



Quality in Qualitative Evaluation: A framework for assessing research evidence

A Quality Framework

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The full report is entitled: 'Quality in Qualitative Evaluation: A framework for assessing research evidence', ISBN: 07715 04465 8.

August 2003
Government Chief Social Researcher's Office

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I INTRODUCTION

This document presents a framework for appraising the quality of qualitative evaluations. It was developed with particular reference to evaluations concerned with the development and implementation of social policy, programmes and practice. The framework was devised as part of a programme of research conducted on behalf of the Cabinet Office.

The research on which the framework was built involved:

- a comprehensive review of the literature on qualitative research methods relating to standards in qualitative research;
- a review of qualitative research methods used in Government funded evaluation studies;
- a review of existing frameworks for assessing quality in qualitative research;
- exploratory interviews with a range of people who have an interest in quality assessment of qualitative research and/or policy-related evaluations. These included academics who have written about qualitative research from either a theoretical or empirical perspective; authors of existing frameworks; research practitioners; commissioners and funders; and policy-makers who have used qualitative research evidence in the development and evaluation of policies;

- a workshop, involving the above groups, to refine the framework initially developed;
- a trial application of the framework to a small number of studies.

All these strands of activity have heavily influenced the content of the framework and the premises that surround its operation.

A separate report on the study is available.¹ The sections below describe the scope, application and coverage of the framework. Sections II and III provide important background information about the premises underpinning the framework and its intended usage. It is recommended that these sections are read by anyone using the framework for the first time. Those familiar with this background can move directly to Section IV where the content of the framework is presented.

¹ Spencer, L., Ritchie, J., Lewis, J. and Dillon, L. (2003). *Quality in Qualitative Evaluation: A framework for assessing research evidence*, Government Chief Social Researcher's Office, London: Cabinet Office.

II SCOPE OF THE FRAMEWORK

The framework has been built on certain premises surrounding the nature of qualitative enquiry, how it can be used for evaluative purposes and how its quality can be assessed. These premises derive from extensive debate in the literature on qualitative research and evaluation. A brief summary is given here but full documentation can be found in the referenced sections of this report.

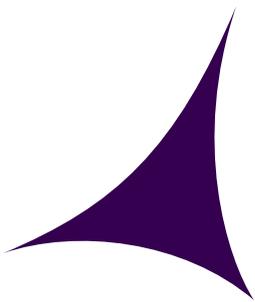
For the purposes of this framework, the quality of the qualitative research that generates the evidence for an evaluation is seen as lying at the heart of any assessment. This is because of a primary interest in evaluations based on empirical enquiry, which form the majority of government-based evaluative investigations. Qualitative research and qualitative evaluation are therefore seen as broadly synonymous in terms of the principles surrounding quality assessment. Because of this, the framework can also be used for qualitative research more generally, irrespective of whether it has an evaluative purpose.

Qualitative research

Qualitative research aims to provide an in-depth understanding of people's experiences, perspectives and histories in the context of their personal circumstances or settings. Among many distinctive features, it is characterised by a concern with exploring phenomena from the perspective of those being studied; with the use of unstructured

methods which are sensitive to the social context of the study; the capture of data which are detailed, rich and complex; a mainly inductive rather than deductive analytic process; developing explanations at the level of meaning or micro-social processes rather than context-free laws; and answering 'what is', 'how' and 'why' questions. It employs a variety of methods, including: exploratory interviews; focus groups; observation; conversation, discourse and narrative analysis; and documentary and video analysis.

Qualitative research is used in evaluation for a range of purposes. For evaluations of programmes, services or interventions, these include identifying the factors that contribute to successful or unsuccessful delivery; identifying outcomes (intended or unintended) and how they occur; examining the nature of requirements of different groups within the target population; exploring the contexts in which policies operate; and exploring organisational aspects of delivery. Qualitative research can also be used in advance of policy development or implementation, for example, to examine an issue or problem that is poorly understood or to inform the kind of intervention required. A further use is to help develop evaluative criteria where these are unclear or where alternative criteria are sought.



