

Working in the Think Tank Sector

The Think Tank Operations Network 2023

Given the current economic, social and political issues facing the UK, encouraging more diversity in Westminster and the policy making sector is more important than ever. To contribute to this, a range of think tanks and similar organisations join together once a year to hold an event for individuals from under-represented groups to de-mystify the world of think tanks.

All the organisations involved are committed to increasing diversity in their own work force and are taking individual action to ensure their work places are open and inclusive. Steps include addressing unconscious bias in the recruitment process, actively providing opportunities for under-represented groups and a range of other actions designed to address the issue on many levels. We also pool our resources where relevant because we can make a bigger impact by working collectively.

Below we have gathered together information about where to look for roles in the sector, guidance to consider when you are applying for jobs, plus responses to Frequently Asked Questions.

For more information about the opportunities offered by individual organisations, please visit the individual websites of the organisations taking part and / or contact them.



Where to look for jobs in the sector

The think tank sector is thriving and recruitment is always on the go. The best place to find think tank sector jobs is by visiting their websites and / or keeping an eye on their social media feeds. If you are interested in the work of a specific organisation, sign up for their newsletters and follow them on social media as this is where their vacancies will first appear. They all also use a range of other recruitment methods, some of which are listed below.

- **Charity Job** - specifically created for charity, not for profit, third sector and voluntary jobs: <https://www.charityjob.co.uk/>
- **The Guardian** jobsite: <https://jobs.theguardian.com/>
- The **Working for an MP** website is a resource for anyone interested in working for a British Member of Parliament or with an interest in how Parliament works. Some think tanks and other research organisations also advertise roles here: <http://www.w4mp.org/>
- **Smart Thinking** aggregates on one platform some of the latest public policy research and analysis from UK think tanks. They list some job and internship opportunities as well as offering career guidance and info for students interested in seeking a think tank placement. <https://smarththinking.org.uk/>

While not part of the think tank sector, you may also be interested in civil service jobs.

- The **Civil Service**: one of the largest employers in the UK. It supports the government of the day to implement its policies. <https://www.civilservicejobs.service.gov.uk/csr/index.cgi>
- The **Civil Service Fast Stream** is the Civil Service's flagship leadership development programme, developing people from a wide range of backgrounds who have the potential to become future senior leaders <https://www.faststream.gov.uk/>

Other Useful Links

- **Access to Work Scheme**: If you're disabled or have a physical or mental health condition that makes it hard for you to do your job, you can talk to your employer about changes they must make in your workplace and get extra help from Access to Work, including mental health support: <https://www.gov.uk/access-to-work>
- **The Black Economist's Network** are a UK based organisation which seeks to connect, support and inspire Black economists, whilst challenging the lack of diversity in the field: <https://www.tben.co.uk/>
- **Charityworks** is a paid, 12 month talent programme which gives you all the tools you need to build a career in the UK non-profit sector: <https://www.charity-works.co.uk/graduate-programme/>
- The **Charity Commission** regulates the think tank sector and provides more information about sector activity: <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/charity-commission>
- **Government Communication Service**: the professional body for government communicators: <https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/>
- **WonkComms** for communications staff working within research institutions to share their practical experiences implementing revolutionary and evolutionary change using digital tools: <https://wonkcomms.net/>

Application Guidance

Each think tank uses their own application process, some use CVs and covering letters and some use application forms or dedicated application platforms. Many organisations involved in this event use blind shortlisting procedures. Please check for details on each organisation's website when they advertise vacancies. Despite these differences, all recruiters are looking for similar things and the guidelines below are applicable if you apply for jobs in our sector, or elsewhere.

- **Pay attention to detail and follow instructions.**

Most recruiters will be assessing your skills from the first point of contact so it is important to read the requirements given for the application process and follow them carefully. Ensuring you comply with their required format shows that you are capable of following the organisation's internal procedures which is an important part of being a good team player.

- **Think about presentation and formatting.**

Recruiters may be using your application to judge your Word and / or written presentation skills so provide the information requested as neatly and clearly as possible. Check your application for typos. Applications with multiple errors may be rejected, especially if the job description requires good written communication skills.

- **Highlight how you meet the essential requirements.**

Sifting is done on the basis of how well you meet the essential characteristics on the job specification – most organisations will score each candidate against these. Recruiters may be sifting hundreds of applications for each job so make it easy for them to see how you meet the requirements of the role by using bullets or section headings. Don't worry if you don't have all the skills / experience listed as 'desirable' – most recruiters will be sifting based on essential criteria only.

- **Provide concrete evidence.**

Don't just state 'I am the ideal candidate for the position' with no detail about how you've demonstrated the essential skills in the past – evidence your assertions by providing examples gained in previous employment, education or volunteering experience. Draw on all of your experience but only if it shows a transferable skill relevant to the position. Don't tell recruiters about skills / experience / interests that have no relevance unless they ask for this.

