

GSR professional standards series



Publishing research and analysis in government

GSR Publication Protocol



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Foreword

As Civil Servants it is vital that we are able to provide accurate, timely and impartial advice to Ministers, drawing on credible analysis and evidence to facilitate well-informed decisions about policies, programmes and project delivery.

Our work draws on evidence from a number of sources, but where this is produced by and on behalf of government, analysis needs to be exceptionally robust and of consistently high standard. As in all scientific disciplines, results should be open to scrutiny and challenge. As well as driving up standards, publishing the evidence on which policies are based delivers greater transparency, enabling the public to hold politicians and public bodies to account.

Carrying out high quality analysis inevitably uses public funds. By being open and transparent about the outcomes of this research, the impact of government research can be increased, thereby delivering greater value for money.

This protocol builds on and supersedes the GSR Publication Guidance published in 2010 and presents revised principles for the publication of all government social research that is not defined as official or national statistics, where procedures for publication are regulated by the independent UK Statistics Authority. The protocol applies to government departments and devolved administrations covering England, Wales and the UK, when conducting or commissioning social research.^{1,2}

The protocol details the five principles that should be adhered to in the publication and release of all government social research products. It clearly sets out how social research conducted by or for government should be released; who should be responsible for the release; the timing of the release and the independence of the research. The principles within this protocol are aligned with the responsibilities of public servants as specified in Freedom of Information (Fol) legislation.

One major improvement since 2010 is that analysts are now likely to be working in mixed-profession teams to produce evidence for government and this is reflected in this new protocol.

Robust evidence collection is the bedrock on which we can build an exceptional, modern and efficient Civil Service. We hope that the protocol will support analysts and policy makers across the Civil Service to deliver advice on which Ministers, and the public, can rely.

Sir Nick Macpherson
Chair of the Heads of Analysis group (HoA)

Jenny Dibden
Head of Government Social Research (GSR)



May 2015

¹ The Scottish Government procedures for publishing social research are compliant with this protocol

² See section 'Scope of the protocol' for further details of what is in and out of scope of this protocol

1 Introduction

It is essential that research and analysis conducted by and for government is of the highest possible standards to ensure that the government of the day can make well-informed decisions, leading to better outcomes for society. Analysts across government demonstrate their commitment to providing high quality research through adherence to professional codes of practice. This GSR publication protocol complements these. Members of all analytical professions are expected to adhere this protocol when collaborating on the production of social research, as they do to the principles under their professional codes.

Compliance with this protocol will help ensure that evidence produced by government is released into the public domain in a manner that promotes public confidence and scientific rigour. The protocol applies to government departments and devolved administrations covering England, Wales and the UK that conduct or commission social research.³ Non-departmental public bodies and agencies are not obliged to follow the protocol⁴, although as it is a statement of good practice for the publication of social research and analysis, compliance is encouraged.

Since the previous GSR publication guidance was released in 2010, the Digital by Default Service Standard has been developed. This includes new standards for data and document formats, to improve accessibility and open up the potential for others to analyse and re-use the results of studies. Where this service standard is applicable⁵ and publications include data tables, these should now be published in reusable formats, accessible to the widest range of audiences, including those with disabilities.

Improving accessibility also means there is a greater emphasis on the importance of making information clear to all users, not just expert users. Further guidance on the accessibility, usability and design of digital publications is available in the Government Service Design Manual.⁶

Analysts publishing policy-related evidence should include a factual statement of policy context, to help users understand the context of the research. Commentary should exclude statements that could be interpreted as political comment though. If in doubt, the appropriate analytical head of profession should be consulted.

As with other sections of the civil service, analysts from across the professions have fostered a culture of continuous improvement, to help drive more effective and responsive working practices. With this in mind, this protocol will be reviewed regularly to ensure it remains relevant and useful.

³ The Scottish Government procedures for publishing social research are compliant with this protocol

⁴ Some non-departmental public bodies / agencies are members of GSR in their own right; these bodies are expected to comply with the protocol in full.

⁵ Researchers in devolved administrations should check if there are other standards that apply

⁶ For more information see: <https://www.gov.uk/service-manual/digital-by-default>

Scope of the protocol

In scope

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

This will include, but is not restricted to:

1. Research and analysis of quantitative data for the express purpose of answering a specific policy question (e.g. strategy development, policy development, policy delivery). This will include the analysis and interpretation of administrative data, analysis of specifically designed ad-hoc surveys, omnibus surveys and secondary analysis of continuous surveys and censuses.
2. Secondary quantitative data analysis involving the interpretation of data following the statistical release of the main findings.
3. Outputs from the analysis of qualitative data. These are data generated by any recognised qualitative method to generate robust data on the population(s) under study.
4. Outputs from the evaluation of policy/delivery initiatives/pilots and trials.
5. Outputs from literature reviews, rapid evidence assessments and systematic reviews.

