Research programme guidance notes

Designing and managing research

3sf

BIG LOTTERY FUND

Contents

Preface

This document forms part of the guidance for organisations that want to apply for a Big Lottery Fund (BIG) Research programme grant. The notes and links have been assembled by Michael Nugent and Julia Spragg. Third Sector First is providing the UK-wide advice and support service for the Research programme.

There are two types of advice available for the Research programme:

- For information on how to make a grant application – such as eligibility, completing the application form, the assessment process and application timetable - go to www.bigresearchprogramme.org.uk or ring the programme helpline on 0845 071 1068 (Textphone: 18001 0845 071 1068).
- For advice and support in putting together a research proposal potential applicants can use this guidance. It has been written for people who may be new to research, and who would welcome some help with the conception and design of research proposals and with the identification of research partners in universities and the wider research community.

Throughout this document we use the term voluntary and community sector organisation (abbreviated to VCS), to signify eligible organisations, including social enterprises.

If you want further explanation, specific advice and practical help after reading these pages, you can contact Third Sector First by telephone, email, correspondence or through a workshop. **But you must first register for the programme and be able to quote your registration number. To register for the programme go to:** www.bigresearchprogramme.org.uk

Scope of this Guidance

We have tried to keep this guidance brief but informative. We hope there is enough here to cover most general enquiries. However, bear in mind that these pages are designed to support VCS organisations that may not be very experienced in the research world, but want to lead a research project application to the Big Lottery Fund Research programme. This limits the information provided here, but there are many more specialist resources for advice on conducting different types of research, some of which are identified by links contained in the text.

There are plenty of people who have worked on devising and disseminating information about research, so there is a lot out there. The Internet in particular is a rich and wonderful source of information. But having access to the world's information can very soon lead to overload. This guidance provides basic information, together with suggestions and a selection of sources for obtaining more, or more specific, details about different features of research.

If you have any suggestions for improving the accessibility of this document then we would be grateful to hear from you, as we would if you notice errors or broken hyperlinks. Please email support@3sf.co.uk

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FAQs about the advice and support service

Before you read any further it might be helpful to consider some of these questions and answers:

- Can we use this advice and support service?
- Who, in our organisation, should contact the service?
- Do we need advice and support?
- Are we more likely to get a grant if we use the support and advice service?
- Is other help available for applicants?
- Will you help us write our application?
- Will you know enough about our research interests to be able to advise us?
- Will you tell us if you doubt we will be successful?
- Does it matter who is going to do the research?

Q. Can we use this advice and support service?

A. You must be registered with the Research programme to use the service. You should first check the eligibility rules for the programme, by contacting the main enquiries line (0845 071 1068; textphone 18001 0845 071 1068). There is a set of general programme questions and answers on the BIG website: www.bigresearchprogramme.org.uk
Once you have a registration number you can use the advice and support service.

Q. Who, in our organisation, should contact the service?

A. When you register for the programme you will be asked for contact details, including the name of the main contact. This will generally be the person within the organisation with overall responsibility or authority for making an application. We would expect the initial approach to be from the main contact, although they may want to suggest other contacts, for example their research manager, if they have one. We are happy to give advice to eligible, registered applicants and to talk with their research partners, as long as this is with the knowledge and agreement of the main contact. We cannot deal with enquiries from ineligible organisations, unregistered organisations, individual callers, or researchers who are not working with eligible applicants.

Q. Do we need advice and support?

A. There is no expectation that applicants to the Research programme should use the advice and support service. Many potential applicants will be experienced and knowledgeable in research design and management; there may be little, if anything, we could tell them that they do not know already. But some VCS organisations may never have undertaken research or commissioned it; they might appreciate the opportunity to discuss their ideas before deciding whether, or how, to proceed with an application.

Q. Are we more likely to get a grant if we use the advice and support service?

A. There is no guarantee that using the support and advice service will ensure success. The hope is that, as a result of using the service, more applicants will submit proposals that have been well thought out, well planned and involve suitable methods. But the Research programme is likely to be competitive, so good ideas, however ingeniously described, will still be in competition with other good ideas.

Q. Is other help available for applicants?

A. Potential applicants might want to start with this written guidance. There may be sufficient information here, or via the links, for you to find whatever you need to know. But if you have a specific question or questions you can send an email or call us or write using the contact details on the final page of this document. You can also attend one of our workshops.

Q. Will you help us write our application?

A. Our aim is to steer you in the direction of the resources, ideas and expertise that might help you put together a complete and competitive research proposal. We can certainly discuss the feasibility of your research idea and the methods that might be most suitable, but we cannot help you write your application, nor can we proofread your application or any supporting documentation.

Q. Will you know enough about our research interests to be able to advise us?

A. The Research programme will attract interest from a very wide range of organisations, with ideas for clinical research, laboratory studies, social surveys and detailed qualitative studies with small numbers of participants; the list is almost endless.

We do not claim in-depth expertise in every subject area, but we do have considerable experience in what successful research applications should look like – such as a clearly expressed research question, a suitable methodology, a realistic timeframe for planning and completion, regard for the involvement of research subjects and beneficiaries, sound ethics, appropriate costs and suitable ideas for dissemination. We can help applicants think through each of these features and direct them to other resources or potential research partners, when they need more detailed advice in a particular subject.

Q. Will you tell us if you doubt we will be successful?

A. We are not involved in assessment, so the strength of applications relative to one another is not something we can comment on. The decision to submit an application is entirely yours, but we will tell you if, in our judgement, what you are proposing to do is unlikely to be successful. This is likely to hinge on feasibility - if it seems improbable that your research could be done in the way you describe, we will tell you so.

Q. Does it matter who is going to do the research?

A. No, in that VCS organisations applying to the Research programme can undertake the research themselves, or identify a research partner to undertake the research. But this service is intended to benefit VCS organisations, to help them make the most of this funding opportunity. It is not a service for researchers who are hoping to identify an organisation that might apply for funding on their behalf.

However you want to use the service, whether by making a phone call or sending us an email enquiry, the following pages, sections and links aim to provide general guidance for putting together applications with strong, well-managed, research proposals.

How to do research and how to manage research: introduction

Supporting, funding and conducting good research are among the most important contributions that VCS organisations make for the public good. Many VCS organisations are the national, and even international, driving force behind outstanding research and important discoveries, and also important is that some - often small - organisations have researched and provided unique insights into entirely local issues. The point we want to get across at the outset is that good research is entirely 'do-able' for VCS organisations, but it is not that easy.

