GSR professional guidance series

GSR
GOVERNMENT SOCIAL RESEARCH
Social Science in Government

Recruiting in GSR

GSR Recruitment Guidance

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Government Social Research Unit

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Photo on front cover – GSR Induction attendees September 2009

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Foreword

The effectiveness of any organisation depends on the quality of its staff, which in turn depends on the effectiveness of its assessment processes for selection and development. There is a solid evidence-base which shows that organisations make better selection decisions by following certain key recruitment principles which provide positive benefits for individual, team and organisational performance.

The recruitment guidance for Government Social Research (GSR) details the four principles to be followed in the recruitment and promotion of GSR members. In answer to the need for practical support for Member organisations, GSRU (the Government Social Research Unit) has developed guidance, assessment materials and training for assessors.

First developed in 2005 by GSRU in consultation with member organisations and recruitment professionals, the guidance has been revised to reflect the new balance between central and local GSR recruitment and to cement the improved standards and greater consistency we have achieved. It is underpinned by the GSR competency framework and reflects the principles of the GSR Code.

The guidance applies to all GSR member organisations when recruiting or promoting to GSR roles. It is a declaration of good practice and will enhance our ability to identify, develop and promote the most suitable candidates.

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Joint Heads, Government Social Research Service
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1. Introduction

The GSR Code was established in 2008 to address the need for shared professional standards across the GSR community. The GSR recruitment guidance has been written to support the people principles of the Code, in particular that GSR members are 'appropriately skilled and continuously developed'.

The recruitment guidance is in two parts:

Part 1) The overarching GSR recruitment principles (in this document)
Part 2) Applying the GSR recruitment principles in practice.
(www.civilservice.gov.uk/gsr)

Heads of Profession are responsible for implementing the guidance in their organisation, taking account of local HR rules and practices.

The guidance and associated recruitment services and support are maintained and delivered by the Government Social Research Unit under the direction of the GSR Leadership Group.

2. Recruitment Guidance Part 1: GSR recruitment principles

The recruitment principles: a summary

Principle 1. Ensuring quality and high standards

Following HR good practice guidelines will ensure high standards and quality in GSR recruitment. Fundamental to ensuring high standards is to apply minimum eligibility criteria and assess candidates against agreed competencies relevant to the role/grade advertised. More than one method of assessment will be used in combination to assess the competencies, and the methods will focus on the systematic and objective identification of relevant behaviours. At least one member of a GSR, or joint analytical, selection panel will have attended the GSR assessor training course. The GSR assessor training course is compulsory for all substantive GSR members at SRO and above with 18 months' seniority. A panel can comprise assessors of the grade equal to the role advertised but the chair must be at least one grade senior. All promotion panels must include an assessor from another GSR member organisation.

Principle 2. Diversity, fairness and legal compliance

Selection will be on merit through fair and open competition as set out in the Office of the Civil Service Commissioners recruitment code. The practices used will not discriminate on the basis of irrelevant criteria such as age, gender, race, religion or sexual orientation and any reasonable steps will be taken to prevent any disadvantage for a person with a disability as set out in the Disability Discrimination Acts (1995 and 2005). Candidates' personal data will be handled in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998.

Principle 3. Meeting the needs of the business/profession

Member organisations will consider candidates in the GSR redeployment pool before advertising a vacancy across GSR and will consider candidates in the GSR external recruits pool before advertising externally. GSRU will work with member organisations to provide support for recruitment at a level commensurate with predicted demand and available resources. GSRU will recover the costs of providing central recruitment and support via agreed fees.

Principle 4. Communication and governance

Member organisations will notify GSRU in advance of **all** recruitment to GSR and will provide regular feedback about the recruitment guidance. GSRU will consult with GSR recruiting managers from departments regularly about operational issues and will work closely with a sub-group of recruiting managers to develop assessment tools/guidance. GSRU will report to the GSR Leadership Group twice a year and will seek advice/direction from the board if substantive changes to the guidance are required.

3. The recruitment principles in detail

Principle 1. Ensuring quality and high standards

Following HR good practice guidelines will ensure high standards and quality in GSR recruitment. Fundamental to ensuring high standards is to apply minimum eligibility criteria and assess candidates against agreed competencies relevant to the role/grade advertised. More than one method of assessment will be used in combination to assess the competencies, and the methods will focus on the systematic and objective identification of relevant behaviours. At least one member of a GSR, or joint analytical, selection panel will have attended the GSR assessor training course. The GSR assessor training course is compulsory for all substantive GSR members at SRO and above with 18 months' seniority. A panel can comprise assessors of the grade equal to the role advertised but the chair must be at least one grade senior. All promotion panels must include an assessor from another GSR member organisation.

