Guide to commissioning or carrying out research

Version information

Version number	Comment	Date
1	Initial version	September 2017
2	Reviewed and updated	November 2022
3	Reviewed and updated following Contract Management training to become an internal guide rather than an external policy	April 2025

Guide to commissioning or carrying out research

The role of research evidence in our work

Evidence based decision making is growing increasingly important – there has been a shift towards evidence based (or informed) policy since the early 2000s, following the emergence of evidence-based medicine during the 1980s. Our strategic plan 2023-26 says "The Scottish Land Commission is here to provide leadership and fresh thinking, underpinned by sound research, analysis and advice."

Research is an important source of evidence used by the Commission, but we also make decisions and provide advice and guidance based on our assessment of case work and experience. Research has a particular niche within the mix of evidence as rigorous scientific scrutiny and transparency provide research findings with credibility and comparability, which tend to mean research evidence is accorded a greater weight among decision-makers and practitioners.

At the Commission, research is a core organisational activity that contributes to the development of policy recommendations, advice, and guidance.

Aim

Our aim in research is to provide a sound evidence base from which to support advice to inform policy, as well as advice to landowners, managers, advisors, and communities to support the practical implementation of Scotland's Land Rights and Responsibilities.

Research Quality

Research quality is a broad concept that does not depend solely to the skills of the researcher or the methods they employ. While the application of sound research principles is necessary to ensure a high-quality output, it is not sufficient. To be considered high quality, research must also contribute in some way to important organisational objectives or wider societal outcomes. It must be useful.

This is consistent with the themes underpinning the Research Excellence Framework (REF), the official system for assessing research quality in UK higher education institutions. The REF assesses research quality using three main dimensions: outputs, impact and environment. Under the REF outputs are assessed in terms of "rigour, reach and significance". Impact is defined as the effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment, or quality of life.

These broad criteria provide a helpful framework for guiding our own approach to research quality. In order to apply this approach it is necessary to consider quality at every stage of the research process – from identifying the initial requirement through to disseminating the final results.

The Scottish Land Commission is committed to undertaking and commissioning high quality research and recognises the need for a holistic approach to quality control. To achieve this, we have adopted a project management approach to research quality

assurance, which involves the systematic application of good project management throughout the lifetime of every research project. This is underpinned by a Project Initiation Document, which must be completed by the relevant project manager when initiating any new project.

The remainder of this document outlines the key stages in the approach.

Research Need

The starting point for any high-quality piece of research must be a clear understanding of why it is needed and what it is expected to achieve. Specifying clear objectives and articulating how the research is expected to contribute to the Land Commission's strategic priorities is therefore an essential first step.

When commissioning or undertaking research we should always seek to build on the existing body of knowledge and avoid unnecessary duplication. After identifying a gap in our knowledge the next step should always be to investigate whether similar research has previously been undertaken by others or is currently underway. Identifying relevant stakeholders and engaging them in the process at an early stage and reviewing what has already been written on a topic are therefore important priorities before commencing or commissioning new research.

Approach

Once the need for research is confirmed the next step should be to assess whether we have the expertise and capacity to deliver the project in-house. The SLC Research Strategy includes a table with pros/cons of each approach and when to use them.

Regardless of whether research is commissioned or undertaken internally all projects should be underpinned by a completed Project Initiation Document. For externally commissioned projects this document should be used to provide the core components of the Statement of Requirements issued to prospective contractors.

The Project Initiation Document is a key document that will guide the delivery of each project. It should clearly articulate the aims and objectives of the research and specify the required outputs and timescales, thereby providing a framework for resolving any potential difficulties that may arise during the course of the project.

Commissioning research

Externally commissioned projects will usually[1] be procured competitively following Scottish Government procurement guidance, using Public Contracts Scotland. A template Statement of Requirements document should be filled out using information from the Project Initiation Document.

Tenders will always be evaluated on the basis of cost and quality with quality criteria weighted significantly higher than cost (e.g. 70%/30%). Typically, we would expect the quality criteria to cover contractors understanding of the requirement; proposed

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[1] On occasion low value contracts may be let through non-competitive action where there is clear business case for doing so.

methodology & approach; the skills and previous experience of the proposed project team; and the contractor's approach to project management. Each of these elements will be individually weighted and assessed based on the information provided in the tender document.