Quality standards in qualitative research

Despite many different approaches and traditions within qualitative and evaluative research, there are widespread concerns about quality. There is also shared interest in issues such as ‘rigour’; the need for principles of practice to be made manifest; the importance of sound or ‘robust’ qualitative research evidence; and in the relevance and utility of research.

The nature of quality assessment in qualitative research

There is debate in the literature about whether the concepts of quality used to assess qualitative research should be roughly the same as, parallel to, or quite different from those used to assess quantitative research. This framework is based on the view that the concerns which lie behind customary conceptions of quality have relevance for qualitative enquiry but need to be *reformulated – and assessed quite differently* – within the domain of qualitative research. In other words, qualitative research should be assessed on its ‘own terms’ within premises that are central to its purpose, nature and conduct.

The formalisation of quality standards

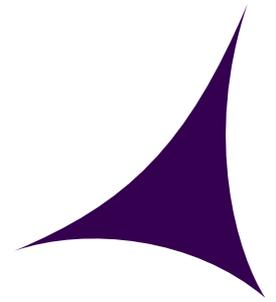
There is some debate about the extent to which quality assessment of qualitative inquiry can be formalised. Alongside this there have been increasing calls for guidance about quality assessment so that criteria appropriate to qualitative research (rather than those imported from other research traditions) are used. This, in turn, has led to the generation of a number of checklists, guidelines and lists of appraisal questions for assessing qualitative research.

This framework draws heavily on previously developed quality criteria, both from the general methodological literature and from pre-existing guidelines. However, it also takes heed of the persistent concern that formalised criteria should avoid being rigidly procedural or over-prescriptive. It has therefore been devised to aid informed judgement, not mechanistic rule-following.

Because there has been an opportunity to build on other frameworks, it is comparatively comprehensive in its coverage. It is also distinctive in making explicit the philosophical assumptions within which it operates; and in the level of specificity of the quality ‘indicators’ on which to base an assessment.

Philosophical assumptions

There are numerous approaches, paradigms, schools and movements encompassed within what is broadly termed ‘qualitative research’. They vary in terms of the ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions on which they are based. The same issues arise in relation to different types of evaluation. A proliferation of approaches to evaluation exist, which, again, differ in terms of their philosophical, ideological and methodological premises. In both cases, the various traditions are often categorised under labelled movements or schools although their identities are not always consistently described.



It was not felt possible to design a single set of quality markers that would be appropriate for all the different qualitative and evaluative traditions that exist. The assumptions on which they are based are too diverse – in some cases contradictory – and the conception of what matters in terms of ‘quality’ can vary with these assumptions.

Instead, an ‘elemental’ approach has been used in which a range of premises about the nature of social reality and how the social world can be investigated have been identified and those which underpin the framework specified. It is thought that these assumptions are broadly those within which most government-funded qualitative inquiry operates. Taking this approach means that the framework will be relevant for a range of types of qualitative evaluations including practice evaluation, policy development and appraisal as well as evaluations of particular interventions, schemes or programmes. It will be the assumptions within which an evaluation operates, rather than the model of qualitative research or evaluation used, that will determine whether the framework will be of value to assess its quality.

Choice of appraisal items

There are numerous appraisal items that could have been included in the framework.

Those selected were chosen on the basis that:

- they operate within the boundaries of the philosophical assumptions prescribed;
- they offer a series of readings on core principles concerning the contribution, defensibility, rigour and credibility of a qualitative study;
- they cover different stages and processes within qualitative enquiry;
- they are recurrently cited as markers of quality in the literature, in pre-existing frameworks and in the interviews conducted for this study.

III APPLICATION OF THE FRAMEWORK

The framework has been designed primarily to assess the *outputs* of qualitative inquiry – that is reports, papers and journal articles. This has inevitably affected both the items covered and, most crucially, how they can be demonstrated for assessment. There is, for example, heavy emphasis on the quality of the evidence and the analysis that has informed it and rather less on aspects of conduct that cannot be well judged from written output.