BIG and its predecessor organisations have funded a wide range of medical and social research projects. The range has been so wide that it is rather difficult to isolate any common features of excellence that are always associated with projects likely to get funding.

On the other hand, experience suggests that many unsuccessful applications have features in common. Avoiding obvious deficiencies is a good start when planning your project.

Common weaknesses in research proposals

Weaknesses in applications to BIG's previous Research Grants programme, which closed to applications in 2006, have commonly been in either:

- The research itself, for example in methods, costs or timescales

or

- The management of the research, for example in the arrangements for leadership, user and beneficiary involvement, financial controls and other issues of accountability, sometimes raising doubts about ownership of the research.

Among the factors that have led to applications being unsuccessful are:

- Proposals setting out a course of enquiry that has already been taken and found to be unsuitable or inconclusive
- Proposals that are overambitious and which make claims about potential impact out of all proportion to the scale and duration of the research
- Proposals that are unsuitably modest in cost or, on the other hand, which contain unjustified and excessive costs
- Not enough attention being given to engaging with the intended beneficiaries of research
- Little attention to the ethical complexities of research involving people
- Proposals featuring the VCS organisation in a client or subordinate role to professional researchers or research institutions.

You have an idea for research…

Applications need to show how your organisation is 'in charge' and actively involved. Evidence of involvement can take a variety of forms and it is probably easier to summarise what BIG hopes to deter by emphasising the central and leading role of the voluntary and community sector.

BIG is unlikely to support proposals from largely passive applicant organisations, those that are likely to just hand on the grant to a research institution for them to get on with it.

Nor is BIG likely to support a proposal where the applicant organisation is little more than a vehicle for making an application in the interests of an individual or institution that is otherwise ineligible.

We will assume that you are reading these pages because you want to explore, understand or discover something that is relevant to what your organisation does or exists for.

But what is research?
To be considered as 'research' your project has to have some essential qualities and purpose. We think that potential applicants ought to think about how their ideas would fit this definition of research, as it is broadly understood in UK universities:

'original investigation undertaken in order to gain knowledge and understanding'.

Research Assessment Exercise (2005) Guidance on submissions REA 03/2005: Annex B.
www.rae.ac.uk/pubs/2005/03/rae0305.doc
[Accessed 12 February 2007]

Before you go any further you need to be absolutely certain that what you are proposing is research: this is not a programme for developing services, for constructing buildings or for promoting the non-research projects and approaches that feature in the Big Lottery Fund's other grants programmes.

Nor will this programme fund the evaluation of existing services or the simultaneous development of a service with an evaluation component. In highlighting evaluation we are referring to the application of research for a particular end, generally to provide information on the impact, usefulness or acceptability of something. Further information about the type of research the Research programme will fund can be found at
www.bigresearchprogramme.org.uk

Medical, social and sociomedical research

You will have to indicate on the application form whether you want to undertake medical research, social research or sociomedical research. 'Medical' and 'social' are very wide categories, and under either heading one might find an extraordinary variety of subjects and approaches for examining them.

Medical research is directed towards improvements in human health and might draw on the techniques and traditions of all the medical sciences, and involve studies at a molecular or cellular level to whole populations. VCS organisations have a long and impressive history of funding and conducting medical research; indeed in some subject or disease areas the effort to find improvements in treatments and effect cures has been led by medical research charities. You can find out more about medical research by visiting these websites, among others:

- Medical Research Council, (http://www.mrc.ac.uk/index.htm) which publishes guidelines on many aspects of conducting medical research
- RD Direct, (http://www.rddirect.org.uk/) supported by the NHS, which is a national advice service for researchers
- Wellcome Trust (http://www.wellcome.ac.uk/)
- Cancer Research UK (http://www.cruk.org.uk/)
- British Heart Foundation (http://www.bhf.org.uk) and
- Association of Medical Research Charities, (http://www.amrc.org.uk/) which represents more than 100 such charities.

Social research is the process of inquiry in human society and would likely include studies in the fields of sociology, social policy, human geography, education, politics, and possibly in economics, ethics and psychology among others. You can find out more about the range, complexity and purpose of social research by visiting:

- the intute (http://www.intute.ac.uk/socialsciences/support)website (and by downloading the subject booklet, Social research http://www.intute.ac.uk/supportdocs/social_research2.pdf)
- the Economic and Social Research Council (http://www.esrc.ac.uk)
- the Social Research Association (http://www.the-sra.org.uk/index.htm)
- the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (http://www.jrf.org.uk) and
- the Academy of Learned Societies for the Social Sciences (http://www.acss.org.uk).

Sociomedical research is the category in this Research programme for projects which include aspects of both medical and social research. This is likely to be because the projects include methods that are typically used by both medical and social researchers and the projects are likely to concern health, where social and medical research approaches and interests can often overlap.

What is a research question?

A suitable research question is one that has two essential qualities: it is constrained in its scope and focus and there will be, somewhere, data available that are relevant to it. 'What on earth are we going to do about climate change?' is a question, but not a research question, and neither is 'How can we reduce the risk of young people becoming socially excluded?'

It can be quite a lengthy process refining a topic or general question or concern into something researchable. If we take the example of young people and social exclusion, to get closer to a research question we would need to consider, among other things, what do we mean by 'risk' and how would this be measured? If we do not already have a reliable definition and measure of 'risk', how will we know if it has been reduced? And which 'young people' and what do we mean by 'young'? Under sixteen, or maybe under eighteen? And what are the characteristics of 'social exclusion'; are they constant, observable and measurable?

Bryman (2004) lists six considerations in formulating research questions. They should be:

- Clear and understandable
- Researchable, in the sense that you can conceive a suitable design and gather relevant information
- Connected with established theory and research, in that you should be able to demonstrate that you can build on what is already known about a subject
- Linked to one another, where – as in much social research they do – studies are designed to answer more than one question
- Have the potential for making a contribution to knowledge, and
- Neither too broad nor too narrow.

Bryman, A. (2004) Social Research Methods Second Edition. Oxford: OUP

Formulating a research question – an example

Your organisation will have an area of interest – for example ovarian cancer or bullying – and if you are considering applying to this programme you will know the sorts of topics that you might want to investigate. A spirit of enquiry and questioning is an important foundation for research, but general questions will need to be refined and focused, to formulate what is called a research question, for research to be able to produce an answer for you.

