



Local Government
Knowledge Navigator

The role of Evidence and Research in Local Government

Results of a
Local Government Knowledge
Navigator survey initiated by the
Society of Local Authority Chief Executives
and the Local Government Association

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September 2014



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THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT KNOWLEDGE NAVIGATOR

The Local Government Knowledge Navigator is a two-year initiative funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), and steered by ESRC, Local Government Association and Society of Local Authority Chief Executives. It was launched in January 2013 with the aim of helping local government to make better use of existing national

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INTRODUCTION

This report presents the results of a survey of local authority managers which assessed the extent to which local authorities use evidence and research to inform decision and policy making.

The survey was designed by the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (Solace), Local Government Association and Local Government Knowledge Navigator and was completed on-line by a sample of 99 members of Solace.

This report is comprised of three sections:

- An executive summary of the conclusions drawn from the results of the survey.
- A summary analysis of survey data, designed to provide information on the key results in a succinct and comprehensible manner. This analysis draws on both the statistical results and respondent comments.
- A detailed breakdown of the responses to each survey question, utilising charts and graphs. The detailed breakdown is subdivided into four themes: Use of evidence and research; Sources of evidence and research and resource allocation; Future evidence and research resource availability; and Benefits, disadvantages, and challenges in the use of evidence and research.

Where differences can be seen between the responses of smaller district councils and larger authorities, these divergences on specific issues and questions are noted. Broadly speaking, however, the differences are found only in a small number of specific areas.

The results presented below are based on the on responses provided by the 99 survey participants who comprised local authority chief executives and senior directors of local government authorities.

The data presented below should be viewed as reflecting the responses of these members of the Solace community to the questions posed. Not every respondent provided an answer to every survey question, and consequently a figure for the total number of respondents per question is provided where applicable in the detailed breakdown.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Authorities currently make wide use of evidence and research in their decision and policymaking; but the extent of this use, and the approaches taken, vary widely from council to council.

A number of key conclusions can be drawn from the results of this survey. The first is that authorities currently make wide use of evidence and research in their decision and policy making, but that the extent of this use, and the approaches taken vary widely from council to council. Moreover, over the past four years many authorities have changed their approach and funding cuts have driven many councils to become more strategic and focused in their use of evidence and research across the board.

Secondly, despite budget restrictions, in-house activities currently make the most significant contribution to the evidence and research, which is used in authority decision and policymaking. However, the level of capacity and skills, and the allocation of resources to internal evidence and research activities varies greatly between authorities. Councils also currently obtain evidence and research from other sources to a lesser degree, the most important sources being partnership arrangements, government departments, and other local authorities.

Thirdly, most respondents expect the present level of resources available to authorities to conduct evidence and research activities to remain stable in current financial year, but to decline after that. This is primarily due to sustained cuts to local government budgets, which are expected to impact on overall research capacity.

Fourthly, the use of evidence and research in decision and policy provides a number of recognised benefits, which make it more likely that desired outcomes will be achieved. There are some disadvantages particularly related to the relevance and applicability of evidence and research, and its use in a politicised context, but in general the advantages significantly outweigh the disadvantages.

Fifthly, the biggest challenge local authorities face in using evidence and research to inform decision and policy making is lack of capacity, both to undertake activity internally, and commission it externally. Other significant challenges include difficulty in identifying relevant and applicable research, a lack of compatibility between data sources, coordination on research activities, and a skills deficit in authority staff reducing their ability to effectively source, analyse, and utilise research and evidence.

Finally, in this sample of 99 council managers, while smaller and larger councils are generally very similar in the ways in which they view, source, and use evidence to inform decision and policymaking, a number of differences can be identified. These relate to the approach to the use of evidence and research, the sources from which evidence and research is sourced and the extent to which certain sources are relied upon, and the challenges faced by local authorities in the use of evidence and research.

SUMMARY ANALYSIS

To a greater or lesser degree, evidence and research is used by almost all local authorities to inform decision and policymaking, although there is wide variation in the extent to which this is systematic use within or across the organisation.