- Selection for GSR roles should be competency-based. Any method used to assess competencies should focus on the systematic and objective identification of behaviours of an individual relevant to the GSR role/grade for which they have applied. The GSR competency framework is the basis for describing any GSR role and the basis for defining methods of assessing candidates. Further reading about competency based selection can be found at Annex A.1
- Minimum eligibility criteria apply to each GSR grade.

- The GSR selection tests have been trialed to ensure that they are relevant, challenging and acceptable to candidates. They are also relatively easy to administer and use. The GSR selection tests include:

  - competency-based application form;
  - verbal/numerical reasoning tests and personality questionnaire;
  - social research knowledge test;
  - written test;
  - oral-briefing test;
  - competency-based interview questions;
  - role play exercise.

  For more information on the criteria used to select the GSR tests see Annex A.2.

- New Research Officers should take a numeracy test.
- All new entrants to GSR should take the knowledge test.
- Selection for PRO level and above should include an assessment of management ability.
- When selecting candidates more than one method of assessment will be used in combination. See Annex A.3.
- Fluid grading a member from RO to SRO must be carried out to the same standard as set out for promoting/recruiting to SRO level.
- There must be a clear process for how information from different sources is integrated to arrive at consistent decisions.
- To access support and selection tests for local recruitment it will be necessary for at least one member of the panel to have attended the GSR assessor-training course.
- All panels must include an assessor from another GSR member organisation for all externally advertised posts and all posts offered on promotion*. GSRU have a register of trained assessors.
- Panels for individual posts should have consistent membership.
- Availability of senior trained assessors can be a problem, particularly at PRO/SPRO/SCS level. Therefore, it is acceptable to use trained assessors equal to the grade of the vacancy advertised as long as the chair of the panel is at least one grade senior to the vacancy advertised.
- The assessor-training course is organised centrally by GSRU and delivered by a consultant Occupational Psychologist. Alternatively, the training can be delivered in a member organization if cost effective.
- Assessor training will be provided free of charge at the point of delivery.

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* Where a Head of Profession does not use an external assessor (e.g. because of location difficulties) the Head of Profession should submit a record of this decision, detailing reasons and steps taken to mitigate any negative impact, to the Head of Professions leadership board.

> **Principle 2. Diversity, fairness and legal compliance**
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> Selection will be on merit through fair and open competition as set out in the Office of the Civil Service Commissioners recruitment code. The practices used will not discriminate on the basis of irrelevant criteria such as age, gender, race, religion or sexual orientation and any reasonable steps will be taken to prevent any disadvantage for a person with a disability as set out in the Disability Discrimination Acts (1995 and 2005). Candidates' personal data will be handled in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998.

- Diversity and fairness are at the heart of the recruitment guidance. When selecting staff, fairness and diversity are most likely to be compromised when selection methods are subjective, where there is a lack of clarity about what needs to be assessed and a lack of awareness of the potential pitfalls in assessing people. Objective selection methods used in GSR have been shown, in general, to lead to better and fairer employment decisions.
- The information collected about candidates and used for the selection decision must be clearly related to the requirements of the job. For example, a test of knowledge of research methods would be completely justified when selecting Research Officers (ROs); a test of general knowledge would be much harder to justify.
- GSR endeavours to ensure that when using psychometric tests no unacceptable adverse impact (AI) on any particular group of individuals occurs (see Annex A.4 for how to calculate the AI ratio for a selection test). How the tests are used is also important; psychometric tests have less 'adverse impact' when used as the basis for identifying and screening out the weaker performers, than when used to identify the top 25% of candidates.
- Reasonable steps should be taken to prevent any disadvantage for a person with a disability as set out in the Disability Discrimination Acts (1995 and 2005). The DDAs say that the duty to make reasonable adjustments applies where any physical feature of premises occupied by the employer, or any arrangements made by or on behalf of the employer, cause a substantial disadvantage to a disabled person compared with non-disabled people. An employer has to take such steps, as it is reasonable for them to have to take in all circumstances to prevent that disadvantage. GSRU provides advice on reasonable adjustments.
- Recruiters should avoid internal candidate advantage e.g. assessing knowledge/experience only available to a civil servant.
- Holding and processing candidates' personal data must be done in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998. Candidates must give consent to the holding and processing of personal data provided for all purposes relating to the assessment of their application for the job

including, but not limited to: administering and maintaining personal records; administering tests and recording results; processing information regarding equality of opportunity and treatment of data subjects in line with the civil service's Equal Opportunities Policy. Information on candidates who are unsuccessful in their application for employment will be retained for a period of twelve months from the date of the advertisement. All personnel records will be used purely for employment purposes and are accessible only to the individual concerned, members of GSRU, recruiting managers, GSR assessors and the individual manager with direct/indirect reporting responsibility for the employee concerned.