If this is a new area of investigation for your organisation, you might need to do some preliminary thinking, investigating and consulting, to turn your general question into a research question.

Here is an example to illustrate this and to explain some of things you may need to find out before you can turn a general question about an issue into a research question that you can try to answer.

Why are so many people affected by Alzheimer's disease these days?

Step 1: Unpacking your question

This general question has many aspects to it and challenging your own questions might help you (1) clarify what it is you are really interested in researching, (2) question some assumptions that you may be making and (3) suggest some areas where you might need to gather more information to support your case for doing the research. For example:

- How many people are affected by Alzheimer's disease?
- Is this 'so many' compared to other forms of dementia or other age-related health problems?
- Are people's lives unduly affected when they get Alzheimer's disease?

You may find answers to these and similar questions by examining statistics and other information gathered by the NHS and other government departments. There are national statistics (http://www.statistics.gov.uk) about many aspects of life in the UK, from health and welfare to crime and justice, and many other sources of information may be available on specific topics.

If you find that this sort of information is not available for your issue, its absence may suggest some research questions in need of answers.

Step 2: What is the current state of knowledge?

It is rare these days to find a research subject that other researchers have never investigated. So part of formulating a research question is finding out what is already known. An essential feature of research is that it is novel, so if others have already investigated and published research on the question you have in mind, it is important to be aware of it. You may decide that you do not need to do the research after all or you may decide that you have a novel idea or approach to a problem, or that the world has changed since the other research was done and there is now something new to be discovered. For example, you may need to know more about:

- what causes Alzheimer’s disease
- whether there is an effective treatment available for it
- how well people with Alzheimer’s disease access the NHS services they need
- how much support from social services is available for people with Alzheimer’s disease and for their carers.

Step 3: Focusing your research question

An ideal research question should produce a crystal clear answer at the end of a project. Some research questions may have yes or no answers, while others may produce numbers (quantitative research) or descriptions of people’s attitudes or experiences (qualitative research). For example:

- Nobody has yet identified one accepted cause for Alzheimer’s disease. But if someone suggests that Alzheimer’s disease is caused by a virus, the general question ‘What causes this disease?’ becomes the research question ‘Does this virus cause this disease?’ If appropriate and well-designed experiments are then carried out, you should be able to end up with a clear answer – yes, it does, or no, it does not.
- If you are concerned that the drugs available for treating Alzheimer’s disease are inadequate, you could ask the research question, ‘How many patients prescribed drug X find their symptoms are improved?’ A well designed study should produce a quantitative measure of improvement.
- If you are concerned about NHS provision for patients with Alzheimer’s disease, you could ask the question ‘How long does it take for someone to get a diagnosis for Alzheimer’s disease, after first going to see their GP?’ A well designed study should produce a quantitative answer to this question, but may also produce qualitative data suggesting factors that can influence diagnosis.
- If you are concerned about social support for people affected by Alzheimer’s disease, or about support for their carers, you could ask ‘What sorts of services are available and who provides them? A well designed study might produce a description of the services available, detail the variations in style, cost and availability, and might describe the ways in which different services are accessed, valued and accepted.

By following similar steps to these you are likely to create a research project that is ‘SMART’, SMART being an acronym for specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-bound.

Finding a research partner – or not

Formulating a research question might be the point at which, unless you have already considered it, you might want to involve someone or some institution with relevant experience.

Whether you have got a research question or you want help in formulating one, there are a few things worth considering in identifying the person or people who can help you construct a full and detailed research proposal.

There are many voluntary organisations that have a formidable reputation for conducting high quality research, so there is nothing in principle to prevent applicants keeping their project entirely 'in house'.

However, if your organisation has never conducted or funded research before, forming a partnership with researchers might have two separate but equally beneficial consequences: it could help you create a full and competitive proposal and it might build capacity within your organisation.

Among VCS organisations that fund, commission or undertake research one can often identify the following characteristics:

- they frequently employ trained research specialists
- they often draw on the support and authority of expert advisory groups of service users, beneficiaries and academics
- they frequently subject their research ideas to independent peer review
- they have strong links with researchers active in their subject area
- they have an interest in disseminating widely the results of their research.

Many organisations have taken years to get to the point where they are proficient in doing their own research. You might decide, given the duration of this grants programme, that you would rather work with people who already know about research methods, and who have a track record relevant to what you want to study. This will be one of the most important decisions that you make in relation to a Research programme grant application.

Research is a complicated business, or at least it should be if it is to take account of all the determinants of success. Involving people trained in research methods, whether as advisers, partners or contracted providers could make a great difference.

The majority of research grants made by BIG (and made previously by the National Lottery Charities Board and the Community Fund) have involved researchers and research institutions working in partnership with the VCS organisations that made the applications. It is a common arrangement that is acknowledged in the application materials, and it has generally worked very well.

First is the issue of whose application this is. BIG wants to support research that matches the interests and priorities of the UK voluntary and community sector organisations, where those priorities correspond with BIG's UK and country priorities. Depending on where you are based (i.e. in England, Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland), consider what you are proposing to do in the light of these priorities. Can you reconcile your priorities with those of BIG?

Involving professional researchers will not alter where responsibility for the application rests or, if a grant is awarded, responsibility for compliance with BIG's terms and conditions of grant. On the other hand, and particularly for small or relatively unstructured applicant organisations, or those with limited experience of funding or doing research, applicants might be concerned that specialists – especially ones from large and famous institutions – might 'take over', even if unintentionally.

Researchers will have as much interest in doing good work as will applicants, but part of the initial approach and discussion should involve both sides being clear about the reason for and ultimate purpose of the proposed research. In the past there have been cases of researchers losing sight of whose research they are working on, and of grant holders losing track of the work that is being done on their behalf.

If your organisation is approached by researchers, with a request or suggestion that it might make an application to the Research programme, consider the following points.

- If your organisation is little more than a vehicle for somebody else's research ambitions, this is likely to become evident during assessment; it will not matter how technically brilliant the research is, the proposal will get marked down.
- If you want to take up an offer of collaboration by all means do so, but think carefully about the sort of relationship you want with the researchers and about the benefits that would accrue from the research.
- And consider whether the research that is being suggested corresponds with your interests and priorities; you might indeed want to make a research application, but not the one being proposed.

The second issue is finding the ideal research partner. Assuming that you are entirely clear and confident about engaging with professional researchers and managing the application process, how would you actually go about finding the most appropriate partner?

