



Conducting attitudinal research toolkit

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Introduction

Findings from research into attitudes and awareness of vaccination/ immunisation amongst parents and health professionals are extremely useful. From experience, we know that they can inform policy and help health professionals/providers gain a better understanding of what is required by way of provision of information for the public. It also enables them to gain better insight into the acceptability of vaccination provision and to understand the public's experience of accessing vaccination services provided in a specific country or region. Where information programmes are available to support the national immunisation programme, research can ensure that provision of such information matches the target population's needs. Well-executed research has the potential to make an important contribution to the success of immunisation programmes.

Of particular interest to partner countries working together on this project are the variations and similarities of research findings in this area. How applicable are findings, from the UK, for example, to those from another partner country? For example, do research findings on parental attitudes to MMR in UK have relevance to researchers in say, Poland? In this example, it may be supposed that there will be differences, when considering contextual variations and influence of the media. When comparing research findings, differences in the delivery method of the national immunisation programme across Europe cannot be ignored. For example, location and accessibility of services, whether they are situated in a primary or secondary care setting, payment/cost issues, acceptance of doctor-led or nurse-led provision, appointing systems and re-call arrangements, and any associations with other rights (school entry/financial benefits etc). However, lessons learned may be generalisable and it is important to consider from the outset, the value of comparison and sharing of experiences.

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VACSATC has produced this toolkit, the main purpose of which is to briefly describe the social research approaches that may be used in this kind of work. In addition, it outlines some of the approaches taken by partner countries as part of work package 5 of the VACSATC project. These are offered as examples of ‘what worked’ in situations where only a limited (or not so limited) amount of this kind of work had previously taken place.

This toolkit is not, however, intended to be a guide on how to carry out social research. A well crafted piece of research that can provide useful inputs to practitioners would normally require extensive training in the relevant research techniques, including the use of statistics for summarising and exploring patterns in the research data. Nevertheless, useful work may be undertaken by individuals and groups who are not experts in research design and these guidelines are intended to indicate some of the important considerations that need to be taken into account in designing and commissioning research.

This paper outlines:

- Some general issues that should be considered before social research is undertaken
- Resources and information on the commissioning of research
- The necessity of assessing existing research on the topic
- Sampling, recruitment and obtaining consent from research participants
- Research methodologies that might be employed to understand attitudes, with some discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of each of the main methodologies

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General issues: Best practice and adequate practice

'Best practice' in carrying out research is highly desirable although it is extremely difficult to define precisely what 'best practice' means. For the purposes of this document it can mean research that would be considered to be well designed and executed by competent researchers. It follows that the best research is normally carried out by highly experienced and specialist practitioners who are adequately funded to carry out their task. Non-experts can more reasonably aim for minimum adequate standards of design and execution. Academic institutions and others organisations may provide appropriate short courses and training on basic research methods. They will also provide suggested reading for those wishing to extend their knowledge and experience in this area. The UK Cabinet Office has produced a brief glossary of research terminology.¹

¹ UK Cabinet Office's "Think research" Glossary can be found at:

www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/~media/assets/www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/social_exclusion_task_force/think_research/1_glossary%20pdf.ashx **(TO BE RECHECKED)**

The following is a non-exhaustive list of standards against which research outputs are likely to be judged:

1. ***The research objectives are clear and well-defined.*** The researcher has identified what needs to be discovered and can communicate it clearly to others. The primary scientific question should be clearly stated.
2. ***The location of the study.*** The researchers will want to consider carefully the location of the research. It a country-wide perspective sought?
3. ***The planned research is related to other work in the topic area.*** It is not uncommon for time and effort to be wasted in discovering things that are already known. If original research is to be carried out, it should ideally draw upon previous work and be able to make a contribution to other research on the topic.
4. ***The research is relevant to the needs of the stakeholders.*** ‘Pure’ research is addressed mainly or exclusively to the needs of the research community itself, but much applied research has to be useful to a wider community of stakeholders, some of whom will have paid for the research to be carried out and will be expecting useful information for purposes of their own.
5. ***An appropriate research strategy has been selected.*** The field of social research is a large one and there are numerous models of research design. Knowing which of the many options available is likely to yield the best results is key to successful research planning.
6. ***Key variables are clearly identified.*** Good research will ensure that most or all descriptive and explanatory variables are identified at the outset.