Unsurprisingly, respondents suggest that - to a greater or lesser degree - evidence and research is used by almost all local authorities to inform decision and policy making, although there is wide variation in the extent to which this is systematic use within or across the organisation. However, evidence and research is used for at least some functions as a matter of course in a significant number of respondent authorities (40%), and is an important tool which is drawn upon in the making of key decisions (27%).

Approaches to the use of evidence and research vary. The survey indicates, however, that a common approach is use in response to requirements by senior management, those in leadership positions, or those responsible for oversight and scrutiny, to take evidence and research into consideration in reaching recommendations, or to challenge the decision making process in relation to the evidential base. Larger councils tend to allocate responsibility for ensuring that evidence and research is used by the oversight and scrutiny body to a greater degree than their smaller district council counterparts.

A small number of respondents stated that their organisation had a written policy for the use of evidence and research in decision and policy making, with other:

- Authorities utilising evidence and research on an ad hoc basis for specific purposes and stating that a defined policy is unnecessary; and
- Respondents using evidence and research as part of the ingrained culture of the authority.

These factors may also explain why the policy is not mandated in writing.

The data illustrates that some authorities are far more systematic in their use of evidence and research than others.

While this survey did not explicitly address this issue, it is likely that the size of council, the policymaking culture, the political context, the level of financial resources, and the research capacity of the authority affects the approach taken. It should also be noted that a survey of this type - which of necessity needs to be focused to encourage respondents - does not provide detailed insight into the types of research and evidence used, or on the quality.

The survey shows that the vast majority (72%) of authorities' approach to the use of evidence and research has changed since the implementation of the 2010 Spending Review and the consequent reductions in the local government budget. Over the past four years councils report that they have increased their use of evidence and research in decision and policy making processes, and have started to apply it across a wider range of activities. Moreover, authorities have begun to look at a wider range of sources of research, facilitated by online systems. Respondent comments suggest that that evidence and research are viewed as important tools which can help to ameliorate some of the problems derived from budget cuts, and enable them to provide more effective services at lower prices. The use of evidence and research has also become more strategic, focused, and used to implement more outcomes-focused policy.

While there are a range of different sources of evidence and research available to authorities, the data shows that for the survey sample, in-house research conducted by council staff provides the most significant contribution (55% of respondents report that they substantively rely on internal sources). Evidence and research that is obtained through partnership with others is also important.

Evidence and research obtained from government agencies and departments, and from other local authorities, is less

significant, but still important. Many authorities have regular contact with these entities and share common interests, and this may partially explain why respondents stated that their councils look to them rather than other external sources such as third parties, professional bodies, academic institutions, and think tanks/independent research funders

The survey data suggests that there are some differences in how smaller and larger authorities source their evidence and research. Although there are many similarities in sourcing practices, smaller district councils are more reliant than larger authorities on evidence and research developed in house (but not necessarily through dedicated research teams), and that obtained from other local authorities and professional bodies. Generally, larger councils appear to draw on a wider range of sources, and are more likely to source their evidence and research from academic institutions.

The survey suggests that dedicated internal research activity varies greatly between authorities in terms of operational practice and resource allocation. Smaller authorities with fewer resources are less likely to operate with a dedicated research officer or team. This is particularly in councils wherein research activities are undertaken on an ad-hoc basis. Instead, evidence and research activities are undertaken by staff as required alongside other duties.

Other councils maintain specific research posts, either for specific departments where this work is deemed particularly important, or across authority as a whole. Some maintain central research teams which are used across all authority departments to support policy and decision making processes. The survey data indicates that it is primarily the larger authorities who have the capacity to maintain these teams, as their operation tends to require a significant expenditure of resources.

One issue which emerges from the data is that many councils find it difficult to express the resources allocated to their evidence and research activities in terms of a number of full time equivalents or financial resources. Once again this is particularly the case with smaller authorities which share research activity amongst all staff, and that undertake such activities on an ad hoc basis.