Well, as we have suggested above, they might have already found you. Your organisation may already have a strong and productive relationship with a researcher or research institution. But where you know relatively little about the research community, what sorts of factors might influence your search and your choices?

It has been quite common for Research programme applicants to form partnerships with local research institutions or individual researchers. There can be many benefits resulting from proximity:

- The applicants and the researchers might be able to keep in close and frequent contact
- Both organisations might have a shared interest and commitment to a particular place or area, if where they are both based is also the location for the research
- The relationship might endure beyond the life of the research, and make it possible for wider and equally productive partnerships to be formed in future.

Another consideration is reputation. Research output is one measure of individual researchers and university research institutions. For university-based researchers the accumulation of publications contributes to the ranking (www.rae.ac.uk) of their departments and research centres in the periodic Research Assessment Exercises (RAE). The RAE Quality Ranking given to an institution or a department will give you an idea of their relative standing.

RAE rankings are informed by a variety of factors, including research income and the number of research students, but research publications are especially important. You need to consider whether a potential research partner has a track record of completing research and publishing the results.

Expertise will contribute to reputation and be reflected in the breadth or authority of published outputs. But consider what sort of expertise is potentially most relevant to the subject you are interested in and the research question you want to develop. If you want to explore and voice the experiences of a small number of people affected by a particularly rare condition, qualitative research may be most appropriate, in which case an expert statistician might not be the most suitable partner.

Good researchers are likely to be busy. You might know of someone who has an international reputation for research in your area of interest, but a whole variety of factors might prevent them becoming involved. But the research community is generally extremely generous with its advice, so you should find that even the most eminent figures could give you clues or suggestions about who might best help you realise your research ambitions.

The cost of doing good research is frequently underestimated. The methods employed will have a bearing on the budget, but as a general rule the principal cost element will be for the staff involved.

The following factors could have some bearing on your planning:

- Universities are increasingly expected to apply the principles of full economic costing to externally funded research activity, but
- Charitable funders of research in universities have generally resisted this principle and have provided the resources only for the direct costs of the research. You need to be clear about the basis on which any university (or other organisation) would cost their involvement.
- University-based researchers are usually employed on nationally comparable and incremental salary scales. For many voluntary and community organisations, particularly small ones, the salaries may be higher than the organisation pays its own staff. But attracting the most suitable research staff will mean paying the going rate.
- Bear in mind that whenever you submit your application it could be at least a year before the work starts, allowing for assessment, agreement of the grant terms and conditions and so on. Over this period the salary element in your proposal could have been eroded by inflation and wage agreements, so be prepared at the outset to discuss with your partner how you will manage variations in cost over the anticipated life of the project. Do not start with a potential deficit – it will only increase over time.

If you could not get on with each other it would not matter how brilliant or eminent your research partner was. You need to be confident that whoever you work with shares your values and will respect your role and responsibilities as the applicant.

A research partner should be able to help you judge the originality and relevance of your ideas. Among the benefits of involving a research partner might be information they can provide about things you did not know about. Your idea could be interesting and your research question might be highly precise; the subject in question might fit very well with BIG’s policies for this programme, but somebody might already have done what you are proposing.

There may be good reasons for replicating previous research, but some other things to consider and discuss with a partner are:

- Is the research original and likely to add to our stock of knowledge about a medical condition, social circumstances or other relevant issue?
- Do you know enough about the field to be confident in your proposition, or does someone need to review the literature?
- If you think a literature review is desirable, is this going to be done beforehand to strengthen the grant application, or is it going to be a stage in the research for which you want funding? Maybe you will consider applying for a development grant.
- Is the proposed research in a subject and policy area that clearly fits the objectives of the Research programme?

Peer review

This is a review process that is used throughout the research community. “Peer” in this context means other researchers or experts in the same field, who are asked to judge the importance and value of submitted work.

Peers – or other researchers – are asked to make judgments about the quality and relevance of two main types of submission:

- Grant applications, to help decide which applications should receive funding and so which research projects actually happen,

and

- Research papers submitted to academic journals, to decide which manuscripts should be published.

Your research application is likely to be peer reviewed in the course of assessment and, if you are successful in gaining a grant, the process might be repeated when your project is completed and you or your research partners write up your results. Before deciding whether to disseminate your findings to other members of the research community, serious research journals will peer review your results.

‘Peer review can be said to have existed ever since people began to identify and communicate what they thought was new knowledge… because peer review is an essential and integral part of consensus building and is inherent and necessary to the growth of scientific knowledge.’

Kronick, D.A. (1990). ‘Peer Review in 19th century scientific publication’. Journal of the American Medical Association, 263, pp 1321-1322

Research methods

There are many different approaches to carrying out research, depending on the nature of the question being asked and the resources available to the researcher. We are not trying here to provide you with a detailed introduction to all the different types of research methods in use and we cannot turn you into an expert in qualitative methods, molecular biology or statistics in a few pages. But we can introduce you to some of the main types of research and some of the terminology involved.

Your organisation will be leading this research. Although you may not be equipped or inclined to suggest what sort of approach, research design or particular method or methods will be most appropriate to provide the sort of answers you want, it is worth knowing something about the main types of medical and social research.

Types of medical research

Preclinical research is generally carried out in laboratories. It is often referred to as 'basic', 'pure' or 'blue skies' research. The general subject area may be a scientific subject such as biochemistry, cell biology, genetics, or physiology. To carry out experiments the researchers may use cells or tissues grown in the lab (tissue culture), derived from humans or other animals. Other organisms such as bacteria, yeast or fruit flies (Drosophila) may also be used in laboratories to test out ideas relevant to human disease. In certain highly restricted circumstances, and under licence, researchers may also use vertebrates – most commonly mice and rats – for some experiments.

Population studies (or epidemiology) collect information about how common different diseases are in large populations (for example, infectious diseases affecting public health) or about risk factors and life-style factors that influence health (for example, the effect of smoking on rates of cancer and heart disease). These studies may involve large surveys, or the collection of large numbers of samples (e.g. blood or saliva) for laboratory tests, or the accumulation of records of patients with a particular disease (known as registries).

Clinical research is carried out in hospitals or in primary care (general practice) and involves patients (users of healthcare services), their medical records and healthcare staff. The research may involve describing the course of a disease, or how a particular therapy or medicine works, or how well a particular way of diagnosing a problem works. When these studies describe what happens in a small number of people they are called 'case studies'. Experiments testing out the effects of a new drug or a particular therapy are known as clinical trials. The exact methods used in a clinical trial can vary, but a Randomised Controlled Trial (or RCT) is regarded as the gold-standard methodology for a clinical trial. The essential features of this type of clinical trial are:

- In addition to the group of people receiving a novel therapy, there is also a control group, receiving either no treatment or the current, usual treatment, to which the experimental therapy is compared.