- **Research the organisation you are applying for.**

Look at their website and some of their recent work. Think about the role and how it fits into the organisation. Show that you have considered how you can meet this specific need.

- **Tailor each application to the specific job.**

This may be time consuming especially if you are applying for lots of jobs but recruiters want to see you have considered the specific role carefully, and how your skills and experience match the needs of the job. Don't just copy and paste material designed for another application form, and don't provide explanations about previous experience without spelling out how it applies to the demands of the specific role advertised.

FAQs

Qualifications / Uni Background

- **What qualifications and past experience are needed for jobs in the think tank sector?**

This will vary role to role, please check the essential and desirable section of job application packs to see what individual organisations are expecting from candidates for specific roles.

- **What degree disciplines are needed for roles in the think tank sector?**

The sector welcomes individuals from a variety of educational backgrounds and having a certain degree is not a prerequisite for working in a think tank. While specialist degrees may be useful for some roles, all degrees provide transferable skills that can be usefully applied to the sector.

- **Do I need to have studied specific subjects at university, or to have a postgraduate degree, to apply to work in a think tank?**

This varies by think tank. Some organisations (e.g. some of those focused on economic policy) might prefer candidates who have a background in a relevant subject, but many do not require applicants to have studied particular subjects at school or university, particularly for entry-level positions. The same applies to postgraduate degrees: for some roles and for some think-tanks, postgraduate degrees can be an advantage, but not all.

If you are interested in applying for a specific position but are unsure whether you have the correct qualifications (or indeed are unsure about any of the criteria outlined in the information you have about the vacancy), the best thing to do is get in touch with the organisation and ask them.

Getting into the Sector

- **What opportunities do think tanks offer those new to the sector?**

Think tanks offer a range of internships, trainee opportunities and entry-level roles. Pre-application chats and / or workshops are offered by some think tanks. Please visit individual websites to find out more about what's available.

The Think Tank Operations Network recommends looking out for paid internship positions. Unpaid internships may still be offered by some organisations in the sector but we do not recommend them.

- **Do think-tanks offer internships or work experience to candidates who are still at university?**

Some think tanks do offer work experience opportunities for candidates who haven't yet graduated, and others will only take on candidates who have completed their undergraduate degree. Some have structured work-experience or training programmes with regular schedules for applications, while others offer this on a less frequent or regular basis. Most organisations will specify on the recruitment section of their website whether they offer work experience placements or shadowing opportunities. Work experience, shadowing opportunities and training schemes are unlikely to be paid, but most organisations will offer expenses.

- **How often do think-tanks recruit? How do I find out when think-tanks are recruiting?**

Most recruit on an ad-hoc basis when the need arises. Some do recruit more regularly for specific roles or programmes (e.g. for fixed-term internships that start at the same time every year), but this is relatively unusual.

The best way to find out about vacancies at specific think-tanks is to keep an eye on the jobs pages on their websites (links to these pages for all the think-tanks involved in this year's event were included in the information pack), and on their Twitter and LinkedIn feeds. If the think tanks you are interested in have newsletters, it can often be helpful to subscribe to these too.

The website [Smart Thinking](#) also has a jobs board, which advertises vacancies at a wide range of think-tanks across the UK.

- **What is the best time of year to look for jobs?**

Roles are advertised all year around. Please keep an eye on each organisation's website or follow them on social media.

- **Do think tanks sponsor visa applications?**

The ability to sponsor visas will vary from role to role, and organisation to organisation so please check job application packs for details.

This varies considerably by think tank. Some will sponsor visas for employees, but this can depend on the specific role. Other organisations do not sponsor visas, meaning that in order to be eligible for their vacancies, an applicant must be a UK citizen, or otherwise entitled to work in the UK without a visa, or hold a relevant visa which allows them to work in the UK without sponsorship. If in doubt, get in touch with the think tank you are interested in and ask them.

Terms and Conditions

- **Is working for a think tank secure employment?**

The type of contract available should be stated at the time of application. The majority of roles will be either fixed term (often due to funding restraints) or permanent.

- **How much are flexible and remote working patterns the norm in the think-tank sector?**

Most think tanks have an office and will require employees to work from there at least some of the time – and meetings and/or events involving external contacts will also require travel at times. However, many organisations (particularly in the wake of the pandemic) have part-time, flexible and hybrid working arrangements available too.

Skills and Experience

- **Is it better to develop specific expertise or be a generalist?**

This will vary from role to role and depends on the size of the organisation. Large think tanks will have specialists focusing on specific areas whereas small organisations will have staff who fulfil a wide range of duties. Check the details in individual job application packs for the requirements of each role.

- **How should I improve my chances of getting into the sector?**

Most think tanks use social media and have a public events programme to publicise their work, so sign up for mailing lists and follow organisations online to familiarise yourself with their work. You could also work to improve skills that will be useful for a specific role (e.g. data analysis, social media skills, or writing, especially communicating complex policy ideas to a non-specialist audience). Some organisations need volunteers to help with specific aspects of their work and if this is feasible for you, it is another way to gain relevant experience.