7. ***Key variables are measured using appropriate levels of measurement.*** The researcher needs to identify how the variables that constitute the data of the research are to be measured – i.e. by nominal, ordinal, or interval measures. What is considered an ‘appropriate’ level of measurement will depend in part upon the research strategy adopted: A qualitative type of design is likely to use nominal measurement, while a quantitative design will tend to use interval measures, but either general approach may include a variety of levels of measurement depending on the nature of the research variables chosen by the researcher. In addition, the measures should be valid (they measure what they purport to measure) and reliable (they are replicable in further studies).
8. ***Data collection is adequate to the research problem.*** This simple statement covers a very wide range of problems that arise in generating data that are appropriate to the central questions of the research, including question design, skill in interviewing respondents, recording information properly, managing and training research workers and many other considerations. Attention should be paid to describing the nature of the data, its reliability, the sources from which it is collected etc.
9. ***Data analysis is appropriate and systematic.*** The proper ‘interrogation’ of data is a large element of a successful research programme. Some of the considerations that apply in this area are:
 - Being aware of possible inadequacies in the data and deciding how these may be compensated for and reported. These may range from lower than intended response rates in sample surveys through interviewer biases and flawed questions.
 - Avoiding over-interpretation (reporting conjectures as ‘findings’).
 - Avoiding under-interpretation (not extracting significant patterns from the data when they’re present).

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- Clearly outlining the main findings, which would include the use of appropriate statistical summary measures.
- Reporting findings (ideally) in such a way that the evidence may be cross-checked by the target audience.
- In the case of explanatory research that aims to discuss causal relationships in the data, carrying out hypothesis testing using appropriate methods.

10. ***The research report is an accurate and clear presentation of the process of the research and its findings.*** All research has a target audience, often more than one. Reporting findings adequately in ways that are appropriate to the diverse needs of these audiences is not a simple matter.

Much social research is nowadays undertaken by teams of people rather than individuals, so ensuring that research meets minimum adequate standards or possibly aspires to 'best practice' is entrusted to a variety of specialists, each of whom is equipped to ensure that the research programme matches up to the relevant standards. To make a comparison with medicine, heart surgery may be carried out by a highly skilled surgeon, but the surgeon's performance depends upon the support of a large team of personnel without whom his or her skills would be unable to achieve the highest standards of professional practice. The same is true for social research.

Beginning the research: Stakeholders, budgets and the commissioning process

What it is that research is trying to either explain, or better understand, can sometimes be hard to define, especially in the area of attitudinal research. The formation of a working party or steering committee to bring together policy makers, health care professionals, researchers and possibly consumer or lay representation may help to narrow down the research goals and generate a clearly defined set of research questions. This may then help inform the most appropriate research methodology and sampling frame to be employed.

From the outset, clarity about what resources are needed to undertake the research should be sought. Identification of the human resources, financial and administrative support that will be required to meet the research objectives should be clearly articulated. Ideally written commitment from senior staff should be requested stating clearly that the necessary resources will be provided to ensure the research can be completed to the necessary standards and in the required timeframe.

All research, no matter how basic the research problem, has to take into account the needs of stakeholders and plan an appropriate budget. As stakeholders often provide the funds to carry out the research, both issues usually need to be worked on simultaneously. Stakeholders (other than the researchers themselves) will often need to be involved in setting out the main parameters of the research and they will need to be kept informed of its progress. If they are furnishing the budget they will take a view on appropriate costs and levels of funding. The output of the research, and its implications for practice, will need to be communicated in a way that is satisfactory for all parties.

Researchers need to be sensitive to the possibility that new stakeholders may emerge as the research progresses. For example, the needs of the research subjects (respondents) may have implications for the publication of the findings.

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Stakeholders will often include an organisation or organisations who commission the research. The commissioning of research is itself a complex process, often requiring considerable negotiation between the researcher and the commissioning body.

A useful guide is: www.the-sra.org.uk/documents/pdfs/commissioning.pdf (the Social Research Association's Commissioning Social Research 2nd edition revised November 2002)²

This report points out that that the commissioning organisation may not be well acquainted with the complexity of social research:

“Social research projects vary widely, but buying such research is usually fundamentally different from buying materials, physical products or more cut-and-dried services. Research involving human populations is intrinsically difficult:

- *people are highly complex, and language is imprecise*
- *human beliefs, values, attitudes and motivations are hard to pin down*
- *memory is fallible, and research respondents are not always able or willing to report their feelings or behaviour accurately or honestly*
- *there are considerable statistical problems in drawing valid inferences about large and shifting human populations.*

² See also “Newcomers’ Guide to Market and Social Research” by the Market Research Society www.mrs.org.uk/mrindustry/downloads/newcomers.pdf (accessed 24th August 2009)

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Researchers have to grapple with these problems in every fresh project. Research therefore cannot normally be reduced to a mechanical formula – good research needs craft skills, intelligent creativity in the way they are applied and ability to understand the way people think, feel and behave”.

