

Promoting change through research

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The impact of research in local government

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1 Introduction

The context for the research

As a non-statutory activity, research in local government has had a chequered history. The case for enhancing its role in policy and decision making has been extensively argued over recent years. Going back nearly 30 years, the reorganisation of local government in the early 1970s provided something of a catalyst for research under the influence of the Bains Report (Bains Committee, 1972), which recommended the development of corporate planning and policy analysis capacities. However, during the late 1970s and 1980s, the impact of central government policies and financial constraints resulted in an erosion of local authorities' research capacity (Blackman, 1995). In this context, fears developed about the potential threat to research posed by local government reorganisation. The Local Authorities Research and Intelligence Association (LARIA) commissioned a study of the nature and extent of research activity in local government as a response to 'the current context of apparently growing needs for research data combined with the severe resource constraints which many authorities face and the creation of new authorities in the wake of local government reorganisation' (Local Government Management Board (LGMB), 1995).

The Advisory Group for the LGMB study highlighted the role of research in enabling local authorities to respond effectively to pressures for change and to inform new ways of working. It was argued that research is essential to understand social and economic forces and trends, to understand the needs and concerns of communities and the public, and to evaluate performance: 'A learning local authority is

required and research can help build the learning local authority' (ibid., p. 3).

The findings of the LARIA project (Boddy and Snape, 1995) provided some cause for concern about local authorities' capacity for research. Although there was a recognition that research was increasingly important, it was, at the same time, viewed as a relatively low priority and, in a third of authorities, funding for research had decreased over the previous three years. There was a tendency for research to be decentralised to service departments with limited planning and co-ordination on a corporate basis. There had been a decline in the employment of research specialists by authorities and a tendency to integrate research into the broader work of non-specialists. Finally, there were acknowledged deficiencies in accessing external sources of research and information, in disseminating research findings and ensuring their impact on policy formation. Snape and Boddy (1996, p. 43) concluded that 'research remains marginal to much of mainstream local authority activity'.

These findings provided grounds for questions to be raised about the capacity of local government to meet the key challenges presented by the present government's 'modernisation agenda' (Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR), 1998). A number of important research needs arise from this agenda:

- understanding the social and economic environment in which councils are operating as a basis for effective strategy and vision for the well-being of their locality

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- understanding the problems and needs of local communities as a basis for effective policies and services
- increasing awareness of alternative 'ways of doing things' as a basis for innovation and change in policy, service delivery and management and organisation
- understanding the views of local citizens and other stakeholders about the services and activities of the authority
- promoting involvement and participation of citizens through research processes
- understanding the impact of strategies, policies, programmes and services on the well-being of communities and the locality (Boddy and Snape, 1995).

In particular, it is the duty to secure Best Value (DETR, 1999) that has the most direct implications for research. Effective performance review requires all the above capacities to be developed and, more broadly, effective performance management requires a strategic approach to information systems development and management within which the role of research is fully integrated. Blackman and Coombes (1996) argue that 'intelligent local governance' requires authorities to develop such a strategic capacity to collect and manage information and research data so as to understand key trends and processes and improve the effectiveness of their responses to complex social problems. Furthermore, it could be argued that the modernisation agenda – especially the emphasis on local government's community leadership role – together with the

development of new partnership structures such as Local Strategic Partnerships gives added impetus to data sharing and collaborative research.

However, while this clearly demonstrates the *need* for, and *importance* of, research in local government, how research findings are utilised and the way in which they impact on policy development and practice are relatively under-researched areas.

Most recently, in 1998, the LGMB, later to be incorporated into the new Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA), commissioned the Policy Research Institute to undertake a study examining local authorities' capacities in relation to research and to identify ways in which that capacity might be enhanced through collaborative arrangements (Percy-Smith *et al.*, 2000; Sanderson *et al.*, 2001). The key findings from this study in relation to the impact and utilisation of research findings were as follows:

- Forty-six per cent of local authorities highlighted the role played by research in the development of strategy and policy.
- Forty per cent of authorities felt that research plays a major role in improving effectiveness, efficiency and quality of services.
- Twenty-five per cent of authorities saw research playing a major role in informing organisational change and development.

These findings suggest that there is perhaps a lack of appreciation of the potential role of research in policy formulation and the development of practice.

Conceptualising the relationship between research and policy

The background for the research presented in the subsequent chapters of this report is a growing literature that seeks to conceptualise and understand the relationship between research and policy and practice change. A common theme within this literature is the belief that knowledge and information will improve policy making. Nutley and Webb (2000, pp. 25–8) offer a discussion of some of this literature and argue that the way in which this relationship is understood depends on how the policy process is perceived. This might be as a linear process, as a circle or as an irrational process. In summary, the most important models are:

- *Rational model*: policy making is seen as a rational process where ideas rather than interests shape politics. An alternative version of this model also takes interests into account.
- *Incremental model*: evolved in response to the perceived weaknesses of the rational model. The policy process is seen as essentially irrational, and information may contribute to policy at any stage of the process.
- *Mixed-scanning approach*: offers a marriage of the two previous approaches by arguing that fundamental decisions should adopt a rationalist approach and routine decisions a more incremental approach.

- *Garbage-can approach*: knowledge is not necessarily seen as a positive input for policy making. It is argued that pre-existing solutions can result in a search for problems to which they can be attached.

Possible reasons for a lack of connection between research and policy and practice have been discussed within the literature (e.g. Hillage *et al.*, 1998; Davies *et al.*, 2000). Three main reasons for this failure of communication are proposed (Davies *et al.*, 2000, pp. 229–50):

- The research agenda has been traditionally led by the researchers rather than the policy makers.
- The research community and the policy makers have different styles of work, use different methods, have different timescales and compose reports in a different way.
- There is a lack of demand for research findings because they are not thought to be relevant to real politics.

In response to these problems, suggestions are being made as to what an effective strategy should include (National Educational Research Forum) and on how to maximise the use of evidence (Davies *et al.*, 2000, pp. 351–66). In summary:

- Both policy makers and practitioners should believe in the importance of using evidence.
- The users of research should be partners in the production of evidence.

- The research should be within a convenient time and methodology framework.
- Research is more likely to be used if it is in accordance with the direction of existing political ideology.
- The research results should be robust and practical for implementation.
- Both researchers and policy makers should realise that evidence-based policy implementation, to have an effect, will take some time.

A paper by Mandell *et al.* (2001) takes the discussion of the relationship between research and policy a stage further by proposing a three-part conceptual framework for understanding these issues. The first part of the framework is a taxonomy of the ways in which research results exert an influence on policy choices. This taxonomy has three dimensions as follows:

- 1 The first dimension distinguishes between situations in which research findings influence specific policy decisions ('concrete utilisation') and situations where research findings influence the general intellectual orientations (world views) of policy actors ('conceptual utilisation').
- 2 The second dimension is a continuum that characterises the *scope* of utilisation. One ('substantive') end of this continuum is where research findings influence the basic core of either specific policy decisions or general intellectual orientation. At the other ('elaborative') end of the continuum are cases in which

research findings influence relatively narrow and peripheral elements of either specific policy decisions ('concrete-elaborative') or general intellectual orientations ('conceptual-elaborative'), the cores of which are established independently of the research.

- 3 The third dimension distinguishes between what the authors term 'formative' and 'persuasive/advocacy' utilisation. Formative utilisation refers to situations where individual actors use research to establish their positions; persuasive/advocacy utilisation refers to situations where research findings are used as the basis for persuading others of already established positions.

However, as the authors point out, while these three dimensions provide a model against which to assess the ways in which research findings are utilised, the boundaries between categories may be blurred, and the categories themselves are not necessarily 'mutually exclusive or collectively exhaustive'.

The second and third parts of the framework are the sets of factors that it is suggested affect the ways in which research is used: key characteristics of the research itself and key characteristics of the policy environment. The research characteristics include: definitiveness, timeliness, communication and visibility, generalisability and relevance. The third part of the framework relates to the policy environment and rests on the assumption that the policy effects of particular research findings will be a consequence of the 'interplay between ideology, interests and information'.

A further consideration in relation to the

assessment of the impact of research on policy making is to define what is meant by ‘impact’. Kanefsky (2001, pp. 5–7) makes an important distinction between ‘impact’ and ‘dissemination’. ‘Dissemination’ is a limited concept which refers to the spreading of awareness of an issue which may or may not have an impact on policy making and practice. ‘Impact’, on the other hand, is characterised as:

... comprehending the whole research agenda and process, but with special emphasis on transforming research knowledge into worthwhile and new approaches and useful products – artefacts, teaching materials, improved policies, improved practice, new research approaches and techniques.

Although impact as defined by Kanefsky is what researchers often aim for, Davies *et al.* (2000, p. 11) argue that what we can hope for most of the time is ‘evidence-influenced’ or ‘evidence-aware’ public policy.

The sub-group report of the National Educational Research Forum (2000, pp. 1–3) concludes that there are four main communities upon which researchers wish to have an impact:

- fellow researchers
- funders
- policy makers and practitioners
- journalistic media.

Although the content and the style of the research will vary depending on the target group, it is always important to adopt an *interactive model* of communication. In such a case, all the communities should interact with and influence one another.

This brief review of key issues relating to the relationship of research to policy and practice

provides a useful context for this study and will be returned to in subsequent sections of the report.

Research aims and objectives

This research builds on the earlier studies referred to in the previous section by analysing not how research is undertaken within local authorities, but rather how research findings are utilised and to what effect. The aims of the research were to:

- examine the way local authorities in Scotland, Wales and England use research to inform policy development at corporate level, including both officers and members
- explore how research is used at different levels from policy through to front-line delivery within individual policy/service areas. What factors support or inhibit the use and impact of research-based knowledge?
- investigate how the value and usefulness of research can be enhanced in supporting change within local authorities.

Research questions

The research questions that we sought to answer through the study relate both to *processes* – the ways in which research influences policy and practice – and also the *outcomes* of those processes – the kinds of changes that are brought about through research. Furthermore, our approach sought not only to identify and describe current practice but also to explain and seek to understand such practice in order to

provide a sound basis for recommendations for improvements.

The key research questions were as follows:

- What are the main sources of externally generated research findings?
- How do research findings 'enter' local authorities?
- Which staff within local authorities routinely have access to research and for what purposes?
- Do elected members access and use research in their decision making and, if so, at what point in the policy process?
- Are authorities proactive or reactive in using research, i.e. do authorities simply use the research sent to them or do they actively seek relevant research to assist in policy and practice development?
- How are research findings that are commissioned by the authority or are produced in-house disseminated within the authority?
- How are research findings utilised at different levels within local authorities, including:
 - at strategic partnership level
 - at strategic corporate level
 - at strategic service level
 - at operational level?
- What role does research play in encouraging policy and practice change?
- What are the processes – both formal and informal – through which research findings are brought to bear on policy development?

- How are unexpected or unwanted research findings handled?
- How do local authorities ensure that front-line and operational staff get access to recent research in their field, and develop their practice accordingly?
- What are the factors which encourage or inhibit the dissemination, utilisation and impact of research?

Research methods

Two methods were used to collect data: a survey of all local authorities to capture extensive data and a series of case studies to focus intensively on key issues.

Survey

The survey was administered in conjunction with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) and the Local Government Association (LGA). A covering letter and five copies of the questionnaire (included as Appendix 1) were sent to all local authorities in England, Scotland and Wales. The named contact from the research networks of the COSLA and the LGA was used wherever possible; otherwise, questionnaires were addressed to the Chief Executive. The covering letter requested that the questionnaires should be distributed within the authorities to five officers across a range of departments that had a responsibility for research or were key users of research. To keep a record of where questionnaires had been sent within the authority, a return pro forma was attached for the initial recipients of the questionnaires to complete, indicating to whom the questionnaire

had been forwarded. Non-respondents were followed up by telephone.

A total of 696 completed questionnaires were returned. Overall, 56 per cent of authorities across England, Scotland and Wales responded to the survey, with an average of 2.8 questionnaires returned per authority. There was a particularly good response from local authorities in Scotland, with 78 per cent responding to the survey. Table 1 indicates the total number of responses and response rate by local authority type.

Case studies

The main focus of the case studies was to explore in greater depth issues raised by the survey and, in particular, to increase our understanding of:

- the utilisation and impact of research at strategic partnership and corporate level
- the way in which research is utilised and its impact in relation to the following three key areas of policy:
 - education
 - housing
 - community consultations
- the processes, both formal and informal, which underpin the dissemination, utilisation and impact of research. (See interview checklist in Appendix 2.)

In addition, in each case-study authority and in relation to two out of the three topic areas, it was hoped that we would be able to ‘track’ the policy and implementation process to assess the use of research at all levels throughout the authority. A selected list of research reports published in the previous six to twelve months relating to education, housing, community consultation and some cross-cutting issues by a range of authoritative sources was drawn up in consultation with the Project Advisory Group (see Appendix 3). Officers in the case-study authorities were then invited to identify those research reports that they had seen so that we could then ‘track’ their route through the authority. In practice, this proved almost impossible to achieve for a number of reasons.

Table 1 Number of responses by local authority type

	Total questionnaires returned	% of total responses	No. of authorities responded	Response rate by type of authority (%)
District	316	45	122	51
Metropolitan Borough	72	10	21	58
London Borough (including Corporation of London)	35	5	14	42
Unitary	107	15	32	70
County	68	10	20	59
Scottish Unitary	77	11	25	78
Welsh Unitary	21	3	11	50
Total	696	100	245	56

Source: Policy Research Institute (PRI) 2001. Base: All ($n=696$).

First, most of the officers interviewed were unable to recall having seen any of the reports. Second, even if they could recall them, they were generally unable to identify where the report went to or what its impact might have been. It was clear that access to research material of this kind was diffuse; individual officers themselves largely took responsibility for tracking down and obtaining research materials; and their impact was similarly diffuse and difficult to pin down.

Case-study authorities were identified using the following criteria:

- at least one authority in England, Scotland and Wales
- at least one Metropolitan Authority, Unitary Authority, County Council and District Council
- at least one authority with a strong corporate research culture
- at least one authority in which research is predominantly devolved to departments and divisions.

The authorities that were finally involved as case studies were as follows:

- Newcastle City Council
- Torfaen Council
- Norfolk County Council
- South Norfolk District Council
- London Borough of Lambeth.

In addition, Edinburgh City Council hosted a shorter visit by members of the research team at a relatively late stage in the research, which provided a valuable opportunity to 'reality check' our draft report and to introduce a Scottish dimension.