Some translation of the criteria included can be made to assess proposals. Guidance notes on this are given in Section IV. It is also hoped that the framework will have a wider educational function in the preparation of research protocols, the conduct and management of research and evaluation and in the training of social researchers, both within and outside government.

Relevance for different qualitative methods

The framework has been designed with a particular focus on the methods used most extensively in government-based evaluations, namely, interviews, focus groups, observation and documentary analysis. Nevertheless, the principles that have guided the design of the framework, and many of the questions suggested for appraisal, will have application to a wider range of qualitative methods (e.g. linguistic analysis, historical and archival

analysis, multimedia methods etc.). However, quality indicators that are particularly relevant to other methods will need to be added.

Use of multiple methods

It is common to find that evaluations use a mix of methods to collect the required information. Sometimes these are a combination of qualitative methods but in other cases a mix of qualitative and quantitative approaches. Although some of the appraisal questions in the framework are method generic (e.g. Qs 1–3, 5, 6 etc.), others are specific to qualitative methods (e.g. Qs 11–13). It is therefore recommended that to assess any quantitative components of an evaluation, quality criteria that are specific to the method concerned will need to be added.

Application to different policy domains

The framework has been designed to assess qualitative evaluation across the spectrum of substantive fields covered by Government Departments. However, it could well be that assessment within a particular substantive area might need to address some additional questions. If so, these can be added to the framework as necessary.

IV CONTENT OF THE FRAMEWORK

The framework is built on a set of principles around which to frame and structure appraisal questions that might be asked of a piece of work in order to critically assess its quality. In each case, a set of quality indicators is listed – features that will help to form a judgement about how well the appraisal question has been addressed. Further questions might also be added depending on the purpose of the research and the approach it uses. It is then for the assessor to judge overall merit, based on the questions and indicators that are most relevant to the evaluation concerned.

Guiding principles

There are four² central principles that underpin the content of the framework. All of these are based on themes that are highly recurrent in the literature and in the interviews conducted for the study. They advise that research should be:

- **contributory** in advancing wider knowledge or understanding about policy, practice, theory or a particular substantive field;
- **defensible in design** by providing a research strategy that can address the evaluative questions posed;
- **rigorous in conduct** through the systematic and transparent collection, analysis and interpretation of qualitative data;

- **credible in claim** through offering well-founded and plausible arguments about the significance of the evidence generated.

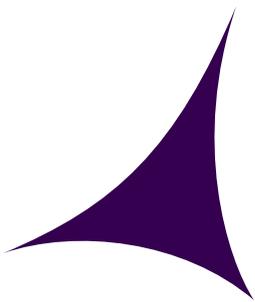
These principles are presented at a sufficiently high level of abstraction that they would apply to a diversity of qualitative approaches. Indeed, most of them are simply emblems of sound and logical enquiry, whatever its form or purpose.

Appraisal questions

The guiding principles have been used to identify 18 appraisal questions to aid an assessment. The questions are listed in column a) of the framework. Between them, they cover all of the key features and processes involved in qualitative enquiry. They begin with assessment of the findings, move through different stages of the research process (design, sampling, data collection, analysis and reporting) and end with some general features of research conduct (reflexivity and neutrality, ethics and auditability).

It is suggested that the findings of the enquiry are given attention first, even though this is not a logical procedural order. This is because the nature of the evidence presented will help in assessing features of the research process (for example, the quality of the data collected, the visibility and logic of the analytic process). However, if readers prefer

² Two of the four principles deal with the way in which a study has been devised and conducted. This is not surprising since, in qualitative research, there are no 'validated' instruments or standardised methods, which means that quality cannot be assumed on the basis that certain methods have been used, but must be demonstrated in each case.



to look at research design and conduct before considering the evidence, they will need to return to Qs 6–18 before completing the assessment.