The budget needs to be adequate to the research programme, and quite often the latter will need to be trimmed to accommodate the provisions of the former. For larger research programmes, considerable expertise is required in the area of budget-setting. The budget will need to have a cash-flow plan, so that funds are available at appropriate times for elements of the research programme. Discipline must be exercised to ensure that funds are not exhausted in the early stages of the research.

If financial resources are scarce the researcher(s) may need to consider further options, including additional funding applications, collaborating with university academic departments, using PhD students and other post graduate students with an interest in the research topic. In addition, professional practitioners may be used to carry out some or all of the data collection depending on other demands upon their time

This process of extending the research budget by drawing in other parties will tend to enlarge the pool of stakeholders and add complexity to the management of the research programme.

Last, but not least, complying with standards of ‘best’ practice has budgetary implications, for example through requirements for adequate sample sizes or hiring the expertise necessary to devise an appropriate sampling frame.

Inevitably there will be trade offs in relation to time, resources, skills and expertise.

Check list/questions

- Have all relevant stakeholders been involved in putting together the research proposal?
- Have budgetary considerations been taken into account when deciding upon the scope of the research to be undertaken?
- Have appropriate collaborations and partnerships been explored? (i.e. academic departments/other researchers/partner organisations etc.)
- Are the research objectives clearly defined?
- If the research is to be commissioned, are there robust arrangements to ensure that the tender is awarded appropriately?
- Has adequate time been allowed to seek ethical approval to conduct the research?

Reviewing existing research

A considerable amount of work should be undertaken before the research begins in order to establish its relevance to existing work in the field. This is often referred to as a literature review and can be a lengthy process especially if the research has more than one objective. Carrying out a literature review is not only important for ensuring that other work in the area is taken into account in formulating the research. It may also serve as the basis of the research itself – see below for discussion of secondary analysis.

For further discussion of the reviewing process, see:

http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/~media/assets/www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/social_exclusion_task_force/think_research/3_appraising_research_evidence%20pdf.ashx

Check list/questions

- Were the objectives of the literature review defined?
- Was the search strategy to be employed clearly stated?
- Were the results analysed and summarised and made available to of stakeholders?
- Were limitations and gaps in the existing literature identified and described?
- Were the findings used to inform proposed or future research?

Research methodologies

There are a large number of research methodologies that may be deployed. The process of choosing an appropriate mix of methods is what is meant by 'research strategy'. Much thought should be given to this before any research is undertaken. It is important that choice of research methodology can be explained and justified, with robust arguments why one method was chosen over another, and any possible "trade-offs" that were considered. An example of this might be reducing sample size BUT increasing the number and depth of questions.

A common classification of research methodologies is the division between 'qualitative' and 'quantitative' methods, the latter depending on a large measure of statistical input both in designing variables and in analysing the resulting data.

However, this paper adopts a more elaborate classification provided by Catherine Hakim in her book on research strategy (Hakim, 1987³). Hakim points out that choosing a strategy inevitably involves considerations of time and money. The choice of an appropriate strategy is seldom solely determined by 'pure' research considerations.

³ Hakim, C Research Design: Strategies and Choices in the Design of Social Research, Allen and Unwin 1987

Therefore the following list of strategies can be thought of as a continuum of increasing cost and complexity.

- 1) Research reviews, meta-analysis and secondary analysis
- 2) Qualitative research
- 3) Ad hoc sample surveys
- 4) Case studies
- 5) Regular surveys/tracking surveys
- 6) Longitudinal studies
- 7) Experimental social research

Within each of the above very broad categories there are numerous design choices to be made. For example, survey designs will have to decide whether to conduct interviews face-to-face, by post or email, or by telephone assisted by information technology.

The overall strategy chosen by the researcher or research team will reflect (a) the purpose of the research and (b) time, staff and cost factors.

For research in which the focus is primarily attitudinal, the most likely choice is the ad hoc survey, though often it would be better to consider research reviews and meta-analysis as the first choice given the possibility that surveys will already have been undertaken.

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To monitor and better understand changes in attitude over time, or changes following changes in policy, delivery or increase in health promotion for example, “tracking” or regular surveys will be useful. A key component of successful surveys is the expertise and time taken in the careful design of the questions used to elicit responses that best answer the research questions set. A recommended reference on this subject is a book by Foddy⁴.