Defining research in the local authority context

At its broadest, research can be said to refer to a systematic and potentially replicable process of collecting, analysing and interpreting data in order to generate knowledge or insight. In practical terms and in the context of local authorities, this definition could encompass:

- both quantitative and qualitative methods
- collection of data on attitudes, opinions etc. through surveys, focus groups
- manipulation and interrogation of datasets
- audits of services
- consultation exercises of various kinds
- evaluation
- good practice reviews.

The key element in the definition is not the type of activity nor the methodology but the degree to which it is systematic, rigorous and, potentially, replicable.

Evidence from our earlier study of research in local government (Percy-Smith *et al.*, 2000) suggested that there is no very clear or consistent definition of research that is widely accepted by all authorities. A decision was taken, therefore, not to stipulate a definition for this study but rather to explore the range of meanings as presented by those contributing to the current study.

As we expected, the definitions of research used in local authorities are relatively loose, vary across authorities and, more significantly, within authorities and encompass a broad range of activities and functions. For example, the

following are all functions that local authority research staff might, to a greater or lesser extent, be engaged in. (However, this is also true of many other people who are formally designated as policy officers.)

- managing research (commissioning, selecting, contract management)
- undertaking research in-house
- organising community-based research
- consulting with citizens and communities (e.g. as part of Best Value Reviews)
- finding relevant research publications
- sifting research publications
- summarising research publications
- distributing research publications
- accessing and interpreting statistical data (e.g. census data)
- applying research findings to policy.

In Newcastle, the following types of activity were specifically mentioned as 'research' by those interviewed:

- surveys – of staff, residents, businesses
- manipulation of data, e.g. projections of demographic data to identify trends in primary school pupil numbers
- consultations, e.g. on the budget and council priorities
- business competitor analysis
- market research
- needs analyses

- audits of services available.

However, in Lambeth, where a similarly broad definition of research was evident, some interviewees expressed the view that consultation and data analysis were not research, and some went so far as to suggest that what the local authority did generally was not 'proper' research, as it did not involve hypothesis testing. One senior manager said:

what the Council does isn't research – research is something academic and not relevant.

There is evidently a widespread lack of clarity about what constitutes research in the local government context, and many examples were cited to us of activities that were commonly defined as research but which did not conform to the definition above. In this study, we have made no attempt to apply that definition to distinguish between activities; a too rigorously applied definition did not seem to us to be helpful in seeking to understand research in local government. Nevertheless, it is perhaps worth registering a concern that the key criterion for research, i.e. that the process should be systematic, rigorous and replicable, is not generally referred to as a defining characteristic of research and may suggest something about the quality of at least some of the activity that is referred to as research in the local authority context.

Structure of the report

In the subsequent chapters of this report, we present and discuss the findings from both the survey and the case studies. Chapter 2 describes the structure and organisation of research in

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local authorities; Chapter 3 examines how local authorities access and communicate research outputs; Chapter 4 looks at the way in which research is used in the policy process and its impact; Chapter 5 discusses the impact of

research organisation on utilisation, research relationships and the consequences for research of local government modernisation. In the concluding chapter, key issues and action points from the research are identified.

2 The structure and organisation of research in local authorities

The way in which the research function in local authorities is organised and managed was not the main focus for this research. Nevertheless, questions relating to organisation were asked in both the survey and case studies, and this information provides a context for understanding the research findings.

Models of research organisation

The survey found that the most likely model for the organisation of research in English authorities was for some research to be undertaken centrally, with other research taking place at service or departmental level. There was also a high proportion of authorities where research was solely undertaken at service level – this was especially the case in district authorities.

In Welsh authorities research tended to take place at either service level or in directorates comprising a number of services, and Welsh authorities were less likely to have any sort of central research function. In Scotland, around

half the authorities undertook research within individual service departments, although a significant number had adopted a hybrid model with some research undertaken centrally, and some undertaken in departments or directorates.

Forty per cent of respondents said they had dedicated research staff within their department. This was significantly higher in Scotland, with more than half the authorities having dedicated staff, compared with only 24 per cent of Welsh local authorities. In England, single-tier authorities and county councils were much more likely than district authorities to have dedicated staff (see Table 2).

Overall, 13 per cent of all local authorities had a corporate research strategy. This was much higher in Scotland, where almost a quarter (23 per cent) had a strategy, compared with only 5 per cent in Wales (see Table 2).

The case studies provided further information on how these organisational models work in practice.

Table 2 Strategic research issues

	% with corporate research strategy	% with designated research staff (in department)
Scottish Unitary	23	53
County	21	57
Metropolitan Borough	19	52
Unitary	14	54
District	9	25
London Borough	7	58
Welsh Unitary	5	24
All	13	40

Source: PRI 2001. Base: All ($n=696$).

Central research units

Of the case-study authorities, Newcastle, South Norfolk, Norfolk County Council, Edinburgh and Lambeth have a central research function. In Newcastle, there is a Central Research Unit located within the Strategic Support Directorate; in Edinburgh, Corporate Services has a research and information function; in Lambeth, there is a Central Research and Intelligence Unit within the Corporate Policy Unit in the Chief Executive's department. In South Norfolk, the corporate research function sits within the Central Policy Unit. In all four cases, research is undertaken on request, mainly to support corporate priorities but without a corporate research work programme or strategy; the research units work predominantly in reactive mode. The central research units in Newcastle, South Norfolk and Lambeth offer advice to other departments/directorates on commissioning, managing and undertaking research, methodology, and respond to requests for information derived from databases that are maintained within the authority. This is not the case in Norfolk County Council, where the

Central Policy Unit works solely in support of corporate, often cross-cutting initiatives.

The Newcastle research unit is considerably larger than that in Lambeth, consisting of a research manager, a number of specialist staff, including a statistician, two officers with a generic research focus and other staff with a Best Value or Performance Management remit. In Lambeth, the Corporate Research and Information Unit consists of two officers with a Consultation Officer located in the Democracy Service with responsibility for managing all consultation work.

In all four cases, the central research unit carries out a large proportion of its work in-house.

By contrast with these three authorities, Torfaen has a research officer located within the External Funding and Information Unit. This post has corporate funding and a corporate function, in particular in relation to providing data and information to support funding bids. Again, there is no research strategy that underpins corporate research work.

Example 1: Central Policy Unit, South Norfolk District Council

Key features:

- Set up two years ago
- Has a strategic policy development role; also undertakes research and supports research activities elsewhere in the council
- The Unit is managed by the Head of Policy and Research to whom the Research and Policy Officer reports
- The Research and Policy Officer advises others on methodology, data analysis, reporting on findings and accessing demographic information and undertakes work on performance indicators

Research in departments or directorates

Even where a central research unit exists as in the case of Newcastle, Lambeth, Edinburgh, Norfolk County Council and South Norfolk, research work is also undertaken in departments and/or directorates. Thirteen per cent of respondents to the survey stated that their department/service had a departmental research strategy (see Table 3). Service areas most likely to have departmental strategies included education and social services, cultural services and corporate support services. Those departments that were most likely to have designated research staff included education and social services, housing and economic and community development (Table 3).

These survey findings were borne out by the case studies, which found considerable variation in the extent to which research is managed, commissioned or undertaken between directorates/departments. For example, in Edinburgh, there are dedicated research officers in individual departments, notably planning, housing, social services and

education. In Norfolk County Council, where the Central Policy Unit is not expected to undertake research for departments or directorates, there is research expertise within directorates, notably planning and transportation and social services, both of which have their own research units. A number of factors seem to determine this variation, including:

- the interest in/ attitudes to research on the part of key officers
- the culture within the department and/or the relevant professional group
- the skills and capacities of officers.

What is also clear from the case studies is that there are a large number of individual officers who have some element of research within a wider portfolio of activity. As one officer put it:

Everyone now has some research skills as an addition to their jobs.

Table 3 Departmental research strategies and research staff

	% with designated research staff (in department)	% with departmental research strategy
Education and social services	56	19
Housing	55	10
Economic and community development	40	13
Chief execs/ central policy unit	39	12
Planning, highways and environment	36	6
Corporate support services	31	16
Cultural services	24	17
Other	25	16
All	40	13

Source: PRI 2001. Base: All ($n=696$).

Co-ordination of research

Whether research is undertaken predominantly by a central unit, or within directorates or departments or a mixture of the two, most authorities seem to make some efforts to co-ordinate research activities across departments or directorates. In Newcastle, this happens through the Research Steering Group, which is convened by the Central Research Unit. This group provides a forum for officers engaged in research to share their departmental priorities, encourage collaboration and share information and good practice (see Example 2).

In South Norfolk, there is an awareness on the part of the Central Policy Unit of the need centrally to co-ordinate research that is being undertaken within individual departments or directorates in order to prevent duplication of effort and 'over-consultation' in some communities. Efforts are being made to ensure that all the relevant officers are aware when surveys are being planned so that other parts of the authority can 'piggy back' additional questions. However, this requires a higher degree of forward planning than some officers have been accustomed to.

Example 2: Newcastle City Council – Research Steering Group Terms of Reference

The Research Steering Group will be convened and led by Policy and Research Services, Strategic Support with a key contact officer from each directorate.

The role of the Research Steering Group will be to:

Research programme

- Advise Policy and Research Services on the research requirements of directorates.
- Ensure resources are available to meet the requirements for corporate research as a priority.
- Develop a prioritised programme of research relating to services in light of the reduced SLAs for directorates and statutory requirements arising out of the national agenda.
- Agree, monitor and review the implementation of the authority's research programme. This will be reported to the corporate team annually.
- Advise Policy and Research Services on the content of corporate research projects where appropriate, e.g. content of Residents Survey.
- Advise on the use of external consultants to carry out particular projects for which the skills and resources are not available in-house.
- Provide constructive feedback to Policy and Research Services on its performance.

Co-ordination of research and dissemination of findings

- Be informed of *all* research undertaken that is within the scope of the Research Protocol and maintain a database containing this information for inspection on the intranet.
- Be aware of and co-ordinate activities with the Community Participation Working Group.
- Provide a focus for the dissemination and communication of research being undertaken by the authority.

In Edinburgh, there are a number of mechanisms for co-ordinating research. A Research Managers Group exists which meets on an ad hoc basis, perhaps once or twice a year, particularly if any major issues or initiatives emerge. There is also a Community Consultation Working Group to support consultation activity within the authority and to disseminate good practice; this group has set up a database to underpin activity in relation to community consultations.

By contrast, in Lambeth there are currently no formal means of co-ordinating research across the authority, although in the past there has been a Research Co-ordination Group.

In all the case-study authorities, the intranet is used as a means of keeping people informed about research activities. In Newcastle, this will, in the future, include a database of research projects from across the authority. In all the case-study authorities, there were also many examples of informal networking through personal contacts.

Some authorities are involved in partnership arrangements with other local organisations which involve an element of co-ordination of research activity and data sharing. However, in most areas, this is not, as yet, a very well-developed area.

3 Accessing and disseminating research outputs

In this chapter, we address the issue of how the outputs from research enter local authorities and circulate within them – in other words, who has access to what kinds of information and how easily that access is achieved. We focus on research outputs that are externally generated, i.e. produced by an organisation other than the local authority, not for that authority and with no specific focus on that authority. Second, we consider research outputs that have been generated within the local authority itself and research outputs produced by an external agency but commissioned by the authority.

Externally generated research

Sources disseminated

This category includes a huge range of material produced by government departments, government agencies, local authority organisations, academic bodies, private consultancies, charitable trusts, voluntary organisations and specialist organisations. The survey indicated that research materials from certain sources were more likely than others to be routinely disseminated to key officers. As Table 4 shows, reports from the DETR/DTLR (in Scotland, the Scottish Executive and, in Wales, the Welsh Assembly) and from the LGA (in England and Wales) and COSLA (in

Table 4 External research reports regularly disseminated to key officers (%)

	England	Scotland	Wales
Local Government Association (LGA)/Welsh LGA	81	17	85
Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR)	80	32	33
Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA)	58	15	37
Office for National Statistics (ONS)	47	41	37
Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF)	43	43	33
Home Office	38	9	33
Department of Health (DoH)	31	24	19
Department for Education and Employment (DfEE)	25	16	19
Department for Social Security (DSS)	16	11	15
National NGOs	6	16	4
Research and information networks, e.g. LARIA, LGIU	4	4	4
Professional bodies, e.g. CIH, RTPI	4	4	4
Voluntary sector	2	4	0
Regional Development Agencies	1	0	0
Universities, consultancies, think tanks	1	0	0
Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA)	1	89	0
Scottish Executive	0	27	0
Welsh Assembly	0	0	41

Source: PRI 2001. Base: All ($n=696$).

Scotland) are most likely to be disseminated to key officers. In addition, material is routinely disseminated from a wide range of other organisations – government departments, NGOs, research and information networks, think tanks and consultancies. Furthermore research from more specialist agencies may also be consulted by relevant staff, e.g. the Association of Directors of Social Services, the Chartered Institute of Housing.

The kind of research information used routinely was further investigated as part of the case studies. The list of sources accessed by Norfolk County Council (see Example 3) was not untypical.

Example 3: External sources of research material used by Norfolk County Council

- Local Government Association
- Joseph Rowntree Foundation
- Audit Commission
- Local Government Information Unit
- Improvement and Development Agency
- Local Authorities Research and Information Association
- Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions
- Department for Farming and Rural Affairs
- Department for Education and Skills
- Local research carried out by other agencies
- On-line statistical sources, e.g. NOMIS
- University of East Anglia
- OFSTED
- NFER
- Countryside Commission
- Regional Observatory
- Benchmarking groups
- Other specialist sources

Reliance on what are regarded as authoritative sources is one method used by officers to sift out certain materials in order to prevent becoming swamped with information. At a strategic or corporate level, research materials emanating from central government departments, especially the DTLR and, in Wales and Scotland respectively, the National Assembly for Wales and the Scottish Executive, the LGA, the Audit Commission and IDeA are all regarded as authoritative. In addition, officers take particular note of any research report that is seen as prefiguring a major policy change.

At a directorate, departmental or service level, more specialist sources were regarded as particularly authoritative, e.g. Ofsted, the Chartered Institute of Housing, the Association of Directors of Social Services.

By contrast, some sources were regarded as being less reliable, either because they were politically motivated – Friends of the Earth was mentioned by one case-study authority as an example – or because they were trying to sell something – private sector consultancies were referred to by several interviewees in this context.