Principle 3. Meeting the needs of the business/profession

Member organisations will consider candidates in the GSR redeployment pool before advertising a vacancy across GSR and will consider candidates in the GSR external recruits pool before advertising externally. GSRU will work with member organisations to provide support for recruitment at a level commensurate with predicted demand and available resources. GSRU will recover the costs of providing central recruitment and support via agreed fees.

- Member organisations should proactively attend to workforce planning and report assumptions to GSRU quarterly via the Leadership Board.
- GSRU, in regular consultation with GSR recruiting managers will endeavour to provide a central recruitment service and support for local recruitment at a level commensurate with the predicted demand and available resources.
- GSRU will recover the costs of providing central recruitment and support via agreed fees. GSRU will ensure value for money in relation to all expenditure on recruitment. A full breakdown of the costs underlying the fees will be reported to the Leadership Group annually.
- Member organisations will consider all candidates of the relevant grade in the GSR redeployment pool, before advertising a vacancy across GSR; and will consider all candidates of the relevant standard in the GSR external recruits pool before advertising externally (assuming no suitable internal candidates exist). Full details of candidates in either pool can be obtained from GSRU.

Principle 4. Communication and governance

Member organisations will notify GSRU in advance of **all** recruitment to GSR and will provide regular feedback about the recruitment guidance. GSRU will consult with GSR recruiting managers from departments regularly about operational issues and will work closely with a sub-group of recruiting managers to develop assessment tools/guidance. GSRU will report to the GSR Leadership Board twice a year and will seek advice/direction from the board if substantive changes to the guidance are required.

- Member organisations will notify GSRU of all recruitment/promotion activity in order that GSRU can offer help, support and advice and keep accurate records for reporting to the GSR Leadership Board.
- Member organisations will work with GSRU to monitor the effectiveness of the guidance. In addition, a sub group of recruitment managers will help to develop assessment tools and guidance for use in GSR recruitment.
- GSRU will report on recruitment to the GSR Leadership Board twice a year. Substantive changes to the guidance must be agreed by the GSR Leadership Board and any revisions communicated across GSR.

Annex A.1

Competency-based selection

Competency-based selection is widely accepted as best practice based on the understanding that past behaviour is the most effective indicator of future performance. Whereas business plans and the setting of personal work tasks and objectives help us to be clear about what we are expected to achieve in our job, competencies describe the attributes we need to do the job, they are individual abilities or characteristics that are key to our effectiveness in work.

The aim of competency-based selection is to obtain precise and verifiable information about when candidates, in a previous role or job, have displayed the particular behaviours at the level required for the vacancy. This type of selection can also be used to assess potential through the use of hypothetical scenarios or applied questions. In this case, candidates may be asked to describe what they would do if faced with a particular situation.

Any method used to assess competencies

Competencies are the building blocks of effective performance but some people are able to use the building blocks to better effect than others. It is the way that the competencies are used in combination that really determines overall effectiveness in a job. Competencies should therefore be regarded as simply a useful framework for gathering and collating information that is relevant to selection decisions. Judgement is still required in weighing this information up to reach the right selection decisions. All assessment activities should involve a comparison of each candidate against the job requirements in as objective a manner as possible.

Annex A.2

The GSR selection tests

The criteria used to select the exercises were:
• that the commercially available psychometrics had a good psychometric pedigree, i.e. good predictive validity across a range of professional contexts with 'norm' groups that were relevant to social research;
• that there was little or no adverse impact, i.e. that exercises did not discriminate unfairly against minority ethnic groups or those for whom English is a second language;
• that the exercises had sound content validity – this is the degree to which the intellectual operations required to do well in the exercise are directly relevant to the skills required to be an effective social researcher;

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• that the exercises had high face-validity, i.e. they appeared to measure something of value – a key measure of the success of a recruitment programme is the degree to which candidates feel they have been fairly assessed;
• that the exercises were sufficiently challenging.
• that candidates and assessors easily understood the exercises and that the assessor scoring guide was easy to use; and
• that the exercise outputs could map onto the GSR Competency Framework.