Procuring quality research will always rely to some extent on individual judgement but to help mitigate the risks of this we intend to adopt a collaborative approach throughout the life cycle of each project. Tenders should always be evaluated by more than one staff member, using the [Tender Evaluation Scores template spreadsheet](). The Commission can ask for a presentation on Teams as an additional evaluation method in the final stages of a decision being made.

Contract Management

When managing a contract for a piece of commissioned work, we should ensure we are having regular project management meetings with the research team. These should cover the timeline, opportunities for SLC input, and semi-regular check-ins to ensure the research aims are being met.

Commissioned research should include an interim findings presentation in advance of an initial draft output, to give SLC staff a chance to input. This should be followed by a draft output, with sufficient time for SLC staff to review and provide feedback before a final output is delivered. Where appropriate we will also seek input from individuals with specialised expertise to help verify the quality of research outputs and provide formal or informal peer review as required. The delivery of a final report should be viewed as the end of a project, after which SLC should avoid requesting any further changes. Any further comments after a project end should be given within five working days of receipt of a final report, and if significant changes are implied may require additional resource. A key measure of success – and therefore quality – of any project is whether the expected outputs are delivered on-time and within budget. Before starting a project it is therefore important to have a delivery plan in place setting out key milestones and deadlines so that regular checks can be made to monitor progress throughout the project. To be effective this must plan for the allocation of staff and financial resources at appropriate stages of the project and be reflected in internal resource planning processes.

Dissemination

Research that sits on a shelf and has no influence on policy or practice has failed to achieve its primary purpose and therefore cannot be considered high quality. A central focus for all research projects must therefore be on how the outputs will be disseminated and used.

This will involve identifying what the intended impacts are and therefore who the key audiences for any piece of work are, as well as considering how we might best communicate the results with them. Part of this is also about thinking through how we intend to make use the research outputs and what linkages there might be with other

areas of the Programme of Work. Dissemination plans should be outlined at the outset of a project in the Project Initiation Document.

Monitoring and evaluation

We should be monitoring impact at a project level. This means setting out intended impacts at the Project Initiation Document stage and returning to these over the course of the project and at the end of the project. To achieve this project managers should take some time at the end of each project to reflect on the lessons learned and what they might do differently next time using the Lessons Learned template. It is advisable to have a 'lessons learned' meeting with a contractor after the conclusion of a project to ask for and give feedback from/to the research team as well. This should usually happen after any outputs are published, to make sure you are capturing the dissemination and impact of a project as well as the research process itself. Lessons learned should then be shared with the whole SLC team, as well as any resulting changes to our policies or practices.

Ethics

Research undertaken or commissioned by the Scottish Land Commission should follow the highest practical ethical standards. In order to achieve this all staff and contractors involved in delivering research involving people will be expected to adhere to the following six key ethical principles as outlined in the Commission's Research Ethics Policy:

- **Principle 1:** Research should have a clear user need and public benefit
- **Principle 2**: Research should be based on sound research methods and protect against bias in the interpretation of findings.
- **Principle 3:** Research should adhere to data protection regulations and the secure handling of personal data
- **Principle 4:** Participation in research should be based on specific and informed consent.
- **Principle 5:** Research should enable participation of the groups it seeks to represent
- **Principle 6:** Research should be conducted in a manner that minimises personal and social harm

Project managers should consider the potential ethical issues associated any new research at the outset of the project using the Research Ethics Checklist found within the Research Ethics Policy.

Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI)

Artificial intelligence (AI) is developing at a rapid pace and can be found throughout society in a growing range of everyday applications and decision-making. Although there is no current legislation on the use of AI, the Scottish Government is proactively fostering its development and ethical use to enhance public services and stimulate economic growth. In March 2021, SG published their AI Strategy titled "Artificial intelligence strategy: trustworthy, ethical and inclusive," aiming to position themselves

as a leader in ethical AI development. However, AI presents both risks and benefits. There are implications for security, privacy, transparency, liability, labour rights, intellectual property and disinformation.

SLC is currently developing its approach to the use of AI and this section will need to be updated in due course. However, in the interim, we should be having conversations with any external contractors to understand what their organisational policies around the use of AI are. If they plan to use it in work carried out for the Commission, we need to know how, and make sure we are working together to ameliorate any risks, particularly around data protection, ethics and bias.

Capacity building

The Land Commission is committed to supporting the development of land related research capacity within and outwith the Commission. To this end we will proactively pursue opportunities to build links with relevant partners and support the development of relevant expertise.

Date for next review: February 2027