Quality indicators

Beside each question, there is a series of quality indicators (column b) which will help in answering the appraisal question. These provide pointers to the kinds of information needed to judge whether or not the quality feature concerned has been secured. They are not intended to be comprehensive and other indicators might well be added for specific studies. Equally, they are not intended to suggest essential requirements – it is highly unlikely that all these indicators will be present, or even relevant, in any one study.

Many of the quality indicators relate only to the methods specified in Section II (i.e. interviews, focus groups, observation and documentary analysis). For most appraisal questions, however, quality indicators that are relevant to other methods could be added.

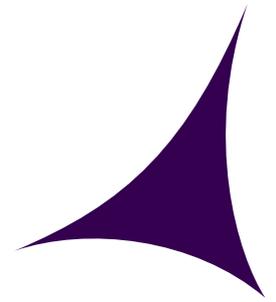
The need for professional judgement

The assessment of a qualitative inquiry, using this framework, will require careful judgements on the part of the assessor. These, in turn, will require some knowledge of qualitative research and some expertise in using qualitative methods. Judgement will also be needed in deciding the weight to attach to particular indicators in order to assess its ‘fitness for purpose’ – that is, how well it addresses the objectives for which it was undertaken. For example, in a study carried out to evaluate the implementation of a new scheme, it may well be more

important to have a detailed account of how practice has affected outcomes, or an accessibly written report, than to have a thorough literature review.

Use for assessing proposals

As was noted in Section III, the framework has been designed to assess *outputs* from qualitative inquiry. However, selected questions and indicators from the framework could be used to assess *proposals* for designing and conducting a qualitative evaluation (see particularly Qs 2, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10 and 16–18). This, of course, will require changing from past to present the tense within which questions are phrased. It is important to stress, however, that other questions not included in this framework, will also be relevant to proposals (for example, feasibility, timescale, resources, experience of research team). This framework is therefore *not* intended as a comprehensive aid for proposal assessment.

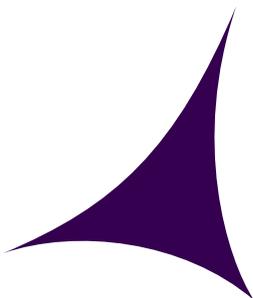


FRAMEWORK FOR ASSESSING QUALITATIVE EVALUATIONS³

Study being appraised:

	a) Appraisal questions	b) Quality indicators (possible features for consideration)	c) Notes on study being appraised
FINDINGS	1 How credible are the findings?	<p>Findings/conclusions are supported by data/study evidence (<i>i.e. the reader can see how the researcher arrived at his/her conclusions; the 'building blocks' of analysis and interpretation are evident</i>)</p> <p>Findings/conclusions 'make sense'/have a coherent logic</p> <p>Findings/conclusions are resonant with other knowledge and experience (<i>this might include peer or member review</i>)</p> <p>Use of corroborating evidence to support or refine findings (<i>i.e. other data sources have been used to examine phenomena; other research evidence has been evaluated: see also Q14</i>)</p>	
FINDINGS	2 How has knowledge/ understanding been extended by the research?	<p>Literature review (where appropriate) summarising knowledge to date/key issues raised by previous research</p> <p>Aims and design of study set in the context of existing knowledge/ understanding; identifies new areas for investigation (<i>for example, in relation to policy/practice/substantive theory</i>)</p> <p>Credible/clear discussion of how findings have contributed to knowledge and understanding (<i>e.g. of the policy, programme or theory being reviewed</i>); might be applied to new policy developments, practice or theory</p> <p>Findings presented or conceptualised in a way that offers new insights/alternative ways of thinking</p> <p>Discussion of limitations of evidence and what remains unknown/unclear or what further information/research is needed</p>	

³ For those wishing to read further about qualitative and evaluative research methods a short list of useful references can be found at the end.