Overall, there was a feeling that the most authoritative sources were those with a track record of producing reliable and relevant information. The quality of the research was a further consideration. Officers were generally sceptical of organisations with no proven track record or those that appeared to be promoting themselves rather than the research.

Accessing external sources

Externally produced research may arrive in the authority unsolicited or following a request from an officer. Specific requests for material

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result from officers having found out about the research in question. This, in turn, comes about through one or more of the following methods:

- direct mail from the organisation producing the research, e.g. a publicity leaflet or report summary
- an intermediary organisation sending out a notice of the report either through the mail or electronically, e.g. through an e-mail alert system or through an e-mail discussion group
- individual officers themselves searching for material either as part of a routine check of specific sources or as part of a search for materials relating to a specific topic
- articles referring to the research in professional journals or magazines
- local authority current awareness services, e.g. circulation by an Information Officer of key journal articles, government press releases etc.
- officer participation in a workshop, seminar or conference
- individuals' own informal networks
- networking with partner agencies
- membership of a professional association.

Thirty-five per cent of all survey respondents reported that someone within their department had responsibility for ensuring that colleagues are kept up to date with relevant research findings (35 per cent in England, 41 per cent in Scotland and 35 per cent in Wales). In several case-study authorities, officers said that they

routinely check key websites (e.g. DTLR and the LGA) for relevant material. Others said that they felt that they *ought* to be checking such sites regularly but, in practice, often did not get round to doing so owing to the pressure of other work.

Example 4

The Service Planning and Marketing Officer in Housing routinely seeks out information via the Internet. Typically, he checks eight or nine sites a week and also has a number of e-mail 'alarm' systems to draw his attention to new developments. In addition, he seeks out specific information to support new areas of work.

Internal dissemination

Where a research report or summary of the research arrives, unsolicited, in the authority, whether electronically or as paper copy, it is likely to be addressed to the Chief Executive or the relevant head of service. They, or another officer to whom it is referred, will then have to decide what to do with it. If they think it is of some value or relevance to the authority, they might take one or more of the following actions, depending on whether they think the appropriate audience is corporate senior officers, elected members, a particular department or directorate, research and policy staff or specific individual officers:

- disseminate further to other colleagues in paper form or electronically
- prepare a summary or briefing paper for discussion by colleagues and /or management team

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- bring to the attention of colleagues at a staff briefing or staff meeting
- pass to Members' Services for circulation to members, storage in members' library, inclusion in members' briefing.

In practice, these processes do occur, although not in accordance with an agreed protocol or through a formal system.

The survey showed that the most common dissemination methods were circulation of

either electronic information via e-mail or intranet or hard copies of reports, and cascading information down through senior management (see Table 5). The key mechanisms for disseminating externally generated research to both front-line and more senior staff were through the initiative of individual officers, and directly from a head of service or other senior manager (Table 6). Senior staff were more likely than front-line staff to be made aware of external research.

Table 5 Dissemination of research by designated staff

	Per cent
Dissemination via e-mail/intranet	20
Newsletter/briefing	15
Circulation of copies of reports to officers	14
Cascade through management process/head of service	13
Team meetings	9
Resource centre/library	5
Information passed directly to relevant officers	5
Scanning Internet and alerting relevant officers	5
Ad hoc/informal dissemination	5
Research network/group	3
Seminars/training events	3
Research database	1
Other	8

Source: PRI 2001. Base: All that had designated staff to disseminate research ($n=238$).

Table 6 How staff are made aware of external research

	Front-line staff (%)	Policy officers/ senior staff (%)
Through the initiative of individual officers	69	70
Information from head of service or another senior manager	64	70
Information from department information/research officer	34	34
Information from central research/information officer	21	26
They are not made aware of external research	9	3
Other	21	27

Source: PRI 2001. Base: All ($n=696$).

The case studies reinforced this picture of the way in which externally generated research reports are disseminated and provided some further detail. In Newcastle, a report or summary report is typically sent to the Chief Executive, the relevant head of service or the research and policy manager. How such material is then disseminated within the authority depends very much on the individual senior officer. One policy officer described the process in terms of research 'dribbling down' to other officers. Within Newcastle's Central Research Unit, managers regard it as part of their role to identify interesting material produced outside the authority and bring it to the attention of the relevant officer. However, selectivity is clearly important to avoid officers 'drowning in a sea of information' and, in the process, useful material being overlooked. Also, for this kind of informal cascading to work effectively, central research and policy staff need to have a good understanding of colleagues' current interests. Co-ordination and networking arrangements can help in this.

In Lambeth, similarly, at a corporate level, dissemination of external research outputs is relatively ad hoc with no formalised system of corporate dissemination. As in Newcastle, research information typically comes into the authority addressed to the Chief Executive or a head of service and would then be sent on to the appropriate officers.

In South Norfolk, although informal networks are considered to be more important than formal methods of dissemination, there is an information section on the Management Team agenda where important research findings can be discussed by the Chief Executive and chief officers. Information may then be passed

on to members or particular officers, or the research and policy officer may be asked to produce a briefing paper on the implications for the district.

Other examples of forms of dissemination from the case studies include the following:

- *Electronic dissemination either via e-mail or via the intranet*
 - Newcastle's intranet contains a list of useful websites and a list of publications produced by the Central Research Unit. The Head of Policy at Norfolk County Council sends out e-mails alerting officers to new research that has arrived within the authority, or highlighting key findings.
- *A central resource centre*
 - In Norfolk County Council, the Policy Unit is developing a library for storage of information received.
- *Internally produced newsletters*
 - In Newcastle, officers have access to the monthly briefing paper, which is produced primarily for elected members and which contains information about current and recent research.

Effectiveness of access to and dissemination of external research

Practice across authorities in relation to the circulation of externally produced research materials is very varied. While most officers acknowledge the importance of such material in order to keep up to date in their fields and to support the development of new policy initiatives, access to, and dissemination of, such

materials is, overall, rather uneven. Senior officers, both in the corporate centre and within directorates and departments, appear to have most chance of receiving information about external research; front-line officers have the least chance. However, the processes through which research materials are disseminated are typically informal and unsystematised and rely heavily on the initiative and networks of individual officers. It is undoubtedly the case that important and potentially relevant research materials do not always get to the right people at the right time.

Electronic means of disseminating information and of drawing people's attention to the existence of useful research materials are being developed in many authorities although there is still the problem of relying on individual officers to access the intranet regularly. One of the difficulties is the sheer volume of material that officers potentially have access to and which require some means of identifying what is useful and relevant. In the absence of other methods of discrimination, dependence on authoritative sources is important. Services that offer abstracts, summaries, digests and e-mail alerts are all seen to be of value.

Internally generated/commissioned research

Local authorities produce their own research which may be undertaken in-house through a central research team or by research staff located within a department or directorate. Alternatively, the research may be commissioned by the local authority from an external research producer. However, in both

these cases, the research that is produced shares certain common characteristics:

- It is undertaken in response to a specific need or local priority.
- It is relevant to that particular local authority.
- An officer or group of officers will have responsibility for the research.

We should expect, therefore, that there would be some important differences in relation to access and dissemination from the external research examined in the previous section. And, this is indeed the case. First, an important issue in relation to internally generated / commissioned research is awareness across the authority that the research is taking place. Second, departments or directorates not directly involved in the research need to be made aware that the research has taken place and to consider whether or not it has relevance for them. And finally, there may be issues relating to access to data by other departments or directorates.

Awareness of and access to internally generated/commissioned research

Both the survey and the case studies indicate that research that has been undertaken in-house or has been commissioned by the authority is more likely to be disseminated within the authority. Again, the role of individuals is crucial to this process.

The survey showed that in-house research was more likely to be disseminated by a head of service or senior manager than was external research (Table 7). Again, senior-level staff were more likely to receive in-house research via senior managers or from a central research

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officer. Other important mechanisms mentioned in relation to dissemination of in-house research were: electronic dissemination via the intranet and e-mail, circulation of reports and committee minutes, staff meetings and seminars, internally produced newsletters, networking and cascading information through management structures.

Research commissioned by the local authority from external researchers was less likely to be disseminated through the initiative of individual officers than other types of research (Table 8) and was more likely to be disseminated by senior staff, possibly because this is seen as more directly relevant or of greater value than other types of research.

This pattern of dissemination was evident in

the case studies. For example in Newcastle, corporate research undertaken by the Central Research Unit typically (but not always) goes to the Corporate Management Team and then to Cabinet and/or a Select Committee or Area Committee. It might also be disseminated internally, electronically via the intranet or through paper copies lodged in the members' library (which has a database linked to the City Library). Front-line staff might also be made aware of key research through the weekly letter to members and staff from the Chief Executive.

Both the survey data and evidence from the case studies indicate that access to research outputs by front-line staff is generally poor. Few formal mechanisms are in place, although one

Table 7 How staff are made aware of research carried out in-house

	Front-line staff (%)	Policy officers/ senior staff (%)
Information from head of service or another senior manager	70	75
Through the initiative of individual officers	64	66
Information from department information/research officer	34	35
Information from central research/information officer	22	26
They are not made aware of internally generated research	6	4
Other	20	17

Source: PRI 2001. Base: All ($n=696$).

Table 8 How staff are made aware of research commissioned from external researchers

	Front-line staff (%)	Policy officers/ senior staff (%)
Information from head of service or another senior manager	70	76
Through the initiative of individual officers	55	59
Information from department information/research officer	27	29
Information from central research/information officer	21	25
They are not made aware of commissioned research	9	4
Other	19	17

Source: PRI 2001. Base: All ($n=696$).

authority said that front-line staff were made aware of research on a 'need to know' basis. This is likely to have implications for the extent to which research 'promotes change' in terms of practice.

Research commissioned by the directorates from Newcastle's Central Research Unit and undertaken on a client basis is typically reported back to group structures. In some divisions, the research would be taken back to Directorate Management Teams; in others it would be taken directly to services. Some research reports will then go to the Select Committees via the directorates. Much of this dissemination takes place on the initiative of individual officers; there is no formal process for cascading research outputs. Research findings and their implications may also need to be communicated to front-line staff in order to ensure that practice changes in line with research evidence. Again, practice in this regard is uneven across the authority,

although Example 6 given in the box suggests an awareness of the additional issues that may be involved in communicating with front-line staff.

In Lambeth, the dissemination of internally generated research was generally the responsibility of the commissioning department. In most cases, the results of research carried out in-house or commissioned from an external agency were disseminated by placing them on the council's intranet. It was generally felt amongst interviewees that the intranet is the most effective way of disseminating internal research, and was a significant improvement on previous manual dissemination systems. It is clear that the council places a lot of emphasis on the dissemination of all policy documents. For pieces of particularly significant research, a press release may also be produced based on the findings.

Example 5: Newcastle Residents Survey

The Central Research Unit undertook a Residents Survey using the DETR model but with their own additional questions. The results of the survey went to the Corporate Management Team and from there went out to Area Committees. One Area Committee asked for action points to be more clearly identified, resulting in a further report containing recommendations for action. A summary of the survey results will also go out to residents and will be available on both the Internet and intranet and through the Customer Service Centre (One-Stop Shop).

Example 6: City Works communication strategy

City Works employs many front-line service staff, some of whom are likely to have difficulty with written communications. A communications strategy has been developed which allows the delivery of key information, including research findings, to front-line staff in a number of different ways, including: e-mail, face-to-face briefings and cascading information from the management team to teams and then to front-line staff.

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In Norfolk County Council, there are some mechanisms for the exchange of internally generated information, especially in relation to Best Value and community planning. The Best Value consultation group shares information and the Public Involvement Group also brings together those involved in community consultation. However, many individuals do not know what others are doing, and equally do not realise that the information they produce may be of use to others. For example, the Library Service undertook a number of community

audits which were not shared with others.

The post of Community Consultation Officer in Norfolk County Council was created about a year ago, since it was recognised that there was a need to be more corporate about consultation and public involvement. There was perceived to be much duplication and consultation fatigue, and a wish to encourage best practice. Thus this officer's key roles are joining up research activities, and leading on the Citizen's Panel (see Example 8).

Example 7: Dissemination – Lambeth's Citizen's Panel

Lambeth have their own Citizen's Panel which is managed by an external consultancy. The panel, which was established in 2000, comprises 1,300 residents drawn from across the community. An annual survey is undertaken, with four mini-sweeps throughout the year. All findings from the panel are placed on the intranet, circulated to the top 200 managers and also to officers who were involved in developing the questionnaire. It is then the responsibility of individual managers to take forward the results.

Example 8: Norfolk's Citizens Panel

The Citizen's Panel operates on behalf of the County Council, LSC, Police, Health Authority and some district councils. The County Council is the lead body. The panel consists of 7,000 individuals, 1,000 for each of the districts within the county, to provide a representative spread. The contract to operate the panel has recently been awarded to MORI.

In the past, the data obtained have been neither well co-ordinated by the County Council nor well used. Not all in the authority knew about the panel, how to get questions on to it or information from it. There were too many questions and insufficient quality control. The panel produces data on a district-by-district basis, or joined up for the county as a whole. District councils can have their own data. If a district does not pay to be involved, there is still a 1,000 sample, and they can access the data from this, but they cannot add questions at present. A timetable has now been produced, so questions can be timed to match policies in development and strategic planning.

continued

There have been logistical problems regarding liaison and the compatibility of data, but these are gradually being resolved. As more officers in the County Council become aware of the panel, the data will be better utilised – at present a lot of data remain unused. For example, in Best Value Reviews, officers will be able to see what exists, so there is no need for all to reconstruct the same data. The new panel data will be provided electronically, so it can be put on the intranet.

Access by and dissemination to elected members

The survey investigated how effectively research was disseminated to elected members (see Table 9). Research generated directly by the local authority, either undertaken in-house or commissioned from external researchers, was much more likely to be disseminated to elected members. This is probably because it is a response to an identified need and directly relevant to the local authority.

The case studies indicated that access by elected members to research materials is very patchy. Newcastle and South Norfolk District Council both produce regular members' briefings/bulletins which include references to research information. Again, however, the extent to which these briefings are read is variable. In general, external research does not get passed to members other than Cabinet members, and there was a widespread feeling that the majority of members would not be interested anyway. One member interviewed said:

Members need to be proactive and ask if they do not understand, but they won't all do this. Some are only interested in what affects their own areas.