Out of scope

This protocol does not cover research or analysis that falls under the definition of official or national statistics, nor will it cover informal evidence gathering exercises which are not designed to generate robust data and reports based on analysis.

To help all those in the analytical professions determine – in a robust and consistent way – which outputs should be treated as statistics, social research or other, the heads of the analytical professions (which includes the National Statistician), in collaboration with the Chair of the Heads of Analysis group and Heads of Profession for social research (including those in devolved administrations) assisted in the development of this protocol. Advice should be sought from the relevant heads of the analytical professions in cases of uncertainty.

Specifically, outside the scope of this publication protocol are:

1. Official and national statistics.
2. Management information.

3. Briefing for Ministers that draws on research and analysis but addresses a specific information requirement.
4. Briefing for policy/delivery colleagues that draws on research and analysis but addresses a specific information requirement.
5. Analysis investigating the potential effects of different policy options.
6. Dipstick/informal information gathering. Ad-hoc and informal evidence gathering which does not constitute a robust picture.
7. Informal stakeholder consultation. Consulting or discussing policy ideas or issues with stakeholders, for example trade unions, employer's groups, or pressure or interest groups whose views may contribute to a policy decision.
8. Formal consultations of the general public.
9. Analysis of unpublished/confidential papers and documents.
10. Communications research (this is covered by a separate protocol).
11. User research, where the output is iterative and so not appropriate for publication.

Summary of the five principles

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

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

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

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

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

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

Principle 4. Clear communication plans should be developed for all social research and analysis produced by government

Departments and devolved administrations should publicly announce what research projects have been commissioned and publish high-level information regarding those projects. Analysts should be clear with Ministers about the intention to publish in-house analytical outputs as early as possible. Communication plans should be drawn up for all research and analysis produced by government, as part of project management principles.

Principle 5. Responsibility for the release of social research and analysis produced by government must be clear.

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

Applying the principles in practice

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

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

2 The five principles in detail

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

The primary purpose of research commissioned and conducted by government is to inform decisions about policy and delivery, but it also plays a role in wider policy debate. The presumption is that products from government social research and analysis will be made publicly available. In the interests of transparency, Ministers need to be kept informed of the intention to publish (see also Principle 4).

- The primary purpose of research commissioned and conducted by government is to inform decisions about policy and delivery, but it also plays a role in wider policy debate and the wider generation of knowledge. Research will be made publicly available in accordance with the government's commitment to openness, as underpinned by Freedom of Information (FoI) legislation.
- FoI legislation gives a general right of access to information held by public authorities. In support of the principles of FoI and the commitment for openness and transparency in government, departments and devolved administrations should publish the results of research and analysis in a timely manner.
- The format and content of the published research output remains at the discretion of the commissioning department/devolved administration and release may be paper or IT-based or both. Publication can be by the department/devolved administration that commissioned or conducted the work.
- Departments/devolved administrations are not expected to publish research on those rare occasions when publication would threaten national security, destabilise the economy, or would otherwise not be in the public interest. For more information, see the FoI guidance on exemptions.⁷
- Poor quality products can also be omitted from publication. However, such data remains publicly accessible through FoI requests. If released under FoI, a covering note detailing the potential limitations of the data being released is advisable.
- Even without a FoI request, it is good practice to indicate why decisions not to publish have been taken as part of the communication arrangements set out under Principle 4.

⁷ For further information see: <http://www.justice.gov.uk/information-access-rights/foi-guidance-for-practitioners/exemptions-guidance/>

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

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

- Government research products should be released promptly, with the normal maximum being 12 weeks from agreeing a quality assured final output. This leaves flexibility on the timing of publication, while ensuring the data are published and released into the public domain within an acceptable timeframe. Publishing more promptly, where possible, is to be encouraged and government analysts should share learning about how this is achieved.
- Publication should be in accordance with Principle 3 (releasing outputs in a way that promotes public trust), and can be:
 - as soon as is practicable once the output is judged to be of acceptable quality
 - timed to coincide with a policy statement on the same/a related subject
 - as part of a 'bundle' of research findings, for example at a specific time each month.
- For research where the department/devolved administration has vested the intellectual property right in the external contractor, the contractor should be encouraged to publish promptly and agree internally how to adhere to the principle of prompt release.⁸
- Where publication is not within 12 weeks, the relevant analytical Head of Profession should be notified and the reason for delay recorded. Reason for delay could be practical or legal, for example during an election period or prior to the budget announcement. The extent to which departments/devolved administrations publish within 12 weeks will be monitored by the Departmental Directors of Analysis (DDAN) group. Where systematic issues are identified, these will be escalated to the Heads of Analysis (HoA) group for further scrutiny.
- Research that is due to be published can, if it is considered reasonable and in the public interest, be exempt from release under FoI until the planned publication date, provided that there is evidence of an intention to publish. The exemption can apply even if the publication date has not been set. The FoI (Scotland) Act and the UK FoI Act differ slightly on this point (in Scotland publication must be within 12 weeks of the request) and so local advice should be taken on this exemption.