- Patients in the trial are randomly assigned to a treatment or control group without the healthcare professional or the patient knowing which group they are assigned to (known as ‘blinding’ or ‘masking’).

Since 2004, the conduct of many clinical trials has been controlled by legislation (Medicines for Human Use (Clinical Trials) Act 2004). Research carried out within the NHS is subject to the guidelines laid down in the Research Governance Framework for the NHS and Social Care in England (http://www.dh.gov.uk/PublicationsAndStatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidanceArticle/fs/en?CONTENT_ID=4108962&chk=Wde1Tv). Similar guidelines exist in Wales, (http://wales.gov.uk/consultations/closedconsultations/healthsocialcare/governance/?lang=en), Scotland (http://www.sehd.scot.nhs.uk/cso/Publications/ResGov/Framework/RGFEdTwo.pdf)and Northern Ireland (http://www.centralservicesagency.n-i.nhs.uk/files/rdo_whats_new/file/RGF_061106.pdf) .

Health Services research investigates organisational and financial aspects of how healthcare services are delivered. It examines how people get access to health care, how much it costs, and what the outcomes are for patients. It aims to identify the most effective ways to organise, manage, finance, and deliver high quality care, reduce medical errors and improve patient safety. If carried out within the NHS this type of research will also be subject to the guidelines mentioned in the last but one paragraph.

Relatively common in medical research is the re-examination and analysis of information gathered in previous studies, a practice sometimes described as **secondary research**. This kind of research may involve pooling results from a number of separate studies, to work out whether there is a consensus or more strongly evidenced view about a subject. Among the variations in secondary research are those studies referred to as systematic reviews or meta-analyses, the purpose of which is often to provide a clear evidence base for treatments. Information about the conduct of systematic reviews can be found in the publications and on the website of the Centre for Reviews and Dissemination (http://www.york.ac.uk/inst/crd/) at the University of York, and through the resources of the Cochrane Collaboration (http://www.cochrane.org/)

Types of social research

Whereas the term 'medical research' applies to studies concerning human health, social research is frequently conducted on matters relating to human health and other social issues as well. Saying 'We are doing social research', without any qualification, conveys a lot less than saying 'We are doing medical research', although even that is not much of a clue about what is being investigated. Social research can be bewildering in the variety of philosophies, purposes, approaches, techniques and subject matter to which the term can be applied.

Given the diversity found within human beings and human society it is hardly surprising that the study of both has followed so many courses. The term social research does not signify a concern with particular problems or circumstances and it can be applied to a variety of investigative techniques. You may be sure that your interest is not in medical research, but uncertain about what sort of social research you do want to do.

People who have tried to map out the world of social research acknowledge that there is no standard typology. At this stage do not become preoccupied with the distinctions between different techniques and disciplines within social science, but think rather about what interests you – what's your topic? – and what sort of study is likely to provide information and answers of the kind that you want.

There are links below to resources that set out categories and subcategories of social research. These are here for reference, but at this stage in your planning it might be sufficient to consider which of the two main approaches in social research are most suitable: quantitative approaches or qualitative approaches or a combination of the two? Bear in mind that these approaches, whether used separately or in combination, are also characteristic of health services research.

Quantitative approaches are characterised by measurement and by counting. You will be familiar with the ten year National Census and maybe less so with large scale surveys and screening studies, but what they all have in common is that the data (i.e. information) generated is numerical and can be analysed using statistical methods. Quantitative approaches can proceed from a particular way of viewing the world and the place of humans within it, in which one might deduce that something is generally so because of the large number of people in a population for whom it can be shown to be so. The key point to consider is whether you are interested in knowing the numbers: how many people, of certain characteristics, in a place, of an age and so on. If this is what you are interested in then it will have a bearing on the methods that you would adopt, and they may be quantitative.

Qualitative approaches may also incorporate measurement – indeed the boundary between the two approaches is blurred at several points – but the number of observations may not be the key consideration, but rather the meaning that individuals attach to them. Your data will often be in the form of text rather than numbers. Qualitative research is particularly useful in developing an understanding of difference, for example why some people believe one thing rather than another; it is frequently the preferred approach for exploring the nuances in human society and the feelings and experiences of individuals, towards the development of generalisable theories.

Quantitative and qualitative approaches can be used in combination, not because the strengths of one compensate for weaknesses in the other, but because they can be complementary and reinforcing. Quantitative approaches might reveal a trend and qualitative approaches might be used to explore and explain it. It is not a case of one being necessarily better than the other, but rather of choosing the approach that is most suitable for your purpose.

Whereas you may not be familiar with these two approaches to social research, or at least with the terms quantitative and qualitative, lots of people have heard of, and even experienced, research practices like interviews, questionnaires and focus groups. These are collectively regarded as research methods and they each take many forms depending on the purpose of the research and the subject matter. Methods are a means to an end, they are not the end in itself; you should not start from the point of thinking 'We are going to do a survey' or 'We are going to run a series of focus groups', these might be suitable methods to adopt, but it will depend on what you are trying to discover.

The choice of method will be determined in part by your research design, for example whether you are going to compare two groups of people or social settings with each other, or whether you are going to follow one group of people and make observations and record changes over time. The distinction between research designs and the suitability of research methods are things that research partners will be happy to discuss with you. For an introduction to the breadth of social research methods, you could look at the companion website (http://www.oup.com/uk/orc/bin/9780199264469/) to Social Research Methods by Alan Bryman (2004), prepared by Susie Scott.

There remains a view, but it is less strongly held than it once was, that there is a hierarchy of research designs, and that the 'gold standard' would be an experimental research design, particularly a randomised controlled trial (RCT). An RCT can be a strong design for social research, but it is not without its controversies from an ethical point of view, nor is it always suitable, let alone practical.

To the extent that a hierarchy of social research designs exists, where your preferred design is located in the hierarchy is probably less important than whether the purpose of your research – and the claims you hope to make for your results – are in proportion. Although the RCT is regarded as a good method for the elimination of bias, and the establishment of the significance of the effect of a particular intervention (for example, a programme of support or counselling), as a design it might reveal little about the range of social meanings that people attach to receiving support or being counselled. So research designs at the top of the hierarchy might be the best for some things but not for others.