Those members involved in Best Value Review Panels may receive information on Best Value consultations. Some elected members also mentioned the reports from the District Auditor and those generated by the peer review process as a source of information. However, it was felt by officers and at least some members themselves that many members do not have the analytical skills for critically interpreting research findings. Officers clearly could or should have a role in supporting elected members in the interpretation of research findings.

Factors encouraging/inhibiting access and dissemination

Overall, only one in five (21 per cent) survey respondents considered that staff at all levels

Table 9 Dissemination of research reports to key members

	Yes (%)	No (%)	Not sure (%)
Internally generated	66	13	21
Commissioned by the authority from external researchers	65	12	23
External	37	27	36

Source: PRI 2001. Base: All ($n=696$).

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had easy access to research findings. There was considerable variation between England, Scotland and Wales, with access to research findings appearing considerably easier in Scotland (30 per cent). Only 10 per cent of respondents from Welsh local authorities felt staff at all levels had access to findings (see Table 10).

While access to research findings for senior staff appears somewhat easier (overall 35 per cent felt that senior staff had easy access to research), this was still generally low. However, over half of all respondents felt that research reports are routinely brought to the attention of relevant senior staff. Fifty-eight per cent felt that individual officers had to take the initiative themselves to obtain relevant research reports. Overall, 44 per cent felt that effective use was being made of electronic means of dissemination.

Set against these relatively low figures are the more impressionistic findings from the case studies, which indicate that many officers feel 'swamped' by the volume of information they receive. This suggests that, for some officers at least, they are receiving plenty of information, but it is not necessarily what they want or need.

The case studies explored the factors that were likely to encourage or inhibit access to and dissemination of research materials.

Size of the authority

Clearly, in larger authorities, the task of dissemination presents more of a challenge. In particular, access and dissemination are less likely to be effective if they rely solely or primarily on informal methods. It is therefore not surprising that, in the larger authorities, consideration is being given to the development of knowledge-management systems to cope

Table 10 Dissemination of research findings

	England (%)	Scotland (%)	Wales (%)	Total (%)
Individual staff have to take the initiative themselves to obtain relevant research reports	58	61	62	58
Research reports are routinely brought to the attention of relevant senior staff	51	46	48	51
Effective use is made of electronic means of dissemination or research reports/ findings	44	43	48	44
Specialist research and policy officers have easy access to research findings that they need	40	46	29	40
Senior staff have easy access to research findings that they need	36	33	29	35
Staff at all levels have easy access to research findings that they need	21	30	10	21

Source: PRI 2001. Base: ($n=696$).

with the volume of information that has to be circulated and the complexity of the structures.

However, larger authorities do have the advantage of greater resources and the possibilities of economies of scale. For smaller local authorities, resources may not be available to justify the appointment of dedicated research and information staff, although informal networks may operate more readily.

The organisation of research within the authority

How research provision is structured within a local authority appears to have an influence on research dissemination. As indicated in Table 11, the survey showed that staff at all levels as well as senior and specialist staff tended to have easier access to research findings where research is focused within a central unit. Conversely,

where research functions were devolved to the departmental or service level, officers were more likely to have to act on their own initiative to obtain relevant research reports.

Formal systems

Most authorities, no matter what their size and how research is organised, use a combination of formal and informal methods of disseminating research. The main issue is to assess how effectively these methods are working and what the relative balance needs to be between the formal and informal. It is clear that, in most cases where research results in some kind of action, it has come to the attention of a corporate or departmental management team. Authorities should therefore consider whether there is a mechanism through which research findings are routinely brought to the attention

Table 11 Influence of research structure on dissemination of research findings

	Central unit (%)	Directorates (%)	Services (%)	Central/devolved (%)
Specialist research and policy officers have easy access to research findings that they need	56	33	35	43
Effective use is made of electronic means of dissemination or research reports/ findings	51	40	42	47
Research reports are routinely brought to the attention of relevant senior staff	49	62	43	55
Individual staff have to take the initiative themselves to obtain relevant research reports	47	52	61	59
Senior staff have easy access to research findings that they need	42	41	33	37
Staff at all levels have easy access to research findings that they need	26	24	22	21

Source: PRI 2001. Base: All ($n=696$)

of these or equivalent bodies.

Research that is effectively disseminated typically has a 'champion' within key structures.

Informal networks

However, given flatter management structures, increased team working and more diffuse access to information, much dissemination relies on the existence of good informal networks and officers having knowledge of each other's interests and concerns. The disadvantage is of course that research findings may not always get to the right people, as was evidently the case in a number of the case-study authorities. In addition, professional and departmental boundaries may militate against the development of these kinds of networks, as the following quotation suggests:

Communication between departments is difficult because of both professional boundaries and administrative boundaries. Creating partnership working between departments is not easy.

Electronic systems

Survey respondents saw greater use of electronic media, including e-mail, central databases, the Web and intranet as one way in which dissemination could be improved.

We need to crack how to disseminate the results of ongoing corporate work – we don't know if everyone knows. A centralised database would help to give key results.

However, as a number of the case studies showed, publishing research materials electronically was a necessary but not sufficient condition for their being accessed.

Research summaries and digests

One of the most frequently mentioned barriers to the effective dissemination of research was a lack of time on the part of officers routinely to look for, access and read research reports and summaries.

There were also difficulties relating to the skills involved in interpreting a piece of research carried out in another area and applying the findings to one's own authority.

Survey respondents suggested that one factor enhancing the dissemination of research findings was the provision of regular synopses / summaries / digests of research findings, produced either internally or by an external agency. The following quotes are typical:

What is needed is information about what exists – you don't know what you don't get.

Research findings which are more user-friendly are likely to come in the form of abstracts or summaries.

Some authorities or departments within authorities are already providing this service (see Example 9) and other case-study interviewees mentioned positively the service provided by info4local.

Sending out of research findings

The case studies indicated that those sending out unsolicited copies of research reports or findings need to take account of the fact that post that is not addressed to a named individual is likely to be opened by a secretary or administrative assistant. It therefore needs to include clear signposting information, including who it is likely to be relevant to. In Newcastle, it was argued that research would be

Example 9: Dissemination within Newcastle Social Services

In Social Services, research findings are treated as a particular kind of information. A weekly summary of information, reports and guidance received within the department is circulated to staff. Officers and members can request any report or document listed, or contact the Support Unit to query the database in order to locate all reports or documents relating to a particular issue.

Additionally, heads of service may request that certain reports or pieces of research are circulated to particular members of staff.

disseminated to the appropriate persons, irrespective of its source, where it is seen to be valid and useful. This underlines the importance of providing further signposting demonstrating the 'credentials' of the research.

Presentation of research findings

The way in which research is presented can affect the likelihood of its being read, disseminated or even acted upon. This issue came up in several case-study interviews: 'Digestibility is a problem'. Factors mentioned in case-study interviews as contributing to good presentation are collated in the box below.

Relevance to current policy and practice concerns is a key factor in determining access to and dissemination of research findings. This might be determined in relation to the authority's strategic objectives or priorities or, more operationally, the current responsibilities of a particular officer. Research which benchmarked an authority against others was likely to be considered particularly important. A further aspect of relevance cited in the case studies was the tendency in much local government research to focus on unitary and metropolitan authorities: 'Much is aimed at unitaries and mets as the government is more

Factors contributing to effective presentation

- A concise summary of the research findings (JRF *Findings* were widely cited as an example of good practice)
- Inclusion of recommendations, action points, checklists
- Clearly presented data, case studies or examples (the Audit Commission was widely quoted in the context of good examples)
- Orientation towards practitioners
- Limited use of academic references, footnotes etc.
- Clear identification of the key issues
- Awareness of the often multiple audiences for research
- Relevance and timeliness.

comfortable with this.’ This did not mean that the research was irrelevant to two-tier authorities, but rather that findings had to be adapted and reinterpreted to fit this context, and this, in turn, requires particular skills.

The timing of research dissemination is crucial. Research reports that arrive after key decisions have been taken are likely to be ignored as are those that utilise out-of-date data. The evaluation of the Best Value pilots was cited as an example of research that arrived too late; central government had already developed Best Value policy in advance of the results of the evaluation of the pilots, and local government was in the process of implementing that policy.

Summary of key issues

Knowledge management is an increasingly important issue, particularly for the larger local authorities, because of:

- increasing awareness of the need to provide evidence to support policy change
- the volume of information and data that needs to be circulated
- the need to make more effective use of research and information sources
- the recognition that current systems are not necessarily working very well.

Key characteristics of current systems for accessing and disseminating research materials are as follows:

- Internally generated/commissioned research is more likely to be available or disseminated than that undertaken by

external agencies unrelated to the local authority.

- Senior managers generally have reasonable access to research information.
- Many officers complain of feeling ‘swamped’, suggesting a lack of selectivity in the material that they access or receive.
- Dissemination is generally reliant on individuals and is therefore very hit and miss and highly dependent on individual officers’ motivations, skills and involvement in networks.
- Research findings are not getting to operational or front-line staff.
- Many officers lack the skills and capacity for evaluating the reliability of research or interpreting and applying research undertaken elsewhere.
- Awareness across departments of research undertaken or commissioned elsewhere within the authority is, at best, partial. A number of authorities are trying to address this issue by setting up formal or semi-formal structures for sharing information about ongoing research, appointing generic posts, e.g. consultation officer, or developing research databases accessible electronically.
- Systems for providing research information to elected members are relatively well developed. However, it is not clear that members make use of the research information to which they have access.

- Research producers need to indicate on reports why the document is important and who it should be passed to.

4 Utilisation and impact of research

In this chapter, we review the study's findings in relation to the processes through which research is applied to the development of policy and the impact of that research on policy and practice. In so doing, it is important to recognise that the relationship between research and policy is typically non-linear. In other words, it is rarely the case that the policy process begins with the identification of an issue or a problem, research is undertaken to investigate that issue or problem and possible solutions to it, and policy is developed accordingly. Many other factors, not least political values, come into play. Research undertaken *within* a local authority or commissioned *by* it is more likely to approximate this linear model. However, this is not usually true of external research. Here, the impact is more diffuse, with research findings contributing to the general background knowledge that provides the context for policy change. While in some rare cases a single piece of research has a momentous impact on the direction of local policy, it is more typical for there to be a gradual accumulation of research findings that tend in a particular policy direction and that eventually have an impact. However, in such cases it would be difficult, if not impossible, to isolate the impact of any particular piece of research. The issue of research impact is returned to in the next chapter.

Role of research in encouraging policy and practice change

Research as a driver of change

The survey asked how effectively research was used in relation to three areas: developing policy initiatives, reviewing existing policy initiatives and improving service quality. A high proportion of respondents felt that research findings were used effectively by officers when developing and reviewing policy initiatives and in improving service delivery. However, the proportion that felt that research findings were used *very* effectively was relatively low, particularly in relation to improving service quality (see Table 12).

The case studies showed that officers felt that the relationship between research and policy was stronger where the research in question had been undertaken in-house or commissioned by the authority. This reflects the finding that in-house or commissioned research is more likely to be disseminated. Internally generated research was felt to command a greater sense of ownership and, clearly, to be more closely aligned to the authority's priorities. Conversely, another view was that a more impartial, detached piece of work undertaken by a credible external research organisation was more likely to be used for strategic purposes. In some areas, local

Table 12 How effectively research findings are used by officers

	Very effectively (%)	Effectively (%)	Not at all effectively (%)
Developing new policy initiatives	13	69	18
Reviewing existing policy initiatives	10	71	19
Improving service quality	8	70	22

Source: PRI 2001. Base: All ($n=696$).

universities were seen as playing an important role in this regard, combining a rigorous approach to research with knowledge and understanding of the local area. External research was generally felt to be more likely to be influential where there were clear recommendations regarding best practice.

Unwillingness to engage with research findings was also evident in the case studies and was attributed to an absence of a 'culture of research' either across the authority as a whole, or within particular departments or professional groupings. In one case-study authority, officers described research as a 'tick box' exercise – something that had to be done but had very little impact on policy and practice. However, it was also felt that this attitude was beginning to change and that research was becoming more firmly embedded within the policy process and being used more effectively to identify needs and issues and to affect the allocation of resources. What might be viewed as the 'old' approach to research is summed up in the following quotations:

Internal research is generally very reactive to circumstances . . . people are generally looking for figures that support their case . . . it is not used as a robust evidence base for making decisions.

[Case-study authority] has a lot of problems . . . but there is a perception that people already know what the problems are . . . they just want evidence to support their case.

Other drivers of change

However, while research can influence the policy agenda, it is unlikely to determine it. Overall, the main drivers of policy change were felt to be: central government priorities,

legislation, local issues, needs and politics. A further factor was budgetary pressure. Local authorities may not be in a position to act on research findings owing to budget constraints. Nevertheless, research could be important in anticipating the direction of future policy change or confirming the direction of existing policy. The case studies indicated that pre-existing policy agendas largely determined the kinds of research that were then accessed and studied.

The view was also expressed that the need for instant answers and 'quick wins' militates against a more considered, evidence-based approach and, in some cases, the speed of policy change can mean that the agenda has moved on before there is time to complete a piece of research. A related view was found in another case-study authority, where it was felt that senior management had 'stopped making policy' and was focusing instead on improved processes and service delivery. This was particularly evident in relation to consultation; some officers and members in the authority in question were concerned that consulting with communities while failing to deliver would only serve to increase dissatisfaction and cynicism among citizens.

Processes through which research impacts on policy and practice

A key aspect of this study was to examine the processes through which research has an impact on policy and practice and, in particular, how research effects change.

Overall, the relationship between research and policy appears to be frequently ad hoc and informal, with little clarity or transparency.

Promoting change through research

Research takes place in a reactive manner. There is a lack of resources and lack of foresight. They crisis manage their way through and are always working to deal with what is currently going on.

As we have seen, externally generated research is generally less likely to have an impact on policy than is research commissioned or undertaken by the authority. Where external research is utilised, it is more likely to be as background to inform the development of policy in a particular area. In Newcastle, most policy staff interviewed said that they would search for relevant research reports if asked to undertake work in relation to a new policy area. Typically, they might look for national trends as reported in journals, seek out research on the issues identified and then, if necessary, commission further work. The most proactive approach to research that was found in the case studies was that of a policy manager with a specific responsibility for a number of culture change and management development initiatives, who ensured that there was a 'research component' within the teams that he was leading; he 'surrounds himself with others who know'.