The majority of respondents (62%) expect that the level of resources (FTEs and financial commitment) available to their authority for evidence and research activities will remain the same in the short term (i.e. in the current financial year), and then a fall. A greater proportion of larger council respondents stated that they believed they would see a decrease in available resources than smaller council respondents. This is perhaps attributable to the fact that larger authorities tend to operate with larger dedicated research teams so it is fair to assume that research posts and teams will be affected by the continuing cuts to local authority budgets and a need to reduce overall staff numbers across the board.

Overall, this suggests a likely reduction in specialist research capacity, and consequently, the growing emphasis on evidence and research potentially becoming part of the wider responsibilities of other - non-research - members of staff. While some respondents indicated that the resources of available for evidence and research activities would increase due to exploitation of new external sources of funding, the data suggests that an increase in the level of research resources across the board is unlikely in the near future.

One of the most evident conclusions that can be drawn from the survey is that the use of evidence and research in decision and policy making is viewed by respondents as having a number of fundamental benefits. Most importantly, respondents unanimously agreed that the use of evidence and research makes it more likely that policy will achieve its desired outcomes. The data demonstrates that the vast majority of respondents (at least 73% of participants) in both larger and smaller authorities also believe the use of evidence and research helps to:

- Provide value for money;
- Build political consensus;
- Bring partners together when there is a difference of opinion;
- Reduce criticism and disagreement about the decision at hand; and
- Build trust with communities and/or services users.

Given that it confers such benefits, it is likely that authorities will continue to want to draw upon evidence and research to inform decision and policy making in the future.

Respondents were more conflicted over the issue of whether use of evidence and research speeds up decision and policymaking. The majority of participants from larger councils in particular did not agree that it expedited policymaking. This is perhaps unsurprising, as collecting robust and reliable evidence and conducting research may take time, especially in larger organisations with broader remits. The amount of time dedicated to evidence and research activities, however, may also depend on an authority's organisational structure and operational procedures.

While the data on the benefits of evidence and research was undoubtedly generally positive, a proportion of respondents (29%) did identify several disadvantages, including:

- The capacity for the use of evidence and research to slow down the decision making process;
- Evidence based approaches not seen as necessarily uniformly applicable to all issues, with a small number of respondents seeing limited utility when addressing complex, dynamic problems in specific local circumstances;
- A mechanistic reliance on evidence and research leading to a lack of creativity and innovation in policymaking;
- The political context where evidence and research can be used and/or interpreted inappropriately to validate the status quo; or
- Too challenging for the current political climate.

Authorities are confronted by a number of challenges in the use evidence and research. Survey data indicates that the issue of capacity is the most significant. Many authorities simply do not have sufficient capacity to undertake their own research internally, or commission another party to do it for them to meet what appears to be a growing requirement.

A lack of capacity is the most significant challenge identified by respondents from both larger and smaller authorities, but in larger councils, the lack of capacity to commission research from others is identified as a more prominent problem than in smaller ones. Interestingly, the data suggests that councils do not experience great difficulty in finding partners and institutions willing to work with or for them on research projects, which highlights the importance of capacity.

Another prevalent theme is the challenge of finding relevant research. Some councils find it difficult to find evidence and research applicable to the issue at hand, while others are unable to find useful evidence and research which accords with the specific circumstances of that authority. In the survey, this was identified as an issue particularly by respondents from district councils, and is especially relevant to small authorities in rural areas.

In addition to overall capacity, respondents also highlighted a growing challenge: as evidence and research is increasingly used to inform decision and policy making, the skills gap in evidence and research competences in authority staff, particularly where evidence and research activities are one of a number of responsibilities of the staff concerned, is increasingly problematic

Clearly, this combination of insufficient capacity and insufficient skills potentially puts at risk the growing desire to be better evidenced and informed by research.

