







Promoting change through research: the impact of research on local government

Current interest in evidence-based policy and practice is informed by a belief that research will improve policy and practice. This belief rests on the assumption that research is used by, and has an impact on, policy-makers and practitioners. This study, by Janie Percy-Smith of Leeds Metropolitan University, examines that assumption. Specifically, the study sought to understand both the ways in which research influenced policy and practice and also the kinds of changes that were influenced by research. The study found that:

-  Dissemination of research outputs within local authorities was often patchy. Front-line officers in particular did not have ready access to research findings that could help develop their practice.
-  Research undertaken in-house or commissioned by the authority was more likely to be used than externally generated research. In general the impact of research on policy tended to be relatively small.
-  Individual officers typically took responsibility for keeping themselves up to date. This was both inefficient and ineffective. Insufficient use was made of tools such as digests and email alert systems to sift out relevant research reports and make them more accessible.
-  Elected members made relatively little use of research, despite their new scrutiny roles. Many members did not believe they had the skills for interpreting and applying research findings to their local context. Officers concurred with this view.
-  There was a variation in the effectiveness with which research was conducted and coordinated, and the extent to which a culture existed that positively supported and encouraged research.
-  Some, usually larger, authorities employed dedicated research staff with appropriate skills. However, in many cases policy officers took on research activities for which they had no specialist skills or training. There was a particular skills gap in relation to the effective interpretation and use of research findings.

Background

A number of recent research reports have advocated the development of local authorities' research capacity in order to underpin the local government modernisation agenda and so that they are better equipped to respond effectively to complex social problems. However while the need for, and importance of, research in local government has been clearly demonstrated, how research findings are used and the way in which they affect policy and practice are relatively under-researched areas. This study explored the way local authorities used research to inform policy and practice and the factors which supported or inhibited the use and impact of research.

Research organisation, structure and culture

The study found that having an effective structure for the commissioning, undertaking and dissemination of research within a local authority was a necessary but not sufficient condition for research to have an impact. The study provides support for the argument that a centrally located, rather than devolved, research capacity results in more effective research and dissemination. Whichever model is adopted there is a need for strategic oversight and co-ordination of research.

Dissemination refers to the processes involved in getting the right information in the right format to the right people at the right time and is an essential pre-requisite for impact. Dissemination of research within local authorities was both uneven and unsystematic. It depended heavily on individuals accessing information themselves and passing it on to colleagues. This is unsatisfactory since there was no guarantee that the right materials got to the right people; the process often seemed to take a long time; and there was duplication of effort as many individuals sought out the same information. Front-line staff were least likely to have access to research of relevance to their practice.

There had to be a receptive organisational or professional culture if research was to have an impact. This varied considerably both between authorities and within authorities. Certain professional groups were more likely than others to have a culture which embraced research as a normal part of policy-making.

Related to research culture is the issue of skills, including the skills of searching for and gaining access to research reports, appraising and interpreting research, applying research findings, commissioning and managing research and undertaking research projects. Distribution of these skills was uneven. In

some authorities there were dedicated research officers who had the appropriate skills to undertake the full range of research-related functions very effectively. In others officers – typically policy officers – had acquired certain of these functions without necessarily having the skills to discharge them effectively. In some cases the dominant view was that 'anyone can do research'. There was most need for skills development in the interpretation and application of research findings.

The issue of skills development was also relevant to elected members. Many councillors did not appear to value the contribution research could make to decision-making or scrutiny, preferring instead to rely on their own knowledge about an issue or area. Some believed (or it was believed by officers) that they did not have the requisite skills to make effective use of research findings.

Research relationships

Local authorities of a similar type or in the same region may share similar research needs, making it easier for them to pool data or undertake or commission joint research. The study found examples of collaborative work of this kind. However, there appeared to be scope for more collaboration especially for small authorities which do not have the resources to maintain a significant in-house research capacity.

The study also found examples of joint working across two-tier authorities. However, two-tier working can impose additional costs in terms of the time necessary to secure agreement from a larger number of stakeholders. Nevertheless factors which made two-tier authorities work together included the increasing numbers of cross-cutting initiatives which require multi-faceted interventions involving departments in both tiers of local government.

Local authorities regarded research produced by central government and central government agencies as authoritative but, nevertheless, in this study they could not identify any such research that had had an impact on policy at the local level. Centrally produced research was clearly regarded as important – especially where it was felt to pre-figure changes in the legislation or guidance affecting local government – but not much practical use appeared to have been made of it.

Furthermore, while local government had heard the central government message about the importance of evidence-based policy, in practice this sat rather uneasily with what they felt was their lack of local discretion to seek and then act on locally produced evidence.