Again, we found evidence in the case studies of both formal and informal processes at work at policy level. Formal processes focused on policy or research officers taking specific research findings which they considered important or relevant to the authority, to a corporate or departmental management team for further consideration and/or action.

Alternatively, perhaps where the implications of a piece of research were less clear, a policy or research officer might consult informally with senior colleagues and sometimes key members.

The processes through which research brings about changes in practice are less well developed than those that relate to policy change. As we have already seen, front-line workers are generally less likely than policy officers to be aware of research findings; systems for disseminating research findings to front-line staff are not well developed. As a result, research may influence policy, but the links with delivery are tenuous:

The findings from the Citizens Panel are not being widely disseminated . . . people don't know how to feed into the process . . . the findings have been used in the development of Vision and Values but they haven't informed delivery.

Example 10: LGA User Satisfaction Pilot Survey

The DETR guidance on residents surveys had made reference to the LGA pilot survey, so the Research Manager had sought it out on the LGA website to inform the Newcastle Residents Survey. In practice, it was used after the Newcastle survey had been carried out; the local results were compared with those in the pilot survey. The pilot survey had not informed the design of the Newcastle survey because the DETR guidance had been so prescriptive that there had, anyway, been very little room for local discretion. However, it did act as a check in terms of the methods used and was referred to in the Newcastle report.

Use of research by elected members

In relation to elected members, officers generally felt that research findings were not very effectively used in all areas of the development and implementation of policy (Table 13).

However, there was a high degree of uncertainty amongst many officers about how effectively research findings were used by members.

The case studies indicated that members' views of research were quite variable, depending in large part on their background and experience, including their professional experience. In one case-study authority, it was suggested that, while some members are committed to research and recognise its value, others regard research as a means of confirming or legitimating what they already know. A number of officers in the same authority expressed the view that members took notice of research when it suited them, but that the same was also true of senior officers. Research was more likely to have an impact on members where it had clear implications for their own wards or where it highlighted a specific problem or issue of interest to them. However, it was felt that research was rarely that clear-cut. Academic research or research that was not rooted in practice was less likely to have an impact on members.

As yet the scrutiny role was not generating more demand for research from members. In one case-study authority, it was noted that, where research was used to develop policy initiatives, this was not always available to elected members. Committee reports in the authority in question are restricted to six pages, and so relevant background information and research cannot be included. Although background documents are available on the intranet, many members will not bother to access these.

Examples of research impact

In order to identify the type of research most likely to have an impact on policy, survey respondents were asked whether they could identify a single piece of research in the last 12 months which led to a significant change of policy. Overall, 38 per cent of respondents could identify a piece of research that had led to a significant change of policy. This fell to only 17 per cent of local authorities in Wales but rose to 46 per cent of local authorities in Scotland. In England, Metropolitan Boroughs were most likely to be able to identify a piece of influential research (46 per cent), whereas only 27 per cent of London Boroughs were able to identify such a piece of research.

Table 13 How effectively research findings are used by elected members

	Very effectively (%)	Effectively (%)	Not at all effectively (%)	Not sure (%)
Developing new policy initiatives	4	33	25	38
Scrutiny/Best Value	4	37	20	39
Reviewing existing policy initiatives	3	33	26	38
Improving service quality	3	34	24	39

Source: PRI 2001. Base: All ($n=696$).

Promoting change through research

Policy change was most likely to result from research that was instigated directly by the local authority, either undertaken in-house (38 per cent) or commissioned externally (37 per cent).

Changes to which the research contributed included a range of corporate- and service-level changes (Table 14). The majority of changes were very specific service changes (referred to as ‘elaborative’ change in the framework described in Chapter 1 in the section ‘Conceptualising the relationship between research and policy’), for example changes to library services or a community newsletter. A range of more strategic changes (towards the ‘substantive’ end of the continuum described in the same section) were also included from overall reviews of services or realigning services, through to development of corporate plans, community planning and development of new structures as part of the modernisation process.

Following on from the data collected through the survey about research utilisation, there was an intention to ‘track’ certain research

reports through the case-study authorities with a view to specifying more closely the processes through which research impacts on policy. However, as indicated above in Chapter 1 in the section ‘Case studies’, this part of the case-study investigations proved almost impossible to undertake in practice. It was quite clear that, even where the officers interviewed were aware of any of the reports in question, or had read them, the impact was too diffuse to for it to be studied in any depth. At best, officers recalled having seen certain of the reports but were unable to identify specific policy changes that had resulted. More typical was one case-study authority where only the research manager could recall having seen any of the reports or having made use of them locally. The only examples of impacts resulting from the research reports in our list were as follows:

- In Norfolk County Council, one officer from Education had a copy of *Reasons for Exclusion from School* (DfES). He had become aware of this via the digest which

Table 14 Policy changes to which research contributed

	Per cent
Specific service changes	38
General service realignment/reviews	19
Development of new policy areas, e.g. community safety strategy	9
Development of corporate plan/overall council priorities	8
Best Value Process and Reviews	6
Community Planning/Neighbourhood Renewal	5
Reorganisation of council structures/Political management	4
Support funding bids/identification of areas of need	3
Improving performance management	2
Generally improved service delivery	1
Other	9

Source: PRI 2001. Base: All those that identified research that led to policy change ($n=257$).

had been received and circulated in the Department of Research, and requested it because this was an area of work in which he was involved. As yet, there was no completed policy, as the work was in progress, but the research was being taken into account in developing new policy.

- In Norfolk County Council, the Early Years Partnership is establishing area needs co-ordinators in accordance with the guidelines in the LGA report *Developing Early Education and Childcare Services for the 21st Century*. This report had been circulated in the department.
- Newcastle City Council's research manager had obtained a copy of the LGA *User Satisfaction Pilot Survey*, having seen a reference to it in the DETR guidance on residents surveys. It was used after the Newcastle Residents Survey had been carried out; the local results were compared with those in the pilot survey. The pilot survey had not informed the design of the Newcastle survey because the DETR guidance had been so prescriptive that there had, anyway, been very little room for local discretion. However, it did act as a check in terms of the methods used and was referred to in the Newcastle report.

What follows is the outcome of a more open request to officers interviewed to identify any recent research that had had a policy impact.

Externally generated research

Rogers Report, Urban Renaissance

This had an influence in Newcastle because 'it had the government stamp on it' and was seen to be an authoritative precursor of changes in planning policy. It addressed a concern of particular relevance to Newcastle – the out-migration of people from city centres – and was not written in a dense academic way.

Specifically, this report had an impact because it:

- was received at the time the department was reviewing this area of policy
- was endorsed by an external agency
- had clear recommendations
- had immediate relevance
- gave a clear indication of good practice
- was picked up by members and senior managers.

In other words, the characteristics of both the research and the policy environment were such that the chances of impact were maximised.

Welsh Assembly research on housing conditions and social deprivation

This has been particularly important in Torfaen. It has been used to support the Better Homes Review (this is a version of Best Value employed locally, relating to housing). This research was taken to the panel undertaking the Best Value Review by a senior officer. It played an important part in reviewing the comparative position ('compare') of Torfaen in relation to other councils.

DETR guidance on tenant attitude studies

This was used in Torfaen in the context of Best Value. When the guidance arrived, it was first considered by a senior officer who reported to the management team. A brief was drawn up, an advert for tenders was produced, a brief for the tenders was written, and research was commissioned.

Research by De Montfort University on choice-based allocation of housing

This has had an impact in Torfaen. The application process for housing is to be fundamentally reorganised on the basis of tenant choice. Concern with tenant participation has had a similar impact. Housing management is moving much more towards a marketing and estate agency approach and away from the paternalism of the past. There is a shift towards making greater use of advertising and of information provision.

Collaborative research

Review of youth services in Edinburgh

This was undertaken internally, externally and with some partner organisations. Many of the findings were considered to be contentious, as they were critical of some service providers. There was a lot of anxiety about how the results should be used and considerable energy was focused on how to manage the release of the results, rather than implementing the findings. This suggests that there was a lack of alignment between at least some aspects of the research and the policy environment.

Research undertaken in partnership with the University of Newcastle Medical School on the effects of exercise on health

This found that, in order to motivate people to take up exercise, 'facilitators' were needed to

encourage and support people. As a result of this research, staff have been appointed in two key areas of Newcastle to undertake this role. This piece of research was felt to have had an impact because it was in line with national and local priorities and had clear implications for local action.

Research on the educational achievement of boys

Torfaen has undertaken this research in partnership with the University of Bath. It was intended to produce useful material for teachers to be used in their professional training. It was designed as a form of action research in which teachers played a part in generating further information. This partnership was seen as extremely useful. In this case, the characteristics of the research itself maximised its impact.

Commissioned research

Race Matters in Lambeth

External consultants were commissioned by the Corporate Policy Unit of the Council to undertake a review of race equality in 1999. The impetus for the research was partly pressure from the local community and partly the findings of the Stephen Lawrence enquiry. The report was based on consultation with local residents through a series of focus groups, and identified a number of issues, including a lack of an explicit and public policy commitment to race equality, an absence of systematic monitoring of how well services are delivered to BME residents, and no consistent approach to collecting data on the race and ethnic origins of service users. Implementation of the findings from the report took a long time. A number of complex reasons may be identified for this

delay, including the whole background to race relations in Lambeth. An Equalities and Diversity Manager was appointed in December 2001 as a direct result of the findings from the research. A number of drivers may be identified which resulted in the research being taken forward.

- The need to act on the findings of the report was highlighted by the peer review team from the IDeA.
- The importance of other national policy drivers including the emerging Neighbourhood Renewal agenda.

Norfolk County Council Economic Audit

In 1997, after substantial local job losses, the County Council and the TEC paid for an Economic Audit, which has underpinned the Economic Strategy and Economic Partnership. Business leaders argued that someone needed to take a lead. As a result, the county now plays the strategic role, while detailed work on projects is carried out at district level, and business support is also provided by other agencies. This was reinforced by the Best Value Review, in which consultation supported a leading role for the NCC to avoid duplication.

MORI Annual Residents Survey – Torfaen

This annual survey produces a great deal of relevant information and is used to generate indicators of the quality of service. It has been carried out yearly since 1995, so it allows time series data to be generated. The general management team looks at the overall picture and produces a ‘member seminar’ based on the results. Detailed results relating to different departments are sent to the relevant departments, and they are required to develop

an action plan to meet the issues raised by the research.

South Norfolk District Council

South Norfolk District Council’s Anti-poverty Strategy Working Group has commissioned research into access to transport. This came about because the Group recognised that transport was an important cross-cutting issue; the research has been used by all departments, and it has influenced access policies.

In-house research

Tenant Satisfaction Survey

Undertaken by the Central Research Unit, Newcastle, this raised issues around access to/ participation in decision making. This resulted in the development of a community participation strategy with efforts to build in opportunities for participation. This research was felt to have had an impact because it:

- clearly identified priorities and issues for tenants
- met a specific need
- provided evidence to support policy change
- had immediate relevance.

Again, this example highlights certain features of both the research and the policy environments which tend to maximise the likelihood of impact.

Telephone survey of foster carers

Carried out by Newcastle City Council’s Central Research Unit, this research solicited views of foster carers on changes to the payment system. It was felt to have had an impact on policy

because it:

- was timely
- met a specific need
- provided evidence to support policy change
- was of immediate relevance.

Lambeth education – role of research and information in performance and service delivery

The Education Service within the London Borough of Lambeth has a dedicated Research and Statistics Unit. The role of the Unit is the provision of research performance data to schools, to support the strategic management of schools, as well as producing any data required by the Secretary of State. The team collects and analyses performance data and produces a range of publications aimed at identifying areas of weakness and strength, target setting and raising educational standards within Lambeth.

A key publication is the School Profile. Profiles are produced for each individual school, and provide a range of comparative information, benchmarking schools against the LEA and national average on a range of performance indicators. It is intended that the profiles will:

- trigger a series of questions and suggest areas of discussion
- suggest targets
- form the basis for discussion with teachers about classroom practice.

Each teacher has a copy of the School Profile and is trained in how they should use it. The

profiles are also used to identify and spread good practice from well-performing schools, and as the basis for targeting problem schools.

Norfolk County Council Central Library consultation

After the destruction of the former Norwich Central Library by fire, there was a public consultation exercise about whether the library and the record office should remain in the same facility or not. This has led to a separate archives facility. However, it was pointed out that one reason this research was influential was that funding was available for the redevelopment.

Norfolk County Council survey of young non-users of libraries

The Library Service commissioned a non-user survey of young people to feed into its Best Value Review. Satisfaction amongst users is very high, but little is known about the views of those who do not use the library. The research surveyed lapsed users, and also people in the street. Non-users wanted a different approach to encourage them to use library facilities. They sought a brighter and livelier atmosphere, where they felt they could relax and not 'creep in and out being policed by the people at the front desk'. As a result, libraries are being refurbished and new developments included.

Lambeth staff survey

The survey highlighted a number of issues such as lack of job security, poor morale, lack of support and training. The results from the survey were used consistently at senior level to support a new approach to staff and human resource management. The survey directly resulted in extra investment in Human Resources including £2.5m invested in people

management and £0.5m for management training. The survey had a significant impact because it was the first time it had been carried out, the findings were relatively hard-hitting, there was an identified strategic need for the research and the findings also fitted in with other major changes within the council.

South Norfolk District Council's elderly persons survey

This identified the need for a trustworthy handyman to deal with minor household maintenance. Such a service has now been established through Environmental Health.

Comprehensive Service Review

This review was produced in November 2001 in Edinburgh and was intended to provide a resource of information for budget making, planning and strategy making. The review drew together a wide range of information relating to resources, performance, needs and service profiles. It outlined spend on specific service areas, and benchmarked Edinburgh against other Scottish local authorities. The review was drawn up in the run-up to budget reviews. The process of the development of the review was very controversial in that it raised fundamental questions and exposed service weaknesses. However, it was felt to be ultimately useful in that it allowed members to look at budget issues in a more informed manner. The review will be continually updated.

Development of an affordable housing strategy

A Housing Needs Assessment was carried out through the Housing Department. One of the key issues that emerged was the lack of affordable housing within the authority. As a result, an affordable housing policy was

developed. The policy was a significant shift, as it specified that a percentage of any new housing developments should be affordable.