RESPONSE BREAKDOWN

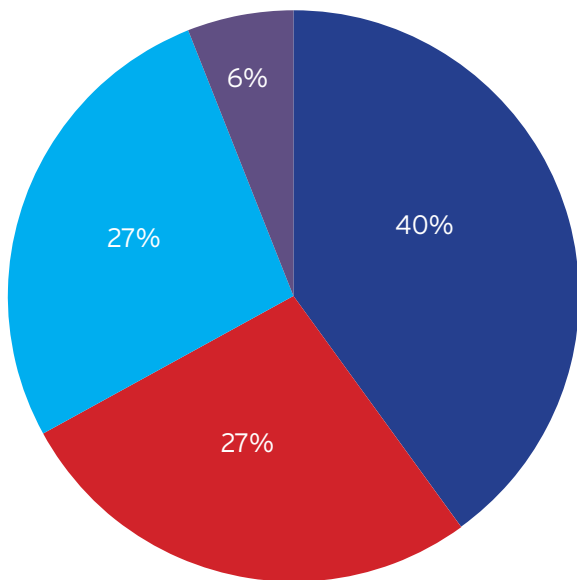
Use of evidence and research

USE

The survey data indicates that local authorities do take evidence and research into account in policy and decision making. While there is some variation on the extent to which evidence and research is used, all of the 81 total respondents stated that it is used to inform decisions. When asked about the use of evidence and research, 40% of stated that evidence and research is used in all or most of the decisions made, while 27% stated that it was used in all key decisions made.

Another 27% of respondents use evidence and research whenever a relevant source can be drawn upon. The remaining 6% indicated that they use evidence and research occasionally, but only in an ad hoc manner.

This data suggests that evidence and research is used to some extent for decision and policy making by almost all local authorities.



Use of evidence and research

- We use evidence and research in all or most decisions that we make
- We use evidence and research in all the key decisions that we make
- We use evidence and research whenever we can source any that is relevant
- We occasionally use evidence and research, but only in an ad-hoc manner

APPROACH

While the survey indicates that evidence and research is utilised by local authorities, there is considerable variation in the approaches taken to their use. Furthermore, some authorities indicated that they adopted multiple approaches to the use of evidence and research.

Most commonly, the officer leadership team is required to explicitly consider available evidence in arriving at recommendations, with 66% of 85 total respondents stating that this was their policy. Similarly, 44% of respondents indicated that the Administration is required to consider available evidence in arriving at recommendations, and 32% stated that their report templates require explicit consideration of evidence in arriving at recommendations.

44% of respondents indicated that Overview and Scrutiny (or equivalent) challenge the policy and decision making process around the use of evidence and research. The data suggests that this approach is more prevalent within larger authorities, while in district councils consideration of evidence and research is more commonly the responsibility of the Administration and office leadership team. Only 9% of respondents stated that their authority had a written policy on the use of evidence and research in decision making.

Which of these approaches to the use of evidence and research are used in your organisation?



Participant comments also reveal other approaches adopted by local authorities. Research is sometimes used on an ad hoc basis, but is not relevant to all decisions taken and policies developed. Some services within councils use evidence extensively, while others do not. Several authorities require that consultation evidence outcomes are specified, while one respondent stated that the Chief Officer team challenges report authors as to how their recommendations are supported by evidence. Others have no explicit policy or requirements on the use of evidence, but have general guidelines, and several councils stated that they were currently working to implement an overall use of evidence and research policy across the authority. Interestingly, several respondents stated that they did not have an explicit policy on the use of evidence and research in decision making, because this is an implicit part of the culture of the respective authority.

In describing their approaches to the use of evidence in more detail, several of the respondents mentioned engaging with communities through local surveys, consultation exercises, and citizen's panels for strategic planning purposes. For more specific requirements, a number of authorities commented that they draw on the services of external specialist advisors where appropriate. Furthermore, several councils stated that they operate with a dedicated evidence and research officer or team, with responsibilities for supporting officers with evidence and research on policy issues.