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 to examine the role research plays in 'promoting change'. The study showed that research which was undertaken in-house or was commissioned by the authority was considerably more likely to have an impact than research undertaken by an external agency. This reflects the dominant 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. Most research of this kind resulted in relatively small shifts in policy or changes to services. Research was most likely to have an impact where the following criteria were met:

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

Consequence for research of local government modernisation

The local government modernisation agenda is having an impact on research. The Best Value review process has research built in to it in relation to consulting with citizens and users on services and also for benchmarking services against other providers and collecting performance management data. 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 and told them what they already felt they knew. The study also provided evidence that local authorities were deploying their research capability as a priority to support the Best Value review process and that, in some cases, this was squeezing out other kinds of research.

Local authorities' community leadership role and their involvement in bodies such as Local Strategic Partnerships appeared to be having some impact if only to encourage greater data sharing across agencies. The community planning process was also

encouraging some additional research on community needs and priorities.

Conclusions and action

It could help evidence-based policy to become a reality if emphasis were placed on ensuring that research outputs reached the right people in the right form at the right time and that those people had the requisite skills and motivation to interpret and apply the findings of research to the local context. This might require commitment and a change in practice on the part of the wider research community, local authorities and individual officers within authorities.

Suggested action for local authorities

- Local authorities could 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;
 - the quality of the research undertaken.
- Local authorities could reassess the role of evidence in the following areas:
 - Who currently has access to what materials?
 - Do the right people get the right information at the right time?
 - Are front-line staff provided with evidence to support practice change?
 - How is research entering the authority assessed in terms of its utility?
 - How is it catalogued and stored, and passed on?
 - How are officers and members kept up to date with their areas of interest?
 - What are the roles of research and information staff in the dissemination of research findings?
 - Is the best use being made of: library and information staff and resources; Internet and intranet; intermediary (eg info4local) and search (eg Planning Exchange) services; research summaries and digests?
- Local authorities might be able to make more effective use of research by doing the following:
 - Research managers and other key officers could identify and address the barriers to the effective use of research and evidence.
 - Senior officers and members could routinely ask what the evidence is to support a policy change, or indeed, for things to stay as they are.
 - Research officers could proactively identify and summarise research of relevance to current policy developments.

- Research units or groups of research officers could work to persuade their colleagues of the benefits of research.
 - Appropriate staff development and training could be made available to address the research-related needs of policy officers and members.
- The findings of this study suggest that for research to have a real impact on policy, it needs to be fully integrated into the policy process. If sustainable mechanisms were put in place to ensure that front-line officers had access to research findings and evidence of relevance to their areas of work, practice might become more informed by evidence.

Suggested action for local government organisations

The research also indicates that these changes at the level of individual local authorities could be supported by the guidance, training and advice provided by the national local government organisations, especially the Local Government Association and the Improvement and Development Agency. In particular local authorities could benefit from:

- training opportunities for both research and policy officers, and elected members;
- guidance on appropriate job descriptions for research and policy officers;
- guidance on models for the organisation of research within local authorities;
- examples of good practice in relation to research collaboration across authorities and across agencies.

Suggested action for producers of research

Producers of research could enhance the possibility of their research having an impact by recognising that:

- publication, even electronically, is not the same as facilitating access;
- dissemination is not the same as reaching your target audience;
- reaching your target audience is not the same as having an impact.

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

- involving potential users of research earlier in the process;

- better understanding of target audiences and the processes through which research and policy interact;
- raising awareness of research reports and summaries;
- ensuring that research results 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 unsolicited to local authorities has a covering sheet that contains the following key information:
 - who the target audiences are for the research;
 - why it is relevant to them;
 - what the key research findings are;
 - what the implications are for the target audience;
 - why the research results are credible;
 - what the recipients should ideally do with the report or summary.

About the project

The study was undertaken by the Policy Research Institute, Leeds Metropolitan University. It involved a postal survey of all local authorities in England, Scotland and Wales and in-depth case studies of six local authorities.

How to get further information

The full report, **Promoting change through research: The impact of research in local government**, by Janie Percy-Smith with Tom Burden, Alison Darlow, Lynne Dawson, Murray Hawtin and Stella Ladi, is published for the Foundation by YPS (ISBN 1 84263 088 1, price £14.95). It is available from York Publishing Services Ltd, 64 Hallfield Road, Layerthorpe, York YO31 7ZQ, Tel: 01904 430033, Fax: 01904 430868, email: orders@yps-publishing.co.uk. (Please add £2.00 p&p per order.) You can also download this report free from www.jrf.org.uk (ISBN 1 84263 089 X).

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