	a) Appraisal questions	b) Quality indicators (possible features for consideration)	c) Notes on study being appraised
3 FINDINGS	How well does the evaluation address its original aims and purpose?	<p>Clear statement of study aims and objectives; reasons for any changes in objectives</p> <p>Findings clearly linked to the purposes of the study – and to the initiative or policy being studied</p> <p>Summary or conclusions directed towards aims of study</p> <p>Discussion of limitations of study in meeting aims (<i>e.g. are there limitations because of restricted access to study settings or participants, gaps in the sample coverage, missed or unresolved areas of questioning; incomplete analysis; time constraints?</i>)</p>	
4 FINDINGS	Scope for drawing wider inference – how well is this explained?	<p>Discussion of what can be generalised to wider population from which sample is drawn/case selection has been made</p> <p>Detailed description of the contexts in which the study was conducted to allow applicability to other settings/contextual generalities to be assessed</p> <p>Discussion of how hypotheses/propositions/findings may relate to wider theory; consideration of rival explanations</p> <p>Evidence supplied to support claims for wider inference (<i>either from study or from corroborating sources</i>)</p> <p>Discussion of limitations on drawing wider inference (<i>e.g. re-examination of sample and any missing constituencies: analysis of restrictions of study settings for drawing wider inference</i>)</p>	
5 FINDINGS	How clear is the basis of evaluative appraisal?	<p>Discussion of how assessments of effectiveness/evaluative judgements have been reached (<i>i.e. whose judgements are they and on what basis have they been reached?</i>)</p> <p>Description of any formalised appraisal criteria used, when generated and how and by whom they have been applied</p> <p>Discussion of the nature and source of any divergence in evaluative appraisals</p> <p>Discussion of any unintended consequences of intervention, their impact and why they arose</p>	



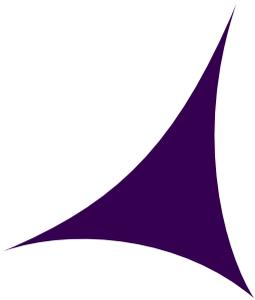
	a) Appraisal questions	b) Quality indicators (possible features for consideration)	c) Notes on study being appraised
6 DESIGN	How defensible is the research design?	<p>Discussion of how overall research strategy was designed to meet aims of study</p> <p>Discussion of rationale for study design</p> <p>Convincing argument for different features of research design (<i>e.g. reasons given for different components or stages of research; purpose of particular methods or data sources, multiple methods, time frames etc.</i>)</p> <p>Use of different features of design/data sources evident in findings presented</p> <p>Discussion of limitations of research design and their implications for the study evidence</p>	
7 SAMPLE	How well defended is the sample design/target selection of cases/documents?	<p>Description of study locations/areas and how and why chosen</p> <p>Description of population of interest and how sample selection relates to it (<i>e.g. typical, extreme case, diverse constituencies etc.</i>)</p> <p>Rationale for basis of selection of target sample/settings/documents (<i>e.g. characteristics/features of target sample/settings/documents, basis for inclusions and exclusions, discussion of sample size/number of cases/setting selected etc.</i>)</p> <p>Discussion of how sample/selections allowed required comparisons to be made</p>	
8 SAMPLE	Sample composition/case inclusion – how well is the eventual coverage described?	<p>Detailed profile of achieved sample/case coverage</p> <p>Maximising inclusion (<i>e.g. language matching or translation; specialised recruitment; organised transport for group attendance</i>)</p> <p>Discussion of any missing coverage in achieved samples/cases and implications for study evidence (<i>e.g. through comparison of target and achieved samples, comparison with population etc.</i>)</p> <p>Documentation of reasons for non-participation among sample approached/non-inclusion of selected cases/documents</p> <p>Discussion of access and methods of approach and how these might have affected participation/coverage</p>	