The data and comments demonstrate that for the majority of respondents, evidence and research comprises an important element of decision making. The survey suggests that some councils are more systematic in their use of evidence and research than others, with some authorities utilising it on an ad hoc basis depending on the policy area and relevance of evidence and research, and others adopting a more holistic approach in which evidence and research is an integral part of all decision making. It also indicates that a number of councils that currently lack one are working to implement a more explicit, systematic evidence and research policy.

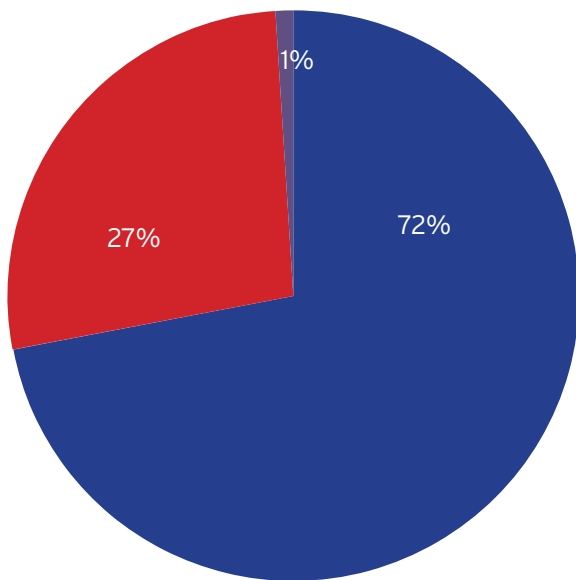
CHANGE

The survey demonstrates clearly that the vast majority of respondent feel that their authority’s approach to the use of evidence and research has changed in the past four years. 72% of 82 total respondents stated that they thought that it had changed over the period, with 27% stating that it had remained the same.

A number of themes can be identified from the respondents’ comments on change over the past four years. The first is that authorities have become increasingly robust in their use of evidence and research, and have begun to view it as more important to effective decision and policy making. This involves being more challenging of assumptions, requiring evidence to support these, and a greater emphasis on the use evidence and research to focus on impact and the outcomes to be achieved, particularly in relation to resource allocation. Evidence and research is now being used more widely across authorities, in both higher and lower level strategies.

The reduction in resources available to authorities over the period has resulted in the use of evidence and research becoming more strategic, focused, targeted, and context-relevant. It is becoming increasingly necessary for decision makers to utilise data, research, evidence, and insight to enable councils to make better policy in a frugal financial environment. In some cases this has meant a reduction the total amount of research commissioned, but the adoption of a more specific outcomes-led approach to the use of evidence. Several respondents commented that use of evidence and research has become increasingly embedded in the culture of their respective authority.

Another trend is the greater sharing of data and evidence between authorities and partner organisations, and the general tendency of councils to draw upon a wider range of available evidence and research to inform decision making. Respondents identified the internet and online resources as particularly useful sources of evidence and research on which they increasingly draw upon. Some authorities have established new research posts or teams to facilitate a greater and more effective use of evidence and research.



Has your approach to the use of evidence and research changed over the past four years?