First and second reading procedure

Edinburgh has now agreed (though it has yet to be implemented) a new process for the development of major council policies and strategies, which is likely to increase and clarify the role and impact of research on policy and strategy. All major strategies and policies are to undergo a staged 'first and second reading' procedure. The intention was to increase participation in the development of policy by non-executive councillors, partner and other external organisations and the community, with a view to improving major policy decisions. There will clearly be an important role for research in the development of policy between the first and second readings, and will need to draw in outside partners in relation to both consultation and joint research to support the process.

Factors encouraging/inhibiting research utilisation

Survey responses indicate that research that was most likely to have an impact provided clear evidence to support the policy change, had immediate relevance and met a specific need within the authority. On the whole, the timeliness and relevance of research were more important than its being endorsed by an external agency or inclusion of good practice examples (see Table 15).

Respondents were asked about the barriers that prevent research findings being used more effectively (Table 16). By far the most important

Promoting change through research

Table 15 Reason for research having an impact

	Per cent
It provided evidence to support the policy change	76
It met a specific need within the authority	73
It had immediate relevance for this department/ division	72
It was received at the time that the department was reviewing this area of policy	53
It contained clear recommendations	53
It had been picked up by senior management	53
It gave a clear indication of good practice	42
It had been picked up by members	36
It was endorsed by a key external agency (e.g. DETR, LGA, professional body)	33
Other	13

Source: PRI 2001. Base: All ($n=257$).

Table 16 Barriers to the use of research findings

	England (%)	Scotland (%)	Wales (%)	Total (%)
Officers lack the time to read and assimilate research reports	73	78	76	73
Relevant research is not available at the time that it is needed	36	36	48	36
Relevant research is not easily available to those who need it	27	27	24	27
It is difficult to apply the findings of research to this department/ locality	24	22	24	24
Research reports are not written in an accessible style	21	18	14	21
Making use of research is not part of the culture of this department/ division	20	21	19	20
Research is not seen as important by managers	19	18	19	19
Research is not seen as important by members	18	21	14	18
The quality of research is often poor	9	8	10	9
Research is not undertaken by researchers who have credibility with officers	4	4	10	5
Research is not undertaken by researchers who have credibility with members	4	3	0	4
Other	11	12	5	11
None of these	7	7	5	7

Source: PRI 2001. Base: All ($n=696$).

barrier was that officers lacked the time to read and assimilate research reports. Other issues around the timeliness and accessibility of research were also important.

Other barriers mentioned by respondents included the organisational culture, costs of research, lack of expertise, lack of relevance of research, information overload and a lack of awareness of research.

The case studies provided further evidence in support of these findings.

Research focus

The fact that much research focused on unitary or metropolitan authorities was seen as a potential barrier to using research findings in both Norfolk County Council and South Norfolk District Council. For example, the initiatives presented in research findings were often viable in areas of concentrated population, whereas a different approach to service delivery might be more successful where the population was dispersed. While senior officers were keen to point out that their authorities worked in partnership with each other and with other agencies, thus seeking to minimise the effects of the two-tier system, front-line officers in both authorities said that the need to adapt best practice or to set up a partnership to implement an initiative was time-consuming and cumbersome, and lessened the impact of the research. They felt that researchers often failed to recognise the potential complexities of working within a two-tier system.

Effective dissemination

As we have seen earlier, for research to have an impact, it must be known about; therefore effective dissemination is important, including dissemination to key individuals. Research

reports that are poorly targeted may fail to reach the right audience and will not therefore have an impact. While many if not most authorities now routinely use their intranets as a key means of disseminating their own research, there has been little evaluation of how effective this is, given its dependence on individual officers routinely accessing information on their own initiative.

Source of research

Again, we have already seen that certain sources – especially those that are seen as being ‘close to the government’ – are regarded as being more authoritative and that the research findings from some agencies are more likely to be taken notice of. However, perceptions of the validity and reliability of the research findings were also significant.

In one case-study authority, the view was expressed that there is a lot of ‘popular’ research (i.e. relatively accessible research that attracts media attention) that is not very good, while at the same time a lot of ‘good’ research is not usable. Academic research frequently falls into the latter category. The ideal was felt to be research that has a practical focus, is specific, is clear about its limitations and is communicated well. This has implications both for the way in which research is presented and also for the development of critical skills among policy officers to enable them to distinguish between ‘good’ but poorly presented research and well-presented research that has little substance.

Timeliness and relevance

Where research arrives in the authority at the ‘wrong’ time or is not perceived as having any particular relevance to the authority in question, it is less likely that it will have an impact.

Presentation

The way in which a piece of research is presented can affect the likelihood of its being utilised. In particular, research users need to be able to assess quickly a piece of research for its relevance and utility, identify the key findings or messages from the research and apply them in their own context.

Context and culture

Research is most likely to have an impact on policy where the findings are seen to be 'swimming with the tide' of policy change or where findings confirm the existing direction of policy. Where local research findings contradict national policy, it can be difficult to use the research to inform local policy change.

More generally, the case studies indicated that it was difficult to achieve 'evidence-based policy', in part because the evidence may be thin, but also because politicians may not want to hear the evidence or because they do not have the time or skills to read and interpret a research report. There is still a long way to go before local authorities achieve the status of 'learning organisations'.

In terms of the use of external research, this was much more likely to be used if it was very timely and was directly related to current areas of work:

It's only really used if something jumps out and is relevant to what you are doing . . . the research might be very worthy and you might read them but it needs to be very timely . . . a lot of this material just sits on the shelf though.

The overall culture of the authority is clearly important in terms of its openness to new ideas and change.

In one case-study authority, the view was expressed that it was perhaps easier to adopt an evidence-based approach in the context of a new initiative or structure (the example of Early Years Childcare Partnerships was cited) because research-resistant professional and organisational cultures and vested interests had not yet had time to develop.

Officer resources and skills

Policy officers frequently lack the time to read and assimilate research results. They may also lack the skills to make effective use of research undertaken by other agencies or to apply research findings to their own locality. For example, in one case-study authority, officers argued that they 'need to be better at using the evidence and clever at deploying it'.

In-house research resources are typically deployed in a reactive rather than proactive way. While it is undoubtedly necessary to maintain some reactive capacity, this might not be the most effective way of deploying what are typically scarce research resources.

Research champions

Research is more likely to have an impact where it is 'championed' by a senior officer or member. This has two facets to it. The first refers to the culture of the authority and the way in which research in general is viewed. Looked at in this way, the arrival of a new head of service or Chief Executive who clearly signalled the value of research could act as a champion for research in general terms. However, having a champion could also affect the likelihood that a particular piece of research would have an impact. This was recognised in one case-study authority where it was suggested that, as part of the

process of encouraging policy change, key members or officers might be approached informally to ‘sound them out’ as to their support for taking issues forward.

Responding to unwelcome/unexpected research findings

Research does not always generate results or findings that are welcome or expected. The way in which an organisation deals with such results is perhaps an indication of the extent to which it is seriously evidence-based.

Respondents in Newcastle were asked how they felt unexpected or unwelcome research findings were handled. It was generally felt that most of the corporate work undertaken was ‘out in the open’, at least within the authority. The view of the Central Research Unit was very much that, if a finding could not be justified, it should not be included in the research report. As a result, the Central Research Unit is widely

seen as being genuinely independent.

Nevertheless, unexpected or unwelcome research findings were sometimes produced and might lead to ‘raised eyebrows’. Some officers were of the view that, where research findings were unexpected or unwelcome, further research might be commissioned to ‘explain away’ particular findings. It was argued that this had happened in relation to certain findings from the Residents Survey. One officer was of the view that it was generally harder to suppress unwelcome findings from consultation exercises than those that might arise in relation to other kinds of research. Where external research had produced such results, further research might be undertaken in order to explain local divergence from national trends. Where research findings were unwelcome or unexpected, it was felt that it was especially important that the research had a ‘champion’ who would take it forward.

Example 11: Newcastle Opinion Survey on Constitutional Change

The NOP opinion survey on constitutional change came about as a result of a decision by the Constitutional Forum which was set up to decide on the most appropriate methods for consultation. The results of the survey showed that the public were evenly balanced between the three options; the Forum’s advice was that there should be a referendum, but this was not accepted and the Leader and Cabinet model was adopted.

Example 12: Research to support Neighbourhood Renewal in Lambeth

A large data collection exercise was undertaken in order to identify areas of need to prioritise for Neighbourhood Renewal funding. Ultimately, funding was allocated on a pro rata basis. It was felt that it was too politically sensitive to prioritise certain areas.

Summary of key issues

- Research is a less significant determinant of policy than local politics, needs, issues and priorities or, indeed, central government prescription.
 - Some local authorities and departments/ directorates within authorities have a culture which is more receptive to research and an evidence-based approach to policy development.
 - Internally generated or commissioned research is more likely to be utilised and have an impact than is external research.
 - In general, the impact of research is in relation to fairly small-scale changes to service rather than major policy change.
- External research is more likely to influence policy rather than determine it.
 - Research is most likely to have an impact if it provides clear evidence in support of a policy change, is timely, locally relevant and meets a specific local need.
 - Research is least likely to have an impact when the way in which it is presented obscures the key message or findings or when the implications for action are not clear.
 - Having a 'champion' for a piece of research can assist impact.

5 Discussion: research and its impact on policy and practice

In this chapter of the report, we pull together the various strands of the research in a discussion of the relationship between research and policy and practice in local authorities.

Research organisation, structure and culture

Having an effective organisation and structure for the commissioning, undertaking and dissemination of research within a local authority is a necessary but not sufficient condition for research to have an impact. However, in a local authority environment of increasing organisational and policy complexity, coming up with the appropriate structure and organisation can be difficult. While the study provides some support for the argument that a centrally located research capacity results in more effective research and its dissemination, this is not always the case. Some local authorities have a well-functioning research capability that is located at directorate level. Whichever model is adopted, there is a need for some strategic oversight and effective co-ordination of research across the authority if maximum benefit is to be derived from research resources. Increasingly, local authorities, in common with other organisations, are investigating the introduction of comprehensive 'knowledge-management systems' to cope with the volume of information and intelligence which is generated within the organisation or is relevant to it. What such a system would look like in the local government context requires further investigation.

Dissemination

Dissemination of research materials is an essential prerequisite for impact. In essence, dissemination refers to the processes involved in getting the right information in the right format to the right people at the right time. An effective dissemination strategy would therefore require not only movements of materials around the authority but also effective systems for awareness raising, storage of materials and retrieval.

What is clear from this research is that dissemination of research materials within local authorities is very uneven in terms of coverage and frequently ad hoc and unsystematic. Although a wide variety of different means for disseminating materials is used, in most authorities there are no clear criteria as to which materials get disseminated to whom or formal systems for so doing. There is a heavy dependence on individuals themselves accessing information and passing it on to colleagues based on their personal networks. This is often unsatisfactory. There is no guarantee that the right materials get to the right people; the process often seems to take a long time, so that materials arrive after the time that they would have been useful; and there is massive duplication of effort, as many individuals seek out the same information or research. Front-line staff are especially likely not to receive information relating to research that might be relevant to the development and delivery of their service.

Again, where there is a central research unit that has a responsibility for dissemination, the

situation can be better. Also, the mechanisms for the dissemination of in-house research appear to be better than those for externally generated research.

Research cultures

For research to have an impact, there has to be an organisational or professional culture that is receptive to the idea that research has a part to play in the determination of policy. Again, this varies considerably both between authorities and within authorities. The study identified examples where the culture within the authority had been quite radically changed by the arrival of a Chief Executive who clearly valued research as an input into the policy process. Similarly, certain professional groups (e.g. education, social services and planning) are more likely than others to have a professional culture which embraces research as a normal part of policy. In these cases, research may be routinely searched out, commissioned or undertaken in-house to support decision making about new policy or service developments.

Members, as a group, are widely perceived (by officers) as being unsympathetic to research, especially research that is not relevant to their particular locality. Members themselves expressed different views as to the value of research; however, it was evident that, for most members, most of the time, research was not regarded as especially useful.

Research skills

Related to the issue of research culture was the issue of skills, including the skills of searching for and accessing research reports, appraising and interpreting the research, applying research

findings, commissioning and managing research and undertaking research projects. Again, the distribution of these skills was uneven; in some authorities, there were dedicated research officers who do have the appropriate skills to undertake the full range of research-related functions very effectively. In other cases, officers – typically policy officers – had acquired certain of these functions without necessarily having the skills to discharge them effectively, with consequences for the quality of the research produced. In some cases, the dominant view was that ‘anyone can do research’.

Central research units have, or could have, an important role to play in building capacity among those officers for whom research is a part of their brief and in exercising some quality control in relation to the design and implementation of in-house research projects. Shared staff development and training in relation to research could also contribute to the development of shared agendas and common standards or protocols for undertaking research.

The area where there appears to be the most need for skills development is in interpreting research findings and applying them to the locality in question. It was clear from our study that, in many cases, policy officers obtain research reports and have very little idea how to make practical use of them. The way in which research reports are produced and disseminated could also help in this regard (see section ‘Utilisation and impact’ below).

The issue of skills relating to accessing, interpreting and applying research findings is also relevant to elected members.

Research relationships

Local authorities are themselves complex organisations and are often also locked into complex networks of relationships with other organisations. These relationships have implications for the organisation, co-ordination and dissemination of research.

Intra-authority relationships

Relationships within a local authority have already been briefly touched on above in Chapter 4 in the section 'Processes through which research impacts on policy and practice'. However, it is important to emphasise the need to enhance the co-ordination, communication and dissemination of research within local authorities. This is especially the case in large authorities where the relevant research and policy officers may be dispersed across a number of departments or directorates. A corporate research strategy that is widely communicated within which directorate-level research strategies can be nested may be one contribution to more effective research relationships. Similarly pan-authority networks of researchers can also be useful.

Inter-authority and inter-agency relationships

Local authorities of a similar type or in the same region often share similar research needs. In such cases, there is value in collaborating to pool data and undertake or commission joint research. There are examples of collaborative work of this kind; however, there is also scope for considerably more collaboration, especially for small local authorities who do not have the resources to maintain a significant in-house research capacity.

The same is also true of collaboration with other agencies. Again, there is evidence of joint

research work and some data sharing, and, in some areas, there is evidence that this is being driven forward by the need to develop community plans and to set up Local Strategic Partnerships.