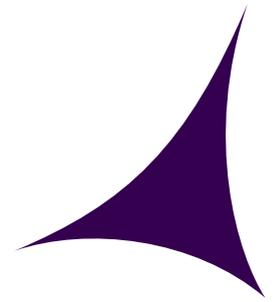
	a) Appraisal questions	b) Quality indicators (possible features for consideration)	c) Notes on study being appraised
DATA COLLECTION	9 How well was the data collection carried out?	<p>Discussion of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • who conducted data collection • procedures/documents used for collection/recording • checks on origin/status/authorship of documents <p>Audio or video recording of interviews/discussions/conversations (<i>if not recorded, were justifiable reasons given?</i>)</p> <p>Description of conventions for taking fieldnotes (<i>e.g. to identify what form of observations were required/to distinguish description from researcher commentary/analysis</i>)</p> <p>Discussion of how fieldwork methods or settings may have influenced data collected</p> <p>Demonstration, through portrayal and use of data, that depth, detail and richness were achieved in collection</p>	
ANALYSIS	10 How well has the approach to, and formulation of, the analysis been conveyed?	<p>Description of form of original data (<i>e.g. use of verbatim transcripts, observation or interview notes, documents, etc.</i>)</p> <p>Clear rationale for choice of data management method/tool/package</p> <p>Evidence of how <u>descriptive</u> analytic categories, classes, labels etc. have been generated and used (<i>i.e. either through explicit discussion or portrayal in the commentary</i>)</p> <p>Discussion, with examples, of how any <u>constructed</u> analytic concepts/typologies etc. have been devised and applied</p>	
ANALYSIS	11 Contexts of data sources – how well are they retained and portrayed?	<p>Description of background or historical developments and social/organisational characteristics of study sites or settings</p> <p>Participants' perspectives/observations placed in personal context (<i>e.g. use of case studies/vignettes/individual profiles, textual extracts annotated with details of contributors</i>)</p> <p>Explanation of origins/history of written documents</p> <p>Use of data management methods that preserve context (<i>i.e. facilitate within case description and analysis</i>)</p>	



	a) Appraisal questions	b) Quality indicators (possible features for consideration)	c) Notes on study being appraised
12 ANALYSIS	How well has diversity of perspective and content been explored?	<p>Discussion of contribution of sample design/ case selection in generating diversity</p> <p>Description and illumination of diversity/multiple perspectives/alternative positions in the evidence displayed</p> <p>Evidence of attention to negative cases, outliers or exceptions</p> <p>Typologies/models of variation derived and discussed</p> <p>Examination of origins/influences on opposing or differing positions</p> <p>Identification of patterns of association/linkages with divergent positions/groups</p>	
13 ANALYSIS	How well has detail, depth and complexity (i.e. richness) of the data been conveyed?	<p>Use and exploration of contributors' terms, concepts and meanings</p> <p>Unpacking and portrayal of nuance/subtlety/intricacy within data</p> <p>Discussion of explicit and implicit explanations</p> <p>Detection of underlying factors/influences</p> <p>Identification and discussion of patterns of association/conceptual linkages within data</p> <p>Presentation of illuminating textual extracts/observations</p>	
14 REPORTING	How clear are the links between data, interpretation and conclusions – i.e. how well can the route to any conclusions be seen?	<p>Clear conceptual links between analytic commentary and presentations of original data (<i>i.e. commentary and cited data relate; there is an analytic context to cited data, not simply repeated description</i>)</p> <p>Discussion of how/why particular interpretation/significance is assigned to specific aspects of data – with illustrative extracts of original data</p> <p>Discussion of how explanations/ theories/conclusions were derived – and how they relate to interpretations and content of original data (<i>i.e. how warranted</i>); whether alternative explanations explored</p> <p>Display of negative cases and how they lie outside main proposition/theory/ hypothesis etc.; or how proposition etc. revised to include them</p>	