- YES
- NO
- DON'T KNOW

Sources of Evidence and Research and Resource Allocation

SOURCES

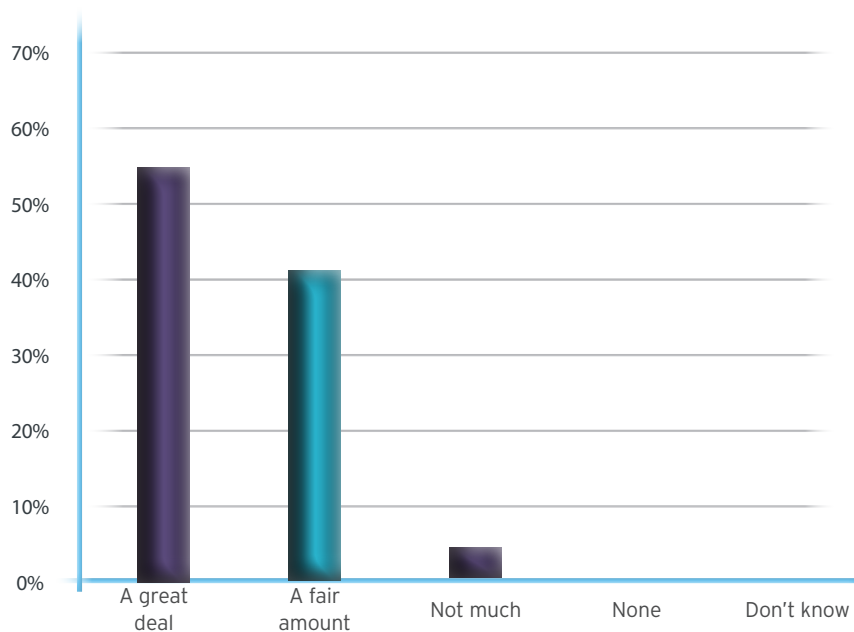
Local authorities obtain the evidence and research they use in decision and policy making from a variety of different sources. The survey data indicates that the evidence and research most commonly draw upon is that which is produced in-house by the respective authority. 55% of a total of 80 respondents stated that a 'great deal' of the evidence used in decision and policy making was developed in-house, with 41% stating that a 'fair amount' comes from this source.

The data indicates that district councils rely more heavily on evidence and research obtained via in-house activities to inform decision making than their larger authority counterparts, for which internal development is less significant (although still a very important source).

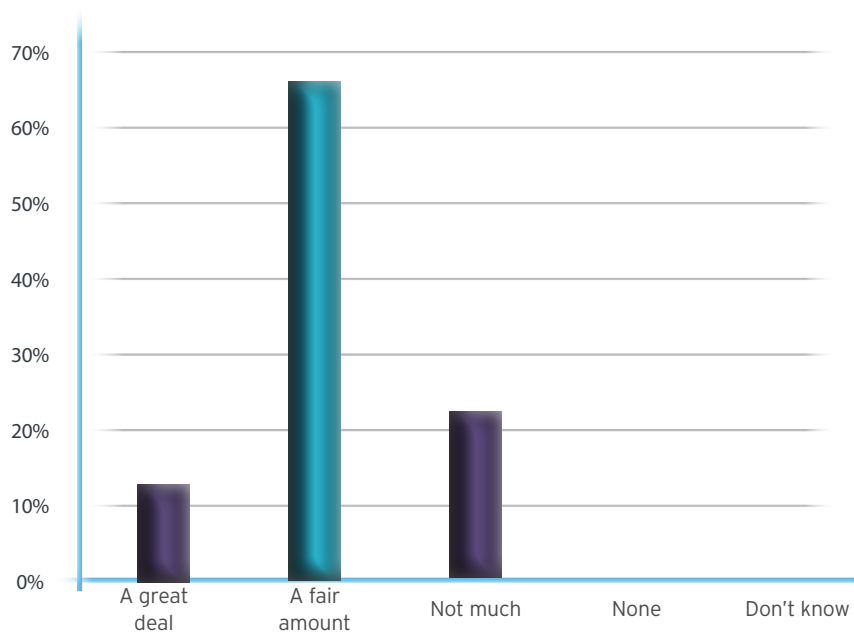
This suggests that larger authorities may have a greater capacity to obtain evidence and research from other sources than district councils.

While it is not as prevalent as that which is developed in-house, evidence and research which is obtained/undertaken in partnership with others also makes a significant contribution to decision and policy-making process. 66% of 79 total respondents stated that a 'fair amount' of the evidence and research used was developed in partnership with others. 13% stated that a 'great deal' was obtained from partnership arrangements. This may reflect the theme of increased sharing of data and evidence identified in the comments on how use of evidence and research has changed over the past four years.