This research also uncovered examples of joint working across authorities in areas where there are two tiers. For example the Norfolk Citizen's Panel is generally well received and 'shows that two-tier research can work'. However, two-tier working can lead to additional costs, especially in terms of the time necessary to undertake the research. Nevertheless, there are factors which are increasingly driving two-tier authorities to work together, not least the increasing numbers of cross-cutting initiatives which require multi-faceted interventions which may be driven by departments in both tiers of local government.

Joint working was considered particularly important in South Norfolk because, although its size as a District Council was helpful for being close to the people, it had limited financial resources. County Council officers noted that they had greater resources, but that larger authorities were more unwieldy and may be viewed as distant by some residents. However, officers felt there was no clear guidance about working together; while this allowed some flexibility to take account of local circumstances, it was also felt there was an element of 'passing the buck'. Although in some respects the two tiers were complementary (for example, one could be strategic, while the other concentrated on local delivery), central government often required both the County Council and district authorities to deal with the same initiatives, such as producing a community plan.

Central–local relations

There is an interesting paradox that, on the one hand, local authorities regard research produced by central government and central government agencies as authoritative and, on the other, that they could not identify any such research that had had an impact on policy at the local level. Centrally produced research is clearly regarded as important – especially where it is felt to prefigure changes in the legislation or guidance affecting local government – but not much use appears to be made of it in a practical sense.

A further interesting aspect of the relationship between central and local government is that, while local government has heard the central government message about the importance of evidence-based policy, in practice this sits rather uneasily with the lack of local discretion which they feel they have to produce and then act on locally derived evidence. In other words, it was felt that there was not a lot of point in undertaking or commissioning research to inform local policy making when increasingly central government identified the priorities, determined how they should be delivered, set the targets and penalised local authorities if they did not meet them. In such a situation, there is no need to undertake research; local authorities need only wait for the central government guidance circular that tells them what to do. Although this is to overstate the case, it is clear that local authorities feel that their room for autonomous manoeuvre is diminishing in the face of increasing central government prescription.

A further cause of dissatisfaction at the local level is conflicting messages that emanate from different government departments reflecting a lack of ‘joined-up thinking’ centrally.

Officers from Norfolk County Council’s Social Services pointed out instances where they could have worked effectively with colleagues in other departments (especially Education and the Health Authority) but were in practice prevented from doing so because of different criteria and timescales that were applied to essentially similar activities. Again, this limited opportunities for joint research and development work.

Utilisation and impact

The main purpose of this research was to examine the utilisation and impact of research on policy and practice in local government and, in particular, to examine the role research plays in ‘promoting change’. In practice, this proved difficult to do because of the frequently informal and non-linear relationship between research and policy. However, it is clear that research that is undertaken in-house or is commissioned by the authority is considerably more likely to have an impact than research undertaken by an external agency. This largely relates to the rather instrumental view of research at the local level – that it should relate to specific local needs and issues or that it is undertaken in response to central government guidance (e.g. in relation to Best Value Reviews). Most research of this kind results in relatively small shifts in policy or changes to services – what we might term ‘elaborative’ change in terms of the framework described in Chapter 1 in the section ‘Conceptualising the relationship between research and policy’. We came across almost no examples of major policy shifts – ‘substantive’ change – that had come about as a result of research.

Research is most likely to have an impact where the following criteria are met:

- It is available at the right time.
- It is produced by a trusted and authoritative source.
- It produces unambiguous findings and has clear implications for action.
- It relates to an issue that is a current local priority.
- It is clearly relevant to the locality.
- It is consistent with national guidance, priorities etc.
- The findings do not represent a major challenge to the direction of existing policy.
- It is 'championed' by a senior officer or member.

These criteria are broadly in line with those characteristics of both research and the policy environment identified in the framework described in Chapter 1 in the section 'Conceptualising the relationship between research and policy'.

Although internally generated research is more likely to conform to these criteria, this is not to say that externally generated research has no impact or that it is not useful. Such research is frequently accessed by officers in local government and, although it is less frequently used to change policy in a very direct way, it nevertheless has an impact by adding to the background or contextual knowledge of those involved in developing policy ('conceptual utilisation'). It may also be used to confirm or

legitimise the existing direction of policy ('persuasive/advocacy utilisation').

Externally produced research could be more effectively utilised within local authorities. This would require both the development of skills in relevant officers in relation to the interpretation and application of research findings and the commitment of resources – lack of time was frequently mentioned as a barrier to making more use of external sources. It would also require research producers to be more sensitive to the needs of their audiences and to present research findings in a more user-friendly and accessible manner. (See section on 'Implications/action points for producers of research' in Chapter 6 for more on this issue.)

Consequence for research of local government modernisation

Local government is changing as a result of the modernisation agenda. Our research has shown that the modernisation agenda is also having an impact on research.

Best Value

The Best Value Review process has aspects of research built into it, especially in relation to consulting with citizens and users on services but also in relation to benchmarking services against other providers and collecting performance management data. These requirements have generated increasing demands for research within local authorities, and new posts have been developed with a particular remit around, for example, consultation work. It is clearly the case that the Best Value regime is generating increasing amounts of information about local authority

performance. One officer described the effect as ‘putting research into all areas of the department’ because of the need to compare and consult.

However, there were also complaints about the bureaucratic nature of the process:

Best Value is too process oriented. We spend lots of time on form-filling and not doing enough development work and innovation. The philosophy behind Best Value is good, but the inspection regime and the auditors lead to a paper chase. So we hit the targets but not in the spirit of the thing.

While some officers conceded that research associated with Best Value had given them a better understanding of the community’s needs, others felt that it was time-consuming and expensive research that simply told them what they already felt they knew.

However, there is also evidence that, given constrained resources, local authorities are deploying their research capability to support the Best Value Review process as a priority and, in some cases, this is effectively squeezing out any other kinds of research.

New political structures

We had expected to find that the new political structures developing in local authorities were having an impact on research in local government. In particular, it had been assumed that the new role of backbench members might have generated research to support their policy review and scrutiny functions. In fact, this was

not the case. We found few examples of research that had been produced for this reason.

Similarly, there was little evidence to suggest that the new Cabinet structures were encouraging additional research. Indeed, on the contrary, there was some evidence to suggest that Cabinet members were now having to deal with such a wide range of issues that the amount of background information that they were provided with to support their decision making was decreasing rather than increasing. Issues go to Cabinet for decision whereas, in the past, officers could prepare committee papers ‘for information’. However, in one case, officers did say that they felt they had to use research to justify the proposals being put to members.

Once again, the issue of skills is relevant here; many members do not have the skills to make effective use of research in their work and, indeed, many do not feel that it has any value.

Community leadership

Local authorities’ community leadership role and their involvement in bodies such as Local Strategic Partnerships do appear to be having some impact, if only to encourage greater data sharing across agencies. The community planning process is also encouraging some additional research on community needs and priorities. However, we found relatively few examples of local authorities collaborating with their partners to undertake or commission research beyond a few projects undertaken on an ad hoc basis.

6 Key issues and action points

In the final chapter of the report, we draw out the key issues arising from the research and then go on to identify action points for local authorities, local government organisations and research producers. Although none of these action points are directed at central government except, of course, insofar as they are major producers of research, the issue raised in the previous chapter of the tension between the emphasis on 'evidence-based policy' on the one hand and increasing central government prescription on the other is relevant.

Key issues arising from the research

The place of research in local authorities

Research is organised in a variety of different ways within local authorities – centrally, within departments/directorates or a mixture of the two. There is also variation in the effectiveness with which research is conducted and co-ordinated and the degree to which there is a culture that positively supports and encourages research. There is evidence that research is seen as increasingly important, although this is not, as yet, always reflected in the ways in which research is organised. Some authorities are recognising their shortcomings and are investigating comprehensive knowledge-management systems, of which research is an important component.

Planning and managing research

Most local authority researchers work reactively in response to demands made on them. Even local authorities that have a central or corporate research function do not always have a research strategy or planned programme of work. Similarly, arrangements for co-ordinating

research across the authority are frequently informal although increasing use is made of electronic means of communication. Some authorities have developed or are developing overarching consultation strategies. Quality-control mechanisms in relation to research are often relatively weak.

Research skills

Some, usually larger, authorities employ dedicated research staff with appropriate and high-level skills. However, in many cases, policy officers take on research functions for which they are not trained or qualified. This is, in part, reflective of the view that 'anyone can do research'. There is a particular skills gap in relation to the effective utilisation and interpretation of research undertaken by other organisations which could, potentially, be applied in the local context. Elected members also often lack skills in relation to the interpretation of research findings.

Accessing research outputs

While some authorities or directorates/departments within authorities provide policy officers with a current awareness service to help keep them up to date with developments in their field, it is more usually the case that individual officers are themselves responsible for seeking out and obtaining access to research and other materials. This is inefficient in that it entails considerable duplication of effort. It is also often ineffective, as individuals, for whom this is not the main part of their job owing to competing pressures on their time, do not search as comprehensively or as regularly as they perhaps should and rely heavily on those sources that they regard as 'authoritative'.

Research summaries, digests and e-mail alert systems all have a role to play here in sifting out relevant research reports and making them more accessible.

Dissemination of research

In general, dissemination of research materials is often patchy, dependent on individuals and informal networks, and may take a long time. In most authorities, dissemination of information relating to research is dependent on poorly developed systems or on individuals taking the initiative to access the relevant parts of the intranet. As a result, while some officers felt that they were 'swamped' with information, for others this was far from being the case. In particular, front-line officers do not seem to have access to research findings that could help develop their practice.

Utilisation and impact of research

Research undertaken in-house or commissioned by the authority in response to a specific issue is more likely to be utilised than externally generated research. However, in general, the impact on policy is relatively small. External research has an important role to play in confirming or legitimising existing policy and it also contributes to the background knowledge of policy officers.

Implications/action points for local authorities

Organisation of research

While the way in which research is organised within a local authority does not determine the relationship between research and policy, it can influence it. Local authorities should consider

whether the way in which research is currently organised maximises the benefit to the authority in terms of:

- the deployment of resources
- the development of research skills
- the potential for collaboration both within the authority and with other agencies
- the quality of the research undertaken.

Access to and dissemination of research

Local authorities need to change their perception of research so that they regard it as a resource that involves costs in terms of acquiring it, but can result in benefits for individual officers and the authority as a whole. In particular, local authorities need to review:

- Who currently has access to what materials?
- Do the right people get the right information at the right time?
- How are front-line staff provided with 'evidence' to support practice change?
- How is research information entering the authority by whatever means, assessed in terms of its utility, catalogued and stored, and passed on?
- How are key officers and members kept up to date with developments in their areas of interest?
- What is the role of research and information staff – both in the centre and in directorates – in the dissemination of research?

- Is the best use being made of:
 - library and information staff and resources
 - Internet and intranet
 - intermediary (e.g. info4local) and search (e.g. Planning Exchange) services
 - research summaries and digests?

Creating an evidence culture

Many local authorities, directorates, departments and professional groups do not have an organisational culture that values research and evidence as inputs into policy. If policy is to be 'evidence-based', that organisational culture will need to change. This can happen with the arrival of a new senior officer. It is already, to some extent, being driven through the requirements of Best Value. Alternatively, an evidence culture will need to be built. This may not necessitate more research being undertaken, but rather research and evidence being used more effectively. The following steps can contribute to such a change:

- Research managers and other key officers need to identify and seek to address the disincentives that limit the effective use of research and evidence.
- Senior officers and members should routinely ask what the evidence is to support a policy change, or indeed, for things to stay as they are.
- Research officers should proactively identify and summarise research of relevance to current policy developments.
- Research units or groups of research officers need to 'sell' the benefits of

research, e.g. through the production of an annual report that identifies the impact of recent research on policy and practice.

- Appropriate staff development and training should be made available to address the research-related needs and skills of policy officers and members.

Research and policy and practice change

For research to have a real impact on policy, it needs to be fully integrated into the policy process, while at the same time recognising that, ultimately, the main drivers of policy will, and probably should, continue to be political values, local needs and priorities, and central government requirements. For practice to become 'evidence-aware', sustainable mechanisms need to be put in place to ensure that front-line officers have access to research findings and evidence of relevance to their areas of work.

Implications/action points for local government organisations

These changes at the level of individual local authorities need to be supported by the guidance, training and advice provided by the national local government organisations, especially the LGA and the IDeA. In particular, local authorities could benefit from:

- the availability of a range of training opportunities for both research and policy officers
- guidance on appropriate job descriptions for research and policy officers

- guidance on possible models for the organisation of research within local authorities
- the provision of examples of good practice in relation to research collaboration across authorities and across agencies.

Implications/action points for producers of research

Producers of research need to understand that there is a good chance that their research findings will not get to the right people at the right time or be interpreted and applied to a particular locality. Key issues for local authority users of externally produced research are gaining awareness of the research, assessing its relevance, summarising the key arguments or findings, and applying it to the local context. Producers of research could considerably facilitate this process by recognising that:

- Publication even electronically is not the same as facilitating access.
- Dissemination does not mean that you have necessarily reached your target audience.
- Reaching your target audience is not the same as having an impact.

These issues can be addressed in part through the following mechanisms:

- involving potential users of research earlier in the process
- better understanding of their target audience in the local authority context

and the processes through which research and policy interact

- raising awareness that the research has been carried out and a report/summary is available
- ensuring that research outputs are made as accessible as possible through the use of summaries, checklists, action points, recommendations etc.
- ensuring that any research report or summary that is sent to local authorities unsolicited has a covering sheet that contains the following key information:
 - who are the target audiences for the research
 - why it is relevant to them
 - what the key research findings are
 - what are the implications for the target audience
 - why the research results are credible
 - what the recipients should ideally do with the report/summary.

Conclusion

The current emphasis on evidence-based policy is generating ever greater volumes of research of relevance of local authorities. However, for evidence-based policy and practice to become a reality rather than costly rhetoric, emphasis now has to be placed on ensuring that the research that is being produced reaches the right people in the right form at the right time; and that those people have the requisite skills and motivation to interpret and apply the findings of research to their own local context. This requires commitment and a change in practice on the

part of the wider research community, local authorities and individual officers within authorities. This report provides evidence that supports just such a change of practice.

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Appendix 1

Survey questionnaire



LEEDS METROPOLITAN UNIVERSITY

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has commissioned the Policy Research Institute to carry out an important piece of research looking at how research is used within local government to inform policy and support change.