	a) Appraisal questions	b) Quality indicators (possible features for consideration)	c) Notes on study being appraised
15 REPORTING	How clear and coherent is the reporting?	<p>Demonstrates link to aims of study/research questions</p> <p>Provides a narrative/story or clearly constructed thematic account</p> <p>Has structure and signposting that usefully guide reader through the commentary</p> <p>Provides accessible information for intended target audience(s)</p> <p>Key messages highlighted or summarised</p>	
16 REFLEXIVITY & NEUTRALITY	How clear are the assumptions/theoretical perspectives/values that have shaped the form and output of the evaluation?	<p>Discussion/evidence of the main assumptions/hypotheses/theoretical ideas on which the evaluation was based and how these affected the form, coverage or output of the evaluation (<i>the assumption here is that no research is undertaken without some underlying assumptions or theoretical ideas</i>)</p> <p>Discussion/evidence of the ideological perspectives/values/philosophies of research team and their impact on the methodological or substantive content of the evaluation (<i>again, may not be explicitly stated</i>)</p> <p>Evidence of openness to new/alternative ways of viewing subject/theories/assumptions (<i>e.g. discussion of learning/concepts/ constructions that have emerged from the data; refinement restatement of hypotheses/theories in light of emergent findings; evidence that alternative claims have been examined</i>)</p> <p>Discussion of how error or bias may have arisen in design/data collection/analysis and how addressed, if at all</p> <p>Reflections on the impact of the researcher on the research process</p>	



	a) Appraisal questions	b) Quality indicators (possible features for consideration)	c) Notes on study being appraised
17 ETHICS	What evidence is there of attention to ethical issues?	<p>Evidence of thoughtfulness/sensitivity about research contexts and participants</p> <p>Documentation of how research was presented in study settings/to participants (<i>including, where relevant, any possible consequences of taking part</i>)</p> <p>Documentation of consent procedures and information provided to participants</p> <p>Discussion of confidentiality of data and procedures for protecting</p> <p>Discussion of how anonymity of participants/sources was protected</p> <p>Discussion of any measures to offer information/advice/services etc. at end of study (<i>i.e. where participation exposed the need for these</i>)</p> <p>Discussion of potential harm or difficulty through participation, and how avoided</p>	
18 AUDITABILITY	How adequately has the research process been documented?	<p>Discussion of strengths and weaknesses of data sources and methods</p> <p>Documentation of changes made to design and reasons; implications for study coverage</p> <p>Documentation and reasons for changes in sample coverage/data collection/analytic approach; implications</p> <p>Reproduction of main study documents (<i>e.g. letters of approach, topic guides, observation templates, data management frameworks etc.</i>)</p>	

V FURTHER READING

A bibliography of texts addressing quality in qualitative research is provided in the main report, but the following are suggested for those who wish to read further about the basic principles and nature of qualitative research and evaluation methods.

Bryman, R. (2001) *Social Research Methods*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

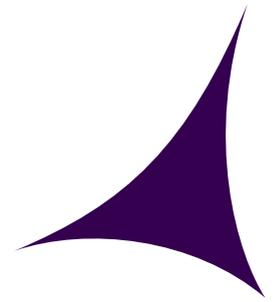
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The Government Chief Social Researcher's Office

The Government Chief Social Researcher's Office (GCSRO) is based in the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit and co-ordinates and promotes social research across Government. It encourages Departments to commission the right research at the right time in order to promote evidence-based policy making and the effective use of social research. It ensures that Government research is of the highest quality and uses the most appropriate and up-to-date methods and techniques. GCSRO helps ensure that the Government social research service has access to people with the right skills. The office maintains effective links with other professional groups within Government as well as with the academic community and those engaging in applied social policy research and evaluation outside Government. Sue Duncan, who is the Government's Chief Social Researcher, heads GCSRO. Sue can be contacted by email at Sue.Duncan@cabinet-office.x.gsi.gov.uk

A web version of the research can be found on Policy Hub (<http://www.policyhub.gov.uk>). Policy Hub is a web resource launched in March 2002 that aims to improve the way public policy is shaped and delivered. It provides many examples of initiatives, projects, tools and case studies that support better policy making and delivery and provides extensive guidance on the role of research and evidence in the evaluation of policy.

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