Which method is best?

You may find differences of opinion about what constitutes 'good' research. There are three key considerations that will affect judgements about the quality of research findings and conclusions: reliability, replicability and validity.

Your research partner will explore with you how these are relevant to what you want to do. For example, if you are interested in understanding the social exclusion of young people, reliability will be an issue.

Social exclusion is a highly mobile concept and you will need to be able to establish that whatever you mean by it is consistent: is your understanding or description of social exclusion the same as other peoples? Not only will you need to be clear about what you mean, you will also need to be clear whether what you are referring to is a cause, a defining characteristic or a consequence. For example, is youth homelessness a cause of social exclusion, a characteristic or manifestation of social exclusion, or something that results from social exclusion? It could be all three.

Replicability is important because scientific and social scientific knowledge is developed incrementally, with the pieces of information being gradually assembled and reinforced by experiment and testing. One of the key features of good research is that it is designed, conducted and described in such a way that other researchers can understand what has been done and have a go themselves. If they do so, and their results match yours, then this will add weight to your original conclusions. But if they cannot understand what you have done and how you have done it, then replication will be impossible, and this will diminish the authority of your conclusions.

Your study of social exclusion might involve interviews with homeless young people and an examination of housing and homelessness statistics. Unless you can explain how the interviewees were selected and what questions they were asked, and what statistics you examined, researchers and other interested people will not be able to judge whether your conclusions could reasonably proceed from the information you have gathered.

Validity is essentially concerned with the meaning that can be assigned to research observations. Taking our social exclusion example, the proposition might be that non-participation in the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme is a measure of social exclusion. You might demonstrate that young people in Area A are more likely to participate in the scheme than in Area B, and conclude that young people in Area B are more socially excluded. But this may not be a valid observation, because levels of participation might be determined by other factors. Average household income in Area A may be much lower than in Area B, youth and young adult employment rates may be higher, as might be the rates of fixed-term and permanent school exclusions. But Area A might have a youth project that encourages and subsidises participation in the Award Scheme, whereas Area B might not. What you may be observing, and interpreting as a measure of social exclusion, may actually be access to a particular type of youth project and not social exclusion at all.

Ethics and research governance

Most of the research proposals submitted to this Research programme are likely to involve people. Your research may involve interviewing people, asking them to fill in questionnaires, observing aspects of human behaviour, accessing people's medical records or asking people to try out novel therapies.

Research which involves people must be carried out according to agreed ethical practices – ensuring that participants in research are treated with respect, are informed about the research, give their consent to participate and are not harmed as a result of the research.

Research governance is a term used to describe the controls and oversight that should be in place to ensure that a research project is being carried out to high standards. These standards concern not only how researchers interact with the subjects of their research, but also ensure that:

- Data is collected and analysed using the best available methods
- Researchers working on a project have appropriate levels of experience and supervision to carry out the project
- The results of the research have not been obtained fraudulently and
- Researchers carry out their duty to report their findings both to other researchers and to other audiences who would find them useful.

An important way of implementing research governance is to use independent expert advice to oversee progress with a research project. How this is done in practice varies in different research communities. But many research projects these days – whether because it is legally required for a clinical trial or because it is viewed as good practice for a particular field of social research – will ask other experts in the field of study – who are not working on the project and will not directly benefit from it - to sit on some form of steering committee, which meets maybe every six months or so, to monitor how a project is progressing.

Medical research which involves people has been subjected to careful ethical scrutiny for some time (The Declaration of Helsinki, 1964, World Medical Association http://www.wma.net/e/policy/b3.htm). NHS Trusts have research ethics committees which assess whether research proposals have been planned with appropriate consideration for the participants and subjects. However in the last five years more formal regulations have been put in place. If you are contemplating clinical research, you should be aware of the following guidelines, authorities and laws:

- The NHS Research Governance Framework for health and social care sets the standards for research carried out within the NHS and social services in England (http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH_4008777), Wales (http://wales.gov.uk/consultations/closedconsultations/healthsocialcare/governance/?lang=en), Scotland (http://www.sehd.scot.nhs.uk/cso/Publications/ResGov/Framework/RGFEdTwo.pdf) or Northern Ireland (http://www.centralservicesagency.n-i.nhs.uk/files/rdo_whats_new/file/RGF_061106.pdf)
- The National Research Ethics Service (NRES) (http://www.nres.npsa.nhs.uk/) now co-ordinates the work of NHS Ethics Committees
- Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) (http://www.mhra.gov.uk/howweregulate/medicines/licensingofmedicines/clinicaltrials/applyingtoconductaclinicaltrial-initialapplication/index.htm) is responsible for licensing drugs and medical devices in the UK and now also authorises clinical trials governed by the Medicines for Human Use (Clinical Trials) Act 2004.

The Medical Research Council publishes several guides to the conduct of ethical research that can be downloaded from their website (http://www.mrc.ac.uk/newspublications/publications/ethicsandguidance/index.htm).

A number of other aspects of medical research conducted in laboratories or hospitals are also regulated and you may want to familiarise yourself with these (see the section below, 'Medical research and the law').

Social research has had less formal systems in place for monitoring ethical standards, but commissioners of social research and the social research community have become increasingly sensitive to the ethical complexities of social research.

Social researchers have for many years been concerned about the ethical issues surrounding research with vulnerable adults and children. These and wider ethical concerns were addressed in a guidance document prepared for applicants to the Community Fund Health and social research grants programme by Linda Ward and Debbie Watson. Potential applicants can still obtain a copy of this document from the Big Lottery Fund.

(Ward, L and Watson, D (2001) Doing Research – and Doing It Right. A brief guide to resources on ethical research practice. Bristol: Norah Fry Research Centre for the Community Fund.)

Other guidance on the ethical conduct of research can be found at:

- Association of the Directors of Social Service (http://www.adss.org.uk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=366&itemid=348)
- British Psychological Society (http://www.bps.org.uk/the-society/code-of-conduct/code-of-conduct_home.cfm)
- Social Research Association (http://www.the-sra.org.uk/ethical.htm)

Whether and how formal ethical approval is obtained for social research projects is in a state of review and change, and practices may vary from place to place. A new national Social Care Research Ethics Committee is being appointed by the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE), at the Department of Health's request (http://www.scie.org.uk/networks/screc/index.asp). In other settings the ethical requirements and approval mechanisms are neither certain nor consistent, though applicants would be wise to discuss with any university-based partners whether the proposed research should be subject to the oversight and approval of the university's research ethics committee.