Please spare a few minutes to complete the following questionnaire. The results will be treated confidentially and will only be used for the purposes of this research. If you have any questions please contact Janie Percy-Smith or Alison Darlow (Tel: 0113 2831747; email: J.P.Smith@lmu.ac.uk or A.Darlow@lmu.ac.uk). Once complete please return by Friday 27th April in the enclosed postage paid envelope to:

Policy Research Institute
Leeds Metropolitan University
Bronte Hall
Beckett Park Campus
Leeds LS6 3QS

Your name:

Post:

Department/Division:

Tel No: Email:

Local authority:

Type of authority (please tick one):

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> ₁ District | <input type="checkbox"/> ₅ County |
| <input type="checkbox"/> ₂ Met District | <input type="checkbox"/> ₆ Scottish Unitary |
| <input type="checkbox"/> ₃ London Borough | <input type="checkbox"/> ₇ Welsh Unitary |
| <input type="checkbox"/> ₄ Unitary | <input type="checkbox"/> ₈ Other: |

Political control (please tick one):

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> ₁ Labour | <input type="checkbox"/> ₅ SNP |
| <input type="checkbox"/> ₂ Conservative | <input type="checkbox"/> ₆ Independent |
| <input type="checkbox"/> ₃ Liberal Democrat | <input type="checkbox"/> ₇ Plaid Cymru |
| <input type="checkbox"/> ₄ No overall control | <input type="checkbox"/> ₈ Other: |

Section 1: Research in Your Authority

1. How is research organised within your authority? *(please tick one)*
 - ₁ Most research is undertaken within a specialist central unit
 - ₂ Most research is undertaken in directorates comprising a number of services
 - ₃ Most research is undertaken within individual service departments
 - ₄ Some research is undertaken centrally; some research is devolved
 - ₅ Other *(please specify)*
 -
2. Do you have dedicated research staff in your department or division?
 - ₁ Yes
 - ₂ No
3. Does the authority have a corporate research strategy?
 - ₁ Yes
 - ₂ No
4. Does your department or division have a research strategy?
 - ₁ Yes
 - ₂ No

Section 2: Access to Research Findings

5. In your department or division how do *front-line staff* usually become aware of relevant research reports produced by *external* agencies (for example JRF, DETR)? *(please tick all that apply)*
 - ₁ Through the initiative of individual officers
 - ₂ Information from departmental information/research officer
 - ₃ Information from Head of Service or another senior manager
 - ₄ Information from central research/information officer
 - ₅ They are not made aware of external research
 - ₆ Other *(please describe)*
 -
6. In your department or division how do *front-line staff* usually become aware of relevant *internally generated* research reports (i.e. research carried out in-house)? *(please tick all that apply)*
 - ₁ Through the initiative of individual officers
 - ₂ Information from departmental information/research officer
 - ₃ Information from Head of Service or another senior manager
 - ₄ Information from central research/information officer

- ₅ They are not made aware of internally generated research
- ₆ Other (*please describe*)
-

7. In your department or division how do *front-line staff* usually become aware of research that has been *commissioned* by the authority (for example commissioned from external researchers)?

(*please tick all that apply*)

- ₁ Through the initiative of individual officers
- ₂ Information from departmental information/ research officer
- ₃ Information from Head of Service or another senior manager
- ₄ Information from central research/information officer
- ₅ They are not made aware of commissioned research
- ₆ Other (*please describe*)
-

8. In your department or division how do *policy officers and senior staff* usually become aware of relevant research reports produced by *external agencies* (for example JRF, DETR)? (*please tick all that apply*)

- ₁ Through the initiative of individual officers
- ₂ Information from departmental information/ research officer
- ₃ Information from Head of Service or another senior manager
- ₄ Information from central research/information officer
- ₅ They are not made aware of external research
- ₆ Other (*please describe*)
-

9. In your department or division how do *policy officers and senior staff* usually become aware of relevant *internally generated* research reports (i.e. research carried out in-house)? (*please tick all that apply*)

- ₁ Through the initiative of individual officers
- ₂ Information from departmental information/ research officer
- ₃ Information from Head of Service or another senior manager
- ₄ Information from central research/information officer
- ₅ They are not made aware of internally generated research
- ₆ Other (*please describe*)
-

Promoting change through research

10. In your department or division how do *policy officers and senior staff* usually become aware of research that has been *commissioned* by the authority (for example commissioned from external researchers)? *(please tick all that apply)*

- ₁ Through the initiative of individual officers
 - ₂ Information from departmental information/research officer
 - ₃ Information from Head of Service or another senior manager
 - ₄ Information from central research/information officer
 - ₅ They are not made aware of commissioned research
 - ₆ Other *(please describe)*
-

11. Are research reports from any of the following agencies routinely disseminated to key officers within your department or division? *(please tick all that apply)*

- ₁ Department for Environment Transport and Regions (DETR)
 - ₂ Department of Health (DoH)
 - ₃ Department for Education and Employment (DfEE)
 - ₄ Department for Social Security (DSS)
 - ₅ Home Office
 - ₆ Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA)
 - ₇ Local Government Association (LGA)
 - ₈ Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA)
 - ₉ Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF)
 - ₁₀ Office for National Statistics (ONS)
 - ₁₁ Specialist organisations *(please indicate which ones)*
-

12. Does anyone within your department or division have responsibility for ensuring that colleagues are kept up to date with relevant research findings?

- ₁ Yes
 - ₂ No
- If Yes, how is this done?
-

13. Which of the following statements describe the dissemination of research findings within your department or division? *(please tick all that apply)*

- ₁ Staff at all levels have easy access to research findings that they need
- ₂ Senior staff have easy access to research findings that they need
- ₃ Specialist research and policy officers have easy access to research findings that they need
- ₄ Research reports are routinely brought to the attention of relevant senior staff

- ₅ Individual staff have to take the initiative themselves to obtain relevant research reports
- ₆ Effective use is made of electronic means of dissemination or research reports/findings

14. In what ways do you think that dissemination of research reports and findings could be improved within your department or division?

.....

.....

.....

Section 3: Utilisation and Impact of Research Findings

15. How effectively would you say research findings are used in your department or division in relation to the following areas? *(please tick one box on each line)*

	Very effectively	Effectively	Not at all effectively
Developing new policy initiatives	<input type="checkbox"/> ₁	<input type="checkbox"/> ₂	<input type="checkbox"/> ₃
Reviewing existing policy initiatives	<input type="checkbox"/> ₁	<input type="checkbox"/> ₂	<input type="checkbox"/> ₃
Improving service quality	<input type="checkbox"/> ₁	<input type="checkbox"/> ₂	<input type="checkbox"/> ₃

16. Thinking about your department or division, which of the following factors prevent the use of research findings? *(please tick all that apply)*

- ₁ Relevant research is not easily available to those who need it
- ₂ Relevant research is not available at the time that it is needed
- ₃ Research reports are not written in an accessible style
- ₄ It is difficult to apply the findings of research to this department/locality
- ₅ Making use of research is not part of the culture of this department/division
- ₆ Officers lack the time to read and assimilate research reports
- ₇ Research is not seen as important by managers
- ₈ Research is not seen as important by members
- ₉ Research is not undertaken by researchers who have credibility with officers
- ₁₀ Research is not undertaken by researchers who have credibility with members
- ₁₁ The quality of research is often poor
- ₁₂ Other:
-
- ₁₃ None of these

17. Please tell us about anything else which prevents the use of research findings in your department or division?

.....

.....

Promoting change through research

18. Can you think of a piece of research over the last 12 months which has led to a significant change of policy within your department or division?

- ₁ Yes If yes continue
₂ No If no go to question 23

19. What was the title of the research and who produced it?

Title:

Author/Organisation:

Was this research (*please tick one only*):

- ₁ Internally generated (i.e. undertaken by local authority officers)
₂ Commissioned by the authority from external researchers
₃ External (i.e. undertaken by another agency)
₄ Don't know?

20. Briefly describe the policy change that the research contributed to.

.....

22. Why did this piece of research have an impact? (*please tick all that apply*)

- ₁ It was received at the time that the department was reviewing this area of policy
₂ It met a specific need within the authority
₃ It was endorsed by a key external agency (e.g. DETR, LGA, professional body)
₄ It provided evidence to support the policy change
₅ It contained clear recommendations
₆ It had immediate relevance for this department/division
₇ It gave a clear indication of good practice
₈ It had been picked up by members
₉ It had been picked up by senior management
₁₀ Other (*please specify*)

.....

23. Are the following types of research reports and findings routinely disseminated to key members? (*please tick one box on each line*)

	Yes	No	Not sure
Internally generated (i.e. undertaken by local authority officers)	<input type="checkbox"/> ₁	<input type="checkbox"/> ₂	<input type="checkbox"/> ₃
Commissioned by the authority from external researchers	<input type="checkbox"/> ₁	<input type="checkbox"/> ₂	<input type="checkbox"/> ₃
External (i.e. undertaken by another agency)	<input type="checkbox"/> ₁	<input type="checkbox"/> ₂	<input type="checkbox"/> ₃

24. Who has responsibility for disseminating research reports and findings to members?

.....

25. How effectively would you say research findings are used by members in relation to the following areas? *(please tick one box on each line)*

	Very effectively	Effectively	Not at all effectively	Not sure
Developing new policy initiatives	<input type="checkbox"/> ₁	<input type="checkbox"/> ₂	<input type="checkbox"/> ₃	<input type="checkbox"/> ₄
Reviewing existing policy initiatives	<input type="checkbox"/> ₁	<input type="checkbox"/> ₂	<input type="checkbox"/> ₃	<input type="checkbox"/> ₄
Improving service quality	<input type="checkbox"/> ₁	<input type="checkbox"/> ₂	<input type="checkbox"/> ₃	<input type="checkbox"/> ₄
Scrutiny/Best Value	<input type="checkbox"/> ₁	<input type="checkbox"/> ₂	<input type="checkbox"/> ₃	<input type="checkbox"/> ₄

26. Is there anything else that you would like to tell us about the dissemination, utilisation and impact of research in your authority?

.....

Thank you for completing this questionnaire

Appendix 2

Case-study interview checklist

Section 1: Organisation of research within the authority

Check details from the survey questionnaire:

- Central or devolved research function?
- Dedicated research staff? Where located?
- Corporate research strategy?
- Departmental/divisional research strategy?

Section 2: Communication and dissemination of research findings

1. In your department/section how would a research report produced externally typically find its way onto your desk?
 - Requested as a result of publicity, arrived in a mailout, via website etc.
 - Who gets it first?
 - Who has responsibility for dissemination?
 - How does dissemination take place?
 - What is the role of key individuals in dissemination?
 - What is the role of senior managers?
 - What is the role of research and policy officers?
2. How are research findings that are commissioned by the authority or produced in-house disseminated within the authority?
 - Requested as a result of publicity, arrived in a mailout, via website etc.
 - Who gets it first?
 - Who has responsibility for dissemination?
 - How does dissemination take place?
 - What is the role of key individuals in dissemination?
 - What is the role of senior managers?
 - What is the role of research and policy officers?
3. How does your department/division ensure that front-line and operational staff get access to recent research in their field and develop their practice accordingly?
4. If there are differences in the treatment of external and internal research why is this?
5. Are research reports that originate in different agencies more or less likely to be disseminated internally?
6. What are the factors that encourage or inhibit the dissemination of research?

7. What makes research findings more or less user-friendly / relevant?
8. How could dissemination of research findings be improved?

Section 3: Utilisation and impact of research

1. How are research findings utilised at different levels within the authority, including:
 - at strategic partnership level
 - at strategic corporate level
 - at strategic service level
 - at operational level?
2. What role does research play in encouraging policy and practice change?
 - developing new policy initiatives
 - reviewing existing policy initiatives
 - improving service quality.
3. How does this happen typically? Can you describe a typical process? (*Record particular examples, if possible.*)
4. What are the factors that inhibit the use / impact of research findings?
5. What factors encourage the use of research findings?
6. In general, would you say that your department or division is proactive or reactive in relation to research, i.e. in general does the department simply use the research sent to them or does it actively seek relevant research to assist in policy and practice development?
7. Why is this, e.g. culture of the authority, willingness to accept change?
8. What could be done to make your authority more proactive in relation to research?
9. How are unexpected or unwanted research findings handled?
10. Can you think of a specific piece of research that has had led to a significant change in policy over the last 12 months? (*Refer to survey questionnaire to prompt.*) Title? Originator?
11. What was the process by which this research led to policy change?
12. What were the factors that meant that this research had an impact?

Section 4: Elected members' role in research and policy

1. Are research reports routinely disseminated to all/some elected members?
2. Describe the processes, both informal and formal, through which this typically happens.
3. How do elected members typically view research?
4. What factors are most likely to make elected members take notice of research findings?
5. What factors are most likely to inhibit elected members from taking notice of research findings?
6. How effectively would you say that research findings are used by members in relation to:
 - developing new policy initiatives
 - reviewing existing policy initiatives
 - improving service quality
 - scrutiny/Best Value?

Appendix 3

'Tracked' research reports

Housing research

Cameron, A., Harrison, L., Burton, P. and Marsh, A. (2001) *Crossing the Housing and Care Divide*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation/ Bristol: The Policy Press (also as JRF *Findings* 111, January 2001)

Cole, I., Hickman, P., Reid, B. and Whittle, S. (2001) *Tenant Participation in Transition: Issues and Trends in the Development of Tenant Participation in the Local Authority Sector in England*. Sheffield: Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research. (Also Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions (2001) *Housing Research Summary*, No. 147)

Good Practice in Housing Management in Scotland (2001) Edinburgh: Scottish Executive Central Research Unit

Education

Developing Early Education and Childcare Services for the 21st century (2001) Research Report 12. London: LGA

Reasons for Exclusion from School (2001) Research Brief 244. London: DfES

Community consultation

Assessment of Innovative Approaches to Testing Community Opinion (2001) Edinburgh: Scottish Executive

Elections – the 21st Century Model – an Evaluation of the May 2000 Local Electoral Pilots (2001) Research Report 14. London: LGA

Taking the Initiative – Promoting Young People's Involvement in Public Decision Making (2001) London: Carnegie

Cross-cutting issues

An Inspector Calls – a Survey of Local Authorities on the Impact of Inspection (2001) Research Report 18. London: LGA

Paved with Good Intentions? A Survey of Local Authority Responses to the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry (March 2001) Research Briefing 6. London: LGA

User Satisfaction Performance Indicators – a Pilot Survey of the Public (January 2001) Research Briefing 4. London: LGA