Case study approaches are also often overlooked even though they can provide better insights into the ways in which attitudes are influenced by the social context.

This paper focuses on attitudinal research and does not cover in detail the link between attitudes held and subsequent immunisation behaviours/decision making. Icek Ajzen has written extensively on the relationship between attitudes and behaviour and useful publications can be viewed at: <http://people.umass.edu/aizen/publications.html>

It is important that local and national guidance on the requirement to obtain ethical approval prior to the undertaking of research is followed. Process and procedures will vary in different countries, as will the standards surrounding the documentation required to demonstrate that research participants are fully informed and have freely consented to take part.

The table in [Annex 1](#) is designed to provide an overview and highlight some of the strengths and weaknesses of possible research strategies.

⁴ Foddy W [Constructing questions for interviews and questionnaires: theory and practice in social research](#), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2003

Check list/questions

- Is the chosen research methodology appropriate to the research question/s posed?
- Has consideration been given to sample size, recruitment of research subjects, sample make up e.g. gender, social class, age, ethnicity, rural/urban dwellers, level of education etc and how information about these variables will be captured?
- Will the identified budget be adequate to carry research project and are there contingency funds to allow for unforeseen additional costs?
- Does the project plan give a realistic timeframe in which the various stages of the research will be carried out?
- Has ethical approval been granted to undertake the research?

Sampling, recruitment and consent

Once the research question/s and methodology to be employed have been identified, it is important to consider the “sample” that is required in order to meet the research aims. The “Think Research” glossary¹ provides some useful definitions.

A non-exhaustive list of considerations is as follows:

1. Size of research sample i.e. how many research participants are required?
2. Age range and how is the age of participants going to be recorded/coded?
3. Gender – is an equal group of women and men required?
4. Parents only?
5. Minority ethnic groups?
6. Recently arrived communities, including refugee and asylum seekers
7. Harder to reach communities/groups?
8. Other carers of children?
9. Health professionals?
10. Location – rural/urban/mixture?
11. Existing users of immunisation services?
12. Those who do not currently take up immunisation services?
13. Employment status/level of education reached?

Recruitment of the necessary number and range of participants may be challenging and certain approaches will undoubtedly bring about bias in your sample. Some researchers consider that recruitment will be aided through the provision of incentives or even payment. It can be argued that it is appropriate to acknowledge time given to participating in research. Care is needed to not introduce further bias through the provision of “rewards” to those taking part.

Any participants in research must give their consent freely to take part in any study. Research governance arrangements will vary from country to country but researchers should be familiar with local and national guidelines. The provision of “Ethical approval” to carry out research, will undoubtedly only be granted if a satisfactory description of arrangements for the recruitment, and safeguarding of research participants has been provided. This would include documentation of consent procedures, data collection and storage arrangements. Any research proposal should detail confidentiality of research subjects, the procedures for obtaining consent, retention of such information, data storage and security as well as information about who has access to the data etc.

Requirements would normally include:

- Details of the recruitment strategy to be employed
- Examples of the provision of both written and verbal information for potential research participants about what taking part in the research study will involve
- The full and available contact details of the research team for any further questions that might arise from research participants
- Assurances of confidentiality and anonymity of research participants including the safe storage of any data generated e.g tape recording, interview transcripts etc
- Clear information about the rights of participants to change their mind and withdraw from the research at any time

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- Information about the intended destination and purpose of the research findings

Consent by potential research participants must be always given freely and without coercion of any kind. There are usually specific and separately detailed arrangements when carrying out research with children or young people as well as adults who are not thought able to consent fully for themselves.

Most academic institutions will have clear policies and guidance to regulate research taking place from within their organisation and these will provide a useful source of information for novice researchers.

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[Annex 1](#) marks some of the methodologies with an *. Specific recruitment and data collection for these types of studies may be undertaken using various approaches with associated advantages and disadvantages, but these are not discussed in detail within this paper.

Examples include:

- face to face (door knocking, going to a specific location where your target population may attend or be present e.g clinic, surgery, school etc)
- CATI (computer assisted telephone interviewing) or CAPI (computer assisted personal interviewing)
- mail or email

Check list/questions

- Is there a clear description of how recruitment of research participants is to be undertaken?
- Will participant details be recorded in a systematic way?
- Has written information for participants been prepared?
- Are there systems in place to document and record consent processes?
- Will data generated be stored securely?
- Will the confidentiality and anonymity of participants be protected at all times?

