

Review of FSA Social Science - Chapter 5

The Social Researchers' Perspectives

This chapter presents the views of the FSA social science team on its strengths and areas for improvement in terms of ensuring the scientific rigour, relevance and value of the FSA's social research. The standards for assessing these professional requirements of social science are presented in the GSR Code for Products and People (Chapter 3).

Face-to-face group interviews were undertaken in October 2022 with all members of the FSA social research team, which at the time was made up of six Principal Research Officers (three of whom are part-time), six Senior Research Officers, and three Research Officers (one of whom was a GSR placement student).

Participation in the group interviews was voluntary and was conducted under the requirements of the GSR's Ethical Assurance Guidance for Social and Behavioural Research in Government (GSR 2021). All fifteen members of the social research team consented to participate.

Commissioning Research

The FSA social science team leads on identifying and commissioning research, which requires effective collaboration with policy and procurement colleagues as well as contractors.

What do FSA social researchers think they do well in terms of commissioning?

Identifying the policy issues requiring social research and clarifying the objectives and anticipated outcomes of a policy or programme are activities that the social science team thinks it does well. As one Principal Research Officer put it: "once we have a clear idea of what is required, we can signpost quickly what has to be done and who are likely to be the best people to undertake that project".

Commissioning social research takes place within the context of a demand for fast-paced delivery of work and slow government procurement processes. The social science team has numerous routes to commissioning including call-off contracts with vetted contractors to deliver research and analysis quickly without sacrificing quality. The team's relationship with FSA's procurement team is seen as productive.

The team keeps up to date with innovative research methodologies from academic and commercial research communities. Members of the team attend a wide range of seminars and training courses, arrange seminars and workshops, and discuss new and upcoming research methods with contractors. The team also has well developed relationships with a broad range of analysts inside and outside government. Several team members have had research experience outside of the civil service, which brings additional skills and expertise.

To improve the commissioning and procurement process the team has developed a process map which is said to have delivered better operations. FSA's Areas of Research Interest (ARI) steering groups also help the social science team link with project technical leads and policy colleagues.

What do FSA social researchers think they do less well in terms of commissioning?

Notwithstanding many positive and productive relationships, working with policy colleagues and other commissioners of research can present challenges. Policy colleagues are said to not always understand the skills and roles of the social science team. Consequently, they do not always approach the team in a timely manner so that precise objectives and questions can be agreed. This is more difficult when the team needs to engage with many different stakeholders who have opposing demands. Policy colleagues may not always fully recognise how long it takes to procure, deliver and quality assure research of high quality.

Managing Research

The team manages the fine details and logistics of social research and works with policy colleagues and contractors to ensure that research is delivered on time, on budget and avoids mission drift.

What do FSA social researchers think they do well in terms of managing social research?

The team thinks it is good at establishing how research is going to be used and adapting the research specification and procurement accordingly. If the research is for communications purposes the breadth and depth will usually differ from when it is being used to shape and evaluate policy.

Good day-to-day management of research requires keeping contracts on track, developing good relationships with contractors, and collaborating with a range of stakeholders. This might require frank feedback to contractors such as saying: "we were expecting this to be a bit more thorough" or "we need more detail from you about x". This is another thing that the team believes it does well, as was verified by some stakeholders (see Chapter 1).

The broad range of stakeholders with which the team engages includes not only policy makers across government and contractors but also academics, food suppliers, consumers, third sector organisations and local authorities across England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Every stakeholder requires careful management and collaborative relationships. Managing this range of stakeholders is something the social science team believes it does well.

Quality control of research outputs is another task about which the team is positive. This requires reviewing and critically appraising research outputs, editing them, identifying policy implications and signing them off only when they reach an acceptable standard of quality.

What do social researchers think they could improve on in terms of managing research?

The overwhelming response to this question from the group interviews was "time". A slower pace of planning, commissioning and delivering research would allow the team to understand policy issues in greater detail, design the appropriate research, and deliver higher quality research throughout. If the team is approached earlier then it will be in a better position to respond effectively.

There was clear recognition, however, that this is seldom possible when undertaking research in and for government. Working to tight timelines and (sometimes) ill-defined questions comes with the territory. A reconsideration of the system for procuring research to support policy making seems timely and appropriate. Previous calls to match policy needs and analytical provision (e.g. Campbell, et al, 2007:33) do not seem to have been heeded.

There is also a recognition that the pressure of time also requires good research “housekeeping”. The team has recently completed a revision of its systems for saving and storing project documents in an organised and shared way. It is anticipated that this will enhance the service that the social science team provides.