Ethical approval of any kind should not be confused with the additional and unavoidable legal requirements for safeguarding children and vulnerable adults. The main priority here is that researchers seeking contact with either should first be referred for Criminal Record Bureau (CRB) checks. These checks must be initiated by authorised organisations and a charge is levied for each check. You can get more details from the CRB website: http://www.crb.gov.uk

Will we have to apply for ethical approval?

If you are carrying out your own research and the subject of your project involves people in any of the groups above, you may have to submit your research proposal to the relevant body for their scrutiny. Ethics Committees fulfill an important function and can give you useful feedback about how to carry out your research to the best standards.

If you are working with a research partner, you probably will not need to submit applications to ethics committees yourself – your research partners should be familiar with and accustomed to the systems which regulate their field of research.

For research carried out within the NHS or social care services the Research Governance Framework requires the identification of a 'sponsor' or:

'Individual, organisation or group taking on responsibility for securing the arrangements to initiate, manage and finance a study. (A group of individuals and/or organisations may take on sponsorship responsibilities and distribute them by agreement among the members of the group, provided that, collectively, they make arrangements to allocate all the responsibilities in this research governance framework that are relevant to the study.)'

Department of Health (2005). Research Governance Framework for Health and Social Care (2nd edition) London: Department of Health. 22. http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH_4008777 [Accessed 19 March 2007]

Similarly, a sponsor also has to be specifically identified for a clinical trial. Your organisation should carefully consider whether or not this is an appropriate role to take on.

Medical research and the law

Being aware that your project will need to be reviewed by an ethics committee, or is controlled by laws or other regulations, means that:

(1) You will understand one of the important factors that can slow down progress on your project – while necessary approvals are obtained

(2) You will be primed to ask your research partners about these matters, and your organisation will be aware of – and can be protected from – any financial or reputational risks that could arise if the correct permissions are not in place for the research.

Organisations funding medical research should be aware that several aspects of research activity are controlled by legislation:

- Clinical Trials for medicines or medical devices (http://www.mhra.gov.uk/howweregulate/medicines/medicines/licensingofmedicines/clinicaltrials/applyingtoconductaclinicaltrial-initialapplication/index.htm)(Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency)
- Use of human tissue and organs (regulated by the Human Tissue Authority (http://www.hta.gov.uk/)
- Use of embryos (regulated by the Human Fertilization and Embryology Authority) (http://www.hfea.gov.uk/cps/rde/xchg/hfea)
- Animal experiments (http://www.scienceandresearch.homeoffice.gov.uk/animal-research/)
  (regulated by the Home Office)
- Use of radioactive materials (regulated by the Environment Agency http://www.environment-agency.gov.uk/business/sectors/32481.aspx or the Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA) http://www.sepa.org.uk/radioactive_substances.aspx)
- Use of pathogenic organisms(regulated by the Health and Safety Executive http://www.hse.gov.uk/biosafety/infection.htm)
- Use of genetically modified organisms (regulated by the Health and Safety Executive http://www.hse.gov.uk/biosafety/gmo/index.htm)

This list may seem a bit intimidating, but as an organisation managing a research grant you need to be aware that these areas are regulated. You do not necessarily need to know about these issues in detail or in depth. However, your research partners should, if the research they do and the research project you are undertaking together involves any of these types of research.

None of these regulations may apply to the research you want to do, or only one or two of them may be relevant. Being aware that there are laws and regulations controlling certain types of medical research will allow you to:

(1) Understand these sorts of constraints, affecting what your research partners do, that can sometimes delay projects, while relevant applications are made and approvals obtained from the relevant bodies

(2) Ask your research partners about the regulation of the research you are undertaking, so that your organisation is aware of – and can be protected from – any financial or reputational risks that could arise if the correct permissions are not in place for the research.

User involvement

BIG wants the people who will benefit from the research to have the fullest possible involvement.

This emphasis on user involvement has occasionally been misunderstood. BIG is not suggesting or requiring that each study it funds should engage users and beneficiaries in every feature of research practice. On the other hand, BIG is unlikely to be persuaded that the research is so complex that everything is best left to experts who will neither benefit from the research nor use the services related to it.

There are many user-led VCS organisations; there are many user-led research organisations. Users and beneficiaries can lead and influence research in a variety of ways short of actually standing at the laboratory bench or interpreting data. In all types of research it should be possible for you and them to assert and assume responsibility, whether exclusively or shared, for identifying relevant research topics, to advise on suitable strategies, to comment on the acceptability and relevance of particular methods and to require that dissemination takes a particular form or forms.

In many cases service users will simultaneously be researchers, or can be trained in the skills necessary to undertake research. Additionally, or alternatively, users and beneficiaries might form an advisory group, to provide advice and comment as the research progresses.

In your plans to involve service-users and beneficiaries, you will need to consider the resources that may be necessary to ensure that all contributors can participate fully and equally, regardless of their role. For example, salaried academic researchers and the employees of applicant organisations may regard participation in advisory group meetings as part of their work, and for which they are therefore getting paid. But non-salaried participants may be at a financial disadvantage, both in terms of attending meetings and in managing the associated costs.

You might consider the likely and reasonable costs of participation and make provision in your budget. This could extend to considering the costs of transport, translation and interpretation and childcare, where the need for any or all of these is a possibility.

Here are some links to examples and organisational policies and advice on user involvement in research.

INVOLVE (http://www.invo.org.uk/) – promotes public involvement in NHS, public health and social care research.

The Toronto Group is an informal network of researchers with a particular interest in user involvement. The report on a series of seminars held in 2004 has been published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and can be read or downloaded from http://www.jrf.org.uk/knowledge/findings/socialcare/0175.asp

The Alzheimer's Society run an award winning Quality Research in Dementia (http://www.qrd.alzheimers.org.uk/QRD_advisory_network.htm) programme which is an active partnership between carers, people with dementia and the research community.

The James Lind Alliance (http://www.lindalliance.org) promotes cooperative approaches to clinical research that combines the interests and views of patients with the expertise of clinical specialists.

Dissemination

Dissemination is the process of sharing your research findings and conclusions with other people. BIG places a lot of emphasis on the research it supports being widely known, understood and influential on policy.