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Reporting of research findings

Research findings should be reported clearly with attention to clear description of the research question, the chosen methodology and data analysis. It is important to include the statistical basis of the chosen sample size as well as comment on why statistical calculations were not included or possible, for example. Difficulties encountered and recommendations for further research are valid findings, and should be included. A dissemination plan should be developed to ensure findings are shared as appropriate, articles submitted to relevant journals and presentations made at suitable meetings.

Annex 1 Summary of research methodologies

Strategy	Main idea	Considerations
<p>Research reviews, meta-analysis and secondary analysis</p> <p><i>Example: <u>Fifteen Thousand Hours</u> by Michael Rutter used studies of school pupils to demonstrate that schools can make a difference to pupil achievements</i></p>	<p>Use existing research to provide a knowledge base of findings from which to draw useful conclusions</p> <p>OR</p> <p>Using findings from previous research combine studies to establish new findings</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☺ May be the cheapest strategy as no new data has to be collected. ☺ May identify more information/existing research about the topic area than was previously thought to be available. ☺ A thorough literature review may allow for a significant number of research studies to be combined to provide new and relevant findings ☹ Previous research findings may be too general or not relevant to the context. ☹ Identified research studies may not be considered of high enough quality or robust enough for inclusion

Strategy	Main idea	Considerations
<p>Qualitative research*</p> <p><i>Examples: focus groups, in depth interviewing</i></p>	<p>Attitudes or other issues are uncovered by focusing on particular individuals or situations.</p> <p>There may be little or no attempt to generalise to other settings, though often it is assumed that the findings are of general relevance</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☺ Relatively low cost strategy ☺ Good for getting at ‘hidden’ aspects of and insights into social behaviour and allows for discussion on more sensitive topics ☺ Helpful in conjunction with other work for adding richness to understandings ☺ Possible to select different groups/populations as part of the sampling frame ☺ Quota/sample can be monitored during research process to ensure sufficient sub-group numbers ☹ Hard to give generalised findings ☹ For findings to be convincing to stakeholders, it may be necessary to carry out a large number of interviews/focus groups ☹ This has potential to increase financial burden due to higher time

Strategy	Main idea	Considerations
		and interviewer team costs ☹ Risk of interviewer bias but can be controlled for by thorough training and use of appropriately experienced interviewers
<p><i>Ad hoc sample surveys*</i></p> <p><i>Example: Local questionnaire survey of attitudes to immunisation</i></p>	<p>Select set of individuals or groups for general snap-shot of social attitudes and behaviours.</p> <p>Sample design allows the survey to be representative of the population and ensures that its results can be generalised.</p>	😊 Useful for establishing general patterns 😊 May be carried out at regular intervals to monitor changes over time and link with other influences/factors ☹ May be costly and complex to administer ☹ The data collection tool may take time to develop and require piloting and refining.
<p><i>Case studies</i></p>	<p>Focus on a particular unit of analysis (e.g. families, communities) for in-depth study, often of social</p>	😊 Capable of throwing light on social processes (hard to achieve in a survey) and useful for isolation of key causal factors ☹ Requires multi-faceted research teams that may be difficult to

Strategy	Main idea	Considerations
	<p>processes.</p> <p>Besides serving as a tool of description, they may be used as an alternative to the controlled experiment in causal analysis.</p>	<p>recruit and manage</p>
<p>Regular/tracking surveys*</p> <p><i>Example: General Household Survey, Census</i></p>	<p>Repeated surveys of groups or populations.</p> <p>Often combined with the ad hoc survey</p>	<p>😊 Allows for the exploration and tracking of changes in over time of in a population.</p> <p>😞 Costly, require long-term funding, administratively difficult</p>
<p>Longitudinal studies*</p> <p><i>Example: National Child</i></p>	<p>Repeated surveys of the same individuals or units</p>	<p>😊 Allow exploration of gross changes in a population.</p> <p>😞 Costly and administratively difficult, may suffer from sample</p>

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Strategy	Main idea	Considerations
<i>Development Survey</i>		attenuation
<i>Experimental designs</i> <i>i.e. RCT (random controlled trial)</i>	Aim at establishing causal relationships through artificial manipulation of experimental subjects or (in most social research) using natural experiments or policy interventions to test hypotheses	<p>😊 The best means of isolating causal factors</p> <p>😞 Manipulation of individuals or groups is difficult in social experiments</p>

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Annex 2 Checklists

Beginning the research

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Sampling, recruitment and consent

- Is there a clear description of how recruitment of research participants is to be undertaken?
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- Will data generated be stored securely?
- Will the confidentiality and anonymity of participants be protected at all times?