Annex A.3

Assessment methods ranked in terms of predictive capacity

Selection tests have differing degrees of 'reliability' (consistency) and 'validity' (relevance and predictive capacity). Studies show that the efficacy of different assessment methods can be ranked in terms of predictive capacity (see table below). No single method is a perfect predictor, so several methods should be used in combination. This is the reason why well-developed assessment centres show the highest levels of predictive capability. Another reason for using a combination of tests is to enable us to assess both maximum and typical performance. Maximum performance is assessed when the candidate is under pressure to perform well (e.g. work-simulation exercises, ability or reasoning tests, knowledge tests). However, typical performance (related to disposition and temperament as much as capacity) is assessed through structured interviews and/or personality questionnaires. A well-rounded view of candidates will be gained by using selection tests, which test for maximum and typical performance.

It must be emphasised that the table below indicates the highest predictive relationship that could be hoped for under optimum conditions. These levels of relationship would not be found where the particular method used was a poor example of its type or was used inappropriately.

Assessment methods ranked in terms of predictive capacity

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R = 1.00	Perfect predictor (does not exist)
0.60-0.65	Assessment centres (involving multiple methods of assessment)
0.50	Work simulation exercises; ability or reasoning tests, knowledge tests
0.30	Structured interviews, personality questionnaires
0.20	Unstructured interviews, references
0.00	**No predictive relationship**

Annex A.4

Calculating the Adverse Impact AI Ratio

The AI ratio is calculated by comparing the success rates of 'the minority group' and 'the majority group'. Thus, if 10% of candidates from minority ethnic groups are successful compared with 15% of the ethnic majority group, then the adverse impact (AI) ratio is 10/15 = 0.67. The existence of adverse impact does not automatically mean that the selection process is unfair and thus illegal under equal opportunities legislation. However, if the AI ratio works out to less than 0.8, then a case needs to be made for continuing to use that selection process. Again, the key issue is the demonstrable relevance of the assessment methods and selection process to the job for which the selection is being made.

Minimum eligibility criteria

Research Officer

Skills/Experience

At Research Officer (RO) level you will be expected to have the professional technical skills to develop, design or manage data collection. You should be analytically competent in one or more applied social research method. You must also be able to apply your knowledge of a range of other research methods to social policy issues through project-based work.

Qualifications

A first or upper second class Honours degree in a relevant* social science with a substantial social research component OR, a first or second class Honours degree, with a relevant postgraduate qualification in social research.

Senior Research Officer

Skills/Experience

At Senior Research Officer (SRO) level you will be expected to manage all stages of the research process, including research design, delivery, write-up and dissemination. You will be expected to take on a number of projects or a programme of work and may be involved in line management of Research Officers.

Applicants with a social science degree only, must have 2-3 years' experience in a research related job that develops government social research competencies.

Applicants with a Masters in research, must have 1-2 years' experience in a research related job that develops government social research competencies.

Applicants with a PHD must have 1 year's experience in a research related job, or doctoral studies that involve relevant research work experience/practice.

Qualifications

A first or upper second class Honours degree in a relevant* social science with a substantial social research component OR, a first or second class Honours degree, with a relevant postgraduate qualification in social research.

Principal Research Officer

Skills/Experience

At Principal Research Officer (PRO) level you will be required to work autonomously on all stages of the research process, including managing research design, delivery, write-up and dissemination. You will be expected to take on a number of projects or a programme of work and will be involved in line management of Senior Research Officers.

Applicants must have at least 4 years' experience in a professional role focused on the application of social research methods, and at least 2 years people management experience.

Qualifications

A first or upper second class Honours degree in a relevant* social science with a substantial social research component OR, a first or second class Honours degree, with a relevant postgraduate qualification in social research.

Senior Principal Research Officer

Skills/Experience

Senior Principal Research Officers (SPRO) are expected to have a strong command of a wide range of research and analysis techniques, and experience of applying these in policy/delivery contexts. Typically they will have responsibility for planning and managing a number of complex projects and programmes through a team of social researchers, and other analysts/policy professionals. They will often work in contexts that cut across boundaries of individual government departments, and must have strong influencing, negotiating and communication skills.

Applicants must have at least 6 years' experience in a professional role focused on the application of social research methods and considerable people management experience.

Qualifications

A first or upper second class Honours degree in a relevant* social science with a substantial social research component OR, a first or second class Honours degree, with a relevant postgraduate qualification in social research.

*Relevant social science disciplines include:

- Area and Development Studies,
- Economics,
- Demography,
- Economic and Social History,
- Education,
- Human Geography,
- Linguistics,
- Management and Business Studies,
- Environmental Planning,
- Political Science and International Studies,
- Environmental Planning,
- Political Science and International Studies,
- Psychology,
- Science and Technology Studies,
- Social Anthropology,
- Social Policy,
- Social Work,
- Socio-Legal Studies,
- Sociology and Statistics,
- Methods and Computing.

This list is not exhaustive.