⁸ An exception is where it is planned that research will be published in academic journals (for example, by academic contractors). In these cases, timing will be dependent on the journal.

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

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

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

Principle 4: Clear communication arrangements will be developed for all social research and analysis produced by government

To demonstrate commitment to transparency and to encourage public trust in the research and analysis produced by and for government, departments/devolved administrations should publicly announce what research has been commissioned and publish high-level information regarding these projects. Researchers must be clear with Ministers about any intention to publish outputs, prior to commencing work.

- Ministers should be informed of all externally commissioned research/analysis and any internal research/analysis where there is an intention to publish
- Departments/devolved administrations should make high level information publically available on all research and analysis commissioned externally, and internal research where there is an intention to publish. Announcements should be made as early as is practicable, for example by publishing details of contracts awarded for externally commissioned work, or once an internal project has been cleared to commence. Exemptions as specified under Principle 1 apply here.
- Communication and dissemination plans need to be designed to facilitate access to information. Discussions with, stakeholders, contractors, policy/delivery colleagues, and departmental/devolved administration press office and communication staff can help develop the plans.
- More detailed dissemination plans should include preliminary proposals for all forms of communication such as reports, conferences, press launches and should ensure that research is released in formats and at times of the day which are convenient to the widest range of users to facilitate widespread access and informed debate.
- Publication dates should be preannounced where possible. If this is not feasible, the department/devolved administration need alternative approaches to promote public trust in the transparency and objectivity of release arrangements.
- Once findings are published, information on department/devolved administration websites should reflect this, clearly signposting where research findings can be found. The information published on websites should be drawn up in consultation with key stakeholders in the project who have the authority to ensure it is adhered to.

Principle 5: Responsibility for the release of social research and analysis produced by government must be clear

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

- There should be accountability for the publication/release of government social research products. Each department/devolved administration should identify a named individual who has responsibility for this. They must have the authority and expertise to be able to make sound judgements on release. The named individual must also ensure that clear processes are in place for implementing the publication protocol together with means of ensuring the protocol is followed.
- The named person will normally be the Head of Profession for social research, who may seek advice from the Director of Analysis or the Chief Scientific Advisor in cases of uncertainty. They may also need to seek advice from the Head of Profession for Statistics, and the National Statistician may also be consulted where there is uncertainty about whether the publication protocol applies.
- It is essential that departmental/devolved administration press office and communication staff are consulted on the release of research and analysis produced by government as early as possible.

Early release to reviewers

- Peer review is an important means of quality assuring government research and analysis. If peer review is to be used, this should be built into the timing for the work, with the date of the agreed final output including time required for peer review and revisions on the basis of this review. This will mean that the 12-week publication window should commence from the end of the peer review process.
- Where external peer review is used, early access to unreleased outputs must be given to the reviewer.
- Where peer review is used, the team producing the research should keep an accurate audit trail of distribution, including what is sent, to whom, when and where. Those receiving unreleased material will be obliged to guarantee the confidentiality of that material until it is formally released.

Translation

- Some research outputs are published in two or more languages. If translations are required, they should be built into the timing for the work. The final draft is not agreed

until the translated version is finalised. It is good practice to give an indication at the beginning of the project of how long translation will take.

Embargoes

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

Accidental and wrongful release

- Accidental or wrongful release is defined as release to any party not involved in the research commissioning process, data collection and analysis or the production of the final output (e.g. quality assurance or peer review).
- Any accidental or wrongful release of research information must be reported to the departmental/devolved administration Head of Profession for social research (or nominee) and the Press Office immediately it is discovered, so that appropriate action to limit loss of confidence can be quickly taken.
- Accidental or wrongful release includes providing any indication of the content of the release, including suggestions as to whether the research findings are 'favourable' or 'unfavourable' with regard to a particular government policy.
- Where there is clear proof of wrongful or accidental early release of a research product, the departmental/devolved administration Head of Profession (or nominee), in consultation with the Press Office, may judge it necessary to arrange for its release at the earliest possible time.

Research support to Press Office

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

Annex A: Glossary

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

Government social research products

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

In-house

Research conducted by in-house analysts (or a synthesis of this) that has been agreed with policy colleagues and/or Ministers.

Launch

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

Agreed final draft

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

Publication

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

Annex B: Sources

Freedom of Information Act

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

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

The Code of Practice for Official Statistics

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

Election Guidance

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