Research dissemination and impact is something else that the team would like to improve upon. The social science team has a very good record of publishing its research outputs, but impact can only be partially assessed by how often its outputs are read, referred to and used for decision making. Impact also requires monitoring and evaluating the uptake of the FSA social research team’s outputs and identifying their effects on dietary and hygiene-promoting behaviour. This, however, would add even further demands on time and resources.

GSR Code for People

The group interviews also explored the professional standards required by the GSR Code for People (GSR 2018).

Performing with integrity

This professional standard includes making “the best use of resources and giving appropriate methodological and impartial evidence-based advice, challenging where appropriate”

There were different understandings within the team about the meaning and implications of “making the best use of resources”. For some members it suggests “delegating to my team without losing control of quality”, “performing my role with efficiency” and “not being under-utilised and not doing too much”. For others it means not undertaking research in areas where there is already an established body of evidence. This includes using the library of publications and ‘back office’ materials that the team has established, as well as its own institutional memory. Others highlighted that “we publish everything, we have a good record, so we can easily find our published work”.

There was universal agreement that “giving appropriate methodological and impartial evidence-based advice [and] challenging where appropriate” was central to what the team does routinely, and in accordance with the GSR’s Ethical Assurance for Social and Behavioural Research in Government (GSR, 2021).

Outward Facing

This professional standard includes establishing “effective links with the external research community, collaborating with policy delivery colleagues and with other analytical professions within and across Departments”.

Evidence of the team’s achievements against this standard include its active participation in Government networks such as the cross-Government Evaluation Group, as well as external organisations such as the Social Research Association (SRA) and the Market Research Society (MRS). The team has good relationships with analysts in other government departments, such as the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), which was reciprocally valued by colleagues at DEFRA.

Attendance at seminars and conferences in the UK and abroad, and having good links with non-Government organisations concerned with food quality and food insecurity such as the Food Foundation, were also mentioned as evidence of being outward facing. So too was membership of the International Social Science Liaison Group (ISSLG) which brings the team into regular contact with FSA-equivalent organisations in the United States, New Zealand, Canada and Australia, plus the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA).

The Advisory Committee on Social Science (ACSS) was also mentioned as a source of expert knowledge and advice. The ACSS “provides expert strategic advice to the FSA on its use of the social sciences, including new and emerging methods, processes and systems to interrogate data, to deliver the FSA’s objectives” (ACSS, 2022).

Appropriately skilled and continuously developed

This professional standard includes being recruited and promoted in line with GSR recruitment protocol and committed to continuous professional development in line with the CPD requirements.

The recruitment policy of FSA social research aligns with the GSR Recruitment Guidance (GSR, 2010). Analysts who meet the standards required can apply to be ‘badged’ as GSR members. FSA social research encourages badging, and most members are badged, or are in the process of becoming badged, including based on their experience in external research agencies.

The GSR Recruitment Protocol (GSR, 2023) outlines the qualifications required and other eligibility criteria for joining the Government Social Research service. This includes an ‘experience route’ that accepts applications from people with an undergraduate and postgraduate degree in any subject and at least four years’ social research practice experience. The latter can include experience working in a research agency, market research agency or specialised research team.

There was agreement amongst the social science team that recruiting people from outside the civil service brings a wealth of experience and different perspectives to the work of the group. Working with people from other professions, such as communications, was also seen as beneficial.

Committed to CPD

GSR researchers must complete at least 100 hours of CPD per year, including on-the-job learning, though there is some flexibility across grades.

Course participation in CPD is sometimes restricted by procurement rules, such as that if Civil Service Learning (CSL) offers a course that looks similar to one provided by another organisation then FSA researchers must take the CSL course. Sometimes, the CSL provision is at a lower level of technical standard than that desired by FSA social researchers.

Researchers can attend non-civil service courses or training, but they must first obtain quotes from three other providers. Where there are not three other providers the time taken to establish this might result in the civil service course being full. This can be frustrating for social researchers.

The social science team suggested, however, that the FSA is very supportive of staff undertaking professional development and training, possibly more so than other Government Departments, albeit within FSA’s HR rules and requirements.

Summary

The group interview with the social science team revealed a self-assured and confident group which is proud of how it works and what it achieves. It sees itself as strong in terms of both commissioning and managing social research, despite the challenges of the timelines involved in their work, and the need to establish focused and answerable questions with policy colleagues.

The team was most eloquent when considering the 'outward facing' dimension of the GSR Code for People. It was able to provide a wide range of examples of how it has effective links with the external research community and other analytical professions within Government, and of positive collaborations with policy and delivery colleagues notwithstanding timeliness issues. The team was also confident about its quality assurance procedures.

Improving the dissemination of research findings and establishing their impact is an area that social researchers thought could be improved if sufficient time were available.