewees are to be selected/designated.
- Specify the number of focus groups, how many people should be included in each one and how participants are to be selected.
- Explore whether incentives are to be offered to participants.
- Indicate where interviews / focus groups will be conducted.

## **Analysis**

It can be useful to specify the type of analysis you require, especially if a quantitative dataset set is large and you have specific ideas of what you want. However, most agencies would expect to run cross-tabulations (in quantitative data) of key variables such as certain personal characteristics e.g. age, gender etc. If more than this is required it should be specified. Alternatively, you should ask the agency to describe the analysis they intend to run and what methods of analysis they intend to use.

If your study uses a qualitative design, statistical analysis will not be appropriate. There are a range of methods and approaches to analysis of qualitative information. You should ask how the analysis will be conducted.

## **Ethics**

For some types of research, ethical approval will be required.

For advice, please provide an outline of your study to Judith Godden

Email: [Judith.Godden@ggc.scot.nhs.uk](mailto:Judith.Godden@ggc.scot.nhs.uk)

If you wish to publish your work in a journal you will need ethical approval or at the very least a letter of comfort from the West of Scotland Research Ethics Committee.

## **Budget / Costings**

If you are quite specific with your methodology, it is best not to put in the budget as comparing costs will help you decide on which agency to go for. If you have not been specific about your methodology, you should put in the budget to give the agency an idea of what they are working towards.

However, it is becoming more common for those writing a research brief to put in the maximum budget available for research / evaluation. Be aware that in nearly all proposals you get back, the agency will come up with a figure that comes in just under the maximum budget. This does not necessarily mean you will get the best quality research for your money, rather that in many cases, you will have no money left over at the end of the research!

Clearly state the budget / costings should exclude VAT. You should also ask the agency to provide a detailed breakdown of their costs for each component of the work. It is easiest if they do this by cost per focus group, cost per questionnaire etc., rather than cost per employee / time of the agency. This will allow you to (more easily) compare costings between agencies and explore value for money.

Payments should be made in stages. First payments can only be made after something has been delivered. For example, a briefing meeting. Bear in mind when companies will have the largest outlay of payments themselves and make payments accordingly. For example, if they need to print questionnaire, or pay fieldworker, payments should be made shortly afterwards so they are not out of pocket for long periods of time.

You should minimise your expose to risk (for example avoid large up front fees). Research agencies can go into liquidation during contracts. If you have paid fees up front you will be exposed to losses and will not receive the work you were anticipating.

It is wise to hold some money back (usually in the region of 25%) to ensure you get a satisfactory report

The word “satisfactory” is important as it lets the agency know that final payment will be withheld until you are happy with the final work. “Satisfactory” means good quality work that meets the terms of the brief....it does not mean that you agree with everything that is written in the report. You do not have to pay the agency for any of the work until it is completed, but note that especially in a larger-scale project, the agency may have to spend significant amounts initially in some research situations e.g. to fieldworkers.

You must follow NHSGGC standing financial instructions (SFIs) which can be seen on the NHSGGC website link below:

## Timetable

A proposed timetable for the research should be provided in the brief (see below for an example). You should ask the agency for their commitment to meet this timetable, or alternatively, produce their own timetable. Your timetable should include the following milestones:

<b>Timetable</b>	<b>Date achieved by</b>
Submission of tenders	Allow 2 weeks from sending brief for tenders being returned
Tenders scored	Allow 2 weeks to score tenders
Interviews	Allow 1 week for interviews
Contract awarded	Between making your decision and awarding the contract it is common to have a 10 day still. Contact procurement for advise
Date of Briefing Meeting	Can take place after the 10 day standstill
Fieldwork – this may be broken into specific stages if required	Allow a reasonable period of time depending the pilot, volume of fieldwork, complexity of analysis and reporting.
Analysis	
Draft report	
Verbal de-brief	
Final report	

Your timetable should be realistic. Experience shows us unrealistic timescales are one reason why companies do not bid for work.

## Tender Specification

This gives specific details to the agency what information you specifically want included in their proposal. You would normally write “In responding to this brief, tenders should provide:

- Your understanding of the research questions
- A detailed plan of how the research will be carried out, the data collection methods proposed and your recommended sampling and recruitment strategies. The methods outlined in the brief are open for discussion. We encourage researchers’ comments on these, including any anticipated problems and suggestions for alternative approaches.

- An outline of what research skills are necessary to carry out the methods proposed and demonstrate that these skills are available for this contract\*<sup>1</sup>. An indication of any contact information, materials or other resources that will be needed from NHSGGC
- A firm commitment to costs, to complete the work outlined in the brief, giving a separate breakdown of costs for each round of fieldwork
- A commitment to disseminating the research findings on the basis of a plan agreed with NHSGGC, indicating whether any additional costs will be charged for dissemination activities\*<sup>2</sup>. We expect the costs of the verbal de-brief and the written report to be included in your costings for this research”.

\*<sup>1</sup> You want the research company to in effect put in a mini-CV of the company and the people who will be carrying out the work so you can see what experience they have.

\*<sup>2</sup> You could also state exactly the number of presentations you would like the agency to undertake and ask if there is an additional cost for this.

### **Data ownership and copyright**

When the work is awarded procurement will send out standard terms and conditions. These will include a clause about data ownership and copyright.