Applicant organisations and researchers will have a shared interest in dissemination, but there are different ways of going about it. And whereas applicants may not be inclined or able to specify exactly how the research should be done, they can assert how they would like the results to be made public.

The main dissemination methods could be roughly categorised as writing, talking and showing.

Writing is the main way of disseminating research findings for the academic research community. But not writing anywhere: the preferred outlet for many academic disciplines would be in a specialist journal, of which there are many thousands published worldwide.

Publication in a specialist journal, particularly those that peer review submissions before accepting them, can be a significant mark of research quality. Researchers are motivated to publish in learned journals because to do so is a measure of their progression and standing in their particular field.

However, the readership of learned journals is quite limited outside academia, and you may want to ensure that the research and its significance is accessible to, and understood by, non-researchers. There is now widespread acceptance that the public understanding of science is a good thing, so you should find that your research partner is sympathetic to the idea of writing about the research in ways that are suitable for different audiences. Bear in mind however that some journals will not publish work that has been previously published in a different form, so discuss with your partner how best to reach your various audiences without restricting your options.

Writing for a general audience should not diminish the seriousness of your research. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (www.jrf.org.uk) has a publication policy that requires every research grant recipient to produce a short briefing paper in their Findings series, and a research report limited to 15,000 words. You may also want to consider reports and briefings that reflect the particular needs and interests of your own members, service users or potential beneficiaries of the research. You might consider which styles, formats and languages are most appropriate for reaching people with an interest in what you have done. Leaflets, plain text documents, publication on the web, translations into Braille, Welsh and other languages are all possibilities, the key point being that eventual publication in a learned journal might be considered insufficient in the light of the Research programme's objectives, at least if this is the only means of dissemination. If you want to do something similar to these examples, you will need to work out how much it might cost and detail it in your application.

If you receive a research grant from BIG, you will be required to produce an executive summary as part of your end-of-grant research report. This will appear on BIG's website so that anybody who is interested can access the research results and request more information from the grant holding organisation. There will be a prescribed format for this executive summary (see the application guidance at www.bigresearchprogramme.org.uk).

Talking about your research findings and conclusions could take the form of conference papers and presentations, workshops and special events. You might also consider recording what has been written so that it is more accessible to people with visual impairments or restricted access to the written word. Cassette tape is increasingly being superseded by digital recording, whether on CD or as a digital file downloadable from the Internet. But if you are thinking about bringing people together to hear about the research, remember to consider all the likely costs, which might include covering a proportion of the costs likely to be incurred by attendees, particularly if lack of money is likely to be an obstacle to their attendance.

Showing people how the research has been done and its possible consequences could take the form of participative events. It may be that participants in the research will want to contribute their own reflections on what it has all meant, and to provide their own ideas for dissemination. Video and DVD has become a familiar if not necessarily common medium for disseminating research; poster presentations are a standard medium for dissemination at academic conferences, many of which have poster exhibitions running alongside workshops and the main plenary sessions.

Here are some links to other sources of advice on how to disseminate your research effectively.

http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/esrcinfocentre/CTK/communications-strategy/guide.aspx

http://www.gdnet.org/middle.php?oid=373

Deciding who should receive the news: first consult your stakeholders

Who you tell and how you tell them about progress with your research project and its results depends on the effects you hope doing your research could have. Your project will have many different stakeholders who will want to know what happens and they may have different expectations for its outcomes. In view of this, it is very useful to consult all your stakeholders early on – while you are designing your research project and putting together your application – so you can plan and budget for the most appropriate ways of contacting the most useful and important people from the start.

Who are the stakeholders in a research project?
You are in the best position to identify your stakeholders, but here are some suggestions for some of the groups you may like to consider and talk to while you develop your proposal:

- In your organisation – in-house research staff, your fundraisers, your trustees, your users and beneficiaries, your communications staff, your volunteers.

These could be people involved in doing the research itself, who may have career-related reasons for disseminating research findings, people who have contributed to fundraising for the project and could be motivated to help support future projects by good feedback, people who could directly make use of your results in their every day lives and people who could help further disseminate your results into new communities.

- Your research partners – in universities or other research organisations.

As for your in-house research staff, the success of a project is important for the careers of the researchers doing the work. Building a reputation in research and gaining promotion depends very heavily on the research you publish in 'peer reviewed' journals, and on writing books. Disseminating your research results to other researchers is therefore important for research staff.

- Other researchers in the field – who will need to know about your results.

Following from the bullet point above, other researchers will be asked to review your research results, for publication in scientific journals. This will give you feedback on how other researchers in the field view the results of your project and will also inform research that they do in the future.

- Other voluntary sector organisations working in related areas.

Other organisations with common interests may find it useful to know about your research project and its results and may be able to help with dissemination and extend its reach.

- Service providers in the NHS or social services and professional organisations whose practices you might want your research to influence.

If the nature of your research relates to service provision and your research results might suggest ways in which this could usefully change, it is important to engage service providers early on as potential allies rather than possible adversaries.

- Policy-makers and politicians – who you would like to influence with the results of your research. As with service providers, if you hope that the research you want to do may influence policy in an area in the future, it is important to engage with policy makers early on – whether locally (local councils, education departments or primary care trusts) or nationally (Departments of Health, the Home Office, Department of Justice and Departments of Education).
- Commercial organisations – which might be interested in commercialising outputs from your research. These could be publishers for your findings, as guidelines or books, manufacturers of medical devices or biotechnology companies. If you think your project might produce a product that has commercial value to a for-profit organisation, you should also consider intellectual property rights while putting your application together, and consider getting legal advice.

If you consult your stakeholders early on, they can tell you what forms of dissemination are most likely to be effective for them – whether you need to budget for a scientific meeting, talks to user groups around the country, additions to your website, paper publications or DVDs, visits to talk to ministers or civil servants...or many other possibilities.

An important additional advantage of consulting widely about dissemination is that you may also find out some useful things that affect other aspects of your project – such as:

- A similar research project has already been done, but the results were not published because they were negative.
- There are others planning similar research that you could collaborate with.
- Another funder is looking at funding this sort of research and might be willing to provide additional funding for your project.

Whatever research you are doing, timeliness will be a consideration. If you want your research to influence policy, bear in mind the likely time lapse between submitting your application, receiving an award, and starting and completing the research. There is likely to be a minimum of six months between putting in your application and getting a decision on it; past experience suggests that very few studies start within nine months to a year of the initial application. These kinds of delays will also have a bearing on how you calculate the likely cost of the study.

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