- **Do I need data analysis skills to work in a think-tank?**

Many think tanks employ a mixture of research and policy staff who specialise in either qualitative or quantitative research, but who can and do develop skills in both on the job. Sometimes a think tank might be recruiting to fill a specific skills gap, so will be looking for a candidate with particular data analysis (or other) skills, and this will usually be clear from the job advert. In many cases, however, organisations are just as interested in candidates' potential and ability to learn new skills as they are in the specific data skills they already have. This is particularly the case for junior and entry-level roles.

- **What advice do you have for those wishing to move to a think tank from other sectors?**

Research the organisation or part of the sector that you are interested in moving into and work out how your existing skills can be applied to a role within the sector. Contact the organisation and ask if they can offer any guidance about whether your experience is a good fit. Many organisations will offer pre-application chats for more senior roles. For junior roles where this may not be possible due to the volume of applications, pre-application workshops may be available. Alternatively, if you have a question that isn't answered in the application guidance, contact the recruitment team and they will answer it for you or put you in touch with someone who can, although bear in mind this may not always be possible as some think tanks are small organisations with limited resources.

General Sector Info

- **How are think tanks funded?**

Think tanks are funded in a variety of ways including donations from the public, and through grants and / or contracts from charitable organisations, businesses or government departments. More information can be found in the annual reports of individual organisations which can be accessed via the Charity Commission website.

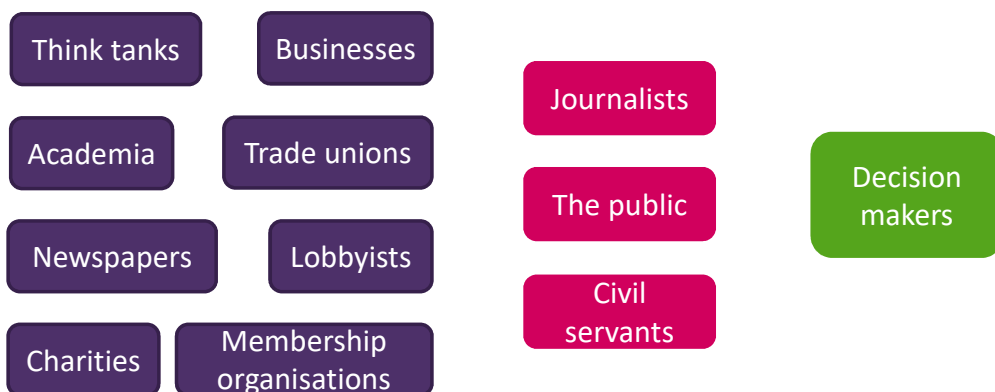
- **How are think tanks regulated and are they aligned with political parties?**

The majority of think tanks are registered charities and regulated by the Charity Commission. The charitable object of most think tanks is to advance education for the public benefit so think tanks are able to promote change in a specific area of policy in support of their charitable purposes, but they can't exist solely for political campaigning and cannot be party political. For more information, please visit the Charity Commission website.

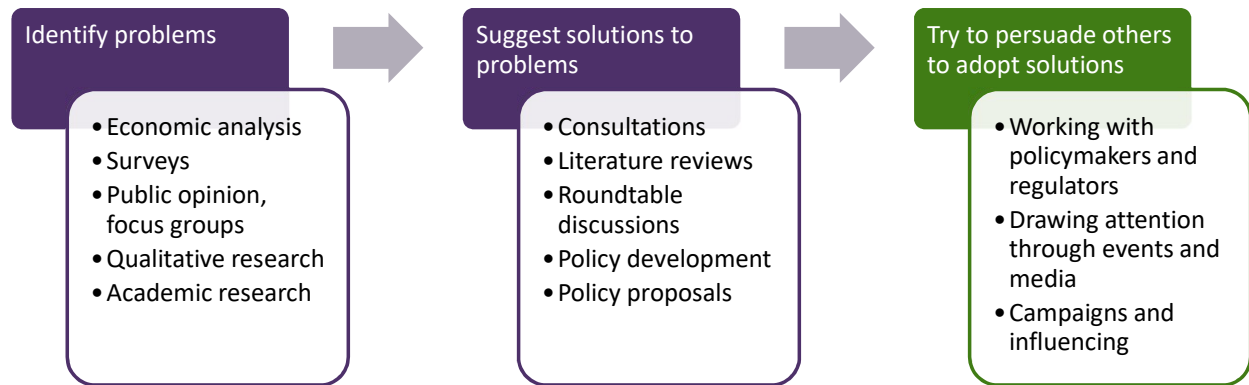
Introduction to think tanks ...and the wider sector

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...and the wider sector



Think tanks: what do they do?



Think tanks: who works in them?