Data ownership and copyright stays with NHSGGC at all times. If the research agencies proposal differs from this it is worth asking procurement to clarify in writing.

### **Presentations and articles.**

To avoid confusion it is worth stating that any presentations or articles should be approved prior to publication. Permission is normally granted but is subject to the following conditions:

The client has approved a copy of the final report,

The role of the client is acknowledged,

Drafts of articles or outlines of presentations are submitted for comments at least 28 days before submission, and

Arrangements for co-authorship or co-presentation with members of the client organisation are in place, if appropriate.

### **Quality control**

You need to be as confident as possible, that a piece of work of high quality will be produced by the appointed agency. (Despite prior knowledge of an agency and its work, staff can change). Therefore it is good practice in the brief to ask agencies for:

- An indication of their past experience of the subject area,
- Evidence of their experience in using the required methods,

- A list of, and a brief CV for, the staff who would work on the research (see also 'Tender Specification'), and
- A statement of the quality control methods that the agency intends to use (for example, a 10% re-check of data-entry).
- The methods they use to ensure interviewer quality

It can sometimes be useful to ask the agency to produce (at a presentation if required) evidence of the quality of other completed work (in confidence if they so wish). You may also wish to ask for references from other agencies that have used their services.

### **Keeping in touch with NHSGGC**

The brief should ask how the agency will keep in touch with NHSGGC. As a minimum you should expect a weekly email that details progress. However it is usual to meet face to face at key milestones in the project or should problems arise with the project.

### **Reports**

Your brief should state what you expect in the report emerging from this work or ask the research agency to describe what the report will include.

If you are expecting a literature review to put your work in a wider context you should state exactly what you want the literature review to include. For example will you supply key documents or do you want a literature search conducted?

### **Questions**

Research agencies sometimes have questions or points to clarify from the brief. These should be submitted in writing. An email is sufficient. You should give a timescale in which questions can be asked.

All questions and your response should be copied to all companies that have been invited to tender.

### **Submission of tender**

At the end of the research brief you should again state the date and time that any tender should be returned by. You should also give the name, job title and full address of the person that it requires to be returned to. The standing financial instructions give rules when you can handle the tenders yourself and when you will need to go through procurement. It is worth checking for every piece of work as systems change frequently and without warning.

If you anticipate that a presentation / interview will be required as part of the short-listing process, you should let the agency know about this here. If you

have a date and time in mind for the interview, put this in as well. If you indicate there will be an interview it HAS TO GO AHEAD. If you do not mention an interview in a brief you cannot decide to interview later on.

### **Selection of tenders**

You should outline the criteria that will be used to assess tenders. For example the following criteria have been useful in the past:

- How you will encourage participation in the survey
- How you will keep in touch with NHSGGC and what they will feedback each week
- How the questionnaire will be administered (e.g. paper based; CAPI etc)
- The experience, number and quality of fieldworkers
- Commitment to providing details of response rate in each area requested
- The approach that will be taken to data management
- Costs giving a breakdown for:
  - Mailing the invitation letters
  - Main sample
  - Basic boosts
  - Enhanced Boosts
  - Neighbourhood boost

The scoring criteria you intend to use should be included too. The weighting of the scores is up to you. The following have been useful in the past:

- |  |     |
|--|-----|
| • Costs  | 40% |
| • Approach to encouraging participation            | 10% |
| • Approach to keeping in touch                     | 10% |
| • Quality of fieldworker                           | 10% |
| • Commitment to providing details of response rate | 10% |
| • Approach to data management                      | 10% |
| • Commitment to timescales                         | 10% |

Costs must be scored objectively. In the past the following approach has been taken. Cheapest quote received 100 % of the score. More expensive quotes are reduced by the %. For example if a quote was 30% more expensive only 70% of the marks would be awarded. An alternative method of scoring is:

$(\text{Lowest cost}/\text{cost}) \times 100 \times 0.4$

Score for cost must be objective. If in doubt, seek advice from procurement.

Guidance should be provided to the scoring panel about how to allocate scores. For example;

10 marks for an excellent and detailed approach to describing the quality of the fieldworkers

5 marks for a satisfactory but less detailed approach to describing the quality of the fieldworkers

0 marks for an unsatisfactory approach to describing the quality of the fieldworkers.

Marks should be justified with comments.

Those scoring the tenders should declare any interest they have in the company bidding for the work.

Scores should be kept to enable information on the selection procedure to be presented if any companies ask for this under the Freedom of Information Act.

The top scoring company should be awarded the work.

Feedback should be given to the successful and unsuccessful company on their scores and the scores of the successful company. Costs scores should not be fed back to competitors as this would be deemed commercially sensitive. Any advice about what to feedback contact procurement.

If you interview (and remember your intension to interview should be in the brief), the scoring criteria for the interview should be in the brief too.

## **Help**

It is hoped that this paper will give staff an idea of what should be included when writing a research brief. Should you require any further information or assistance with your research, please contact a member of the PHRU Research & Evaluation Team [contactresearch@ggc.scot.nhs.uk](mailto:contactresearch@ggc.scot.nhs.uk)

Procurement can offer advice on general purchasing issues and have some useful documents. Please see the link below for details:

<http://www.staffnet.ggc.scot.nhs.uk/Acute/Facilities/Procurement%20Department/Corporate/Pages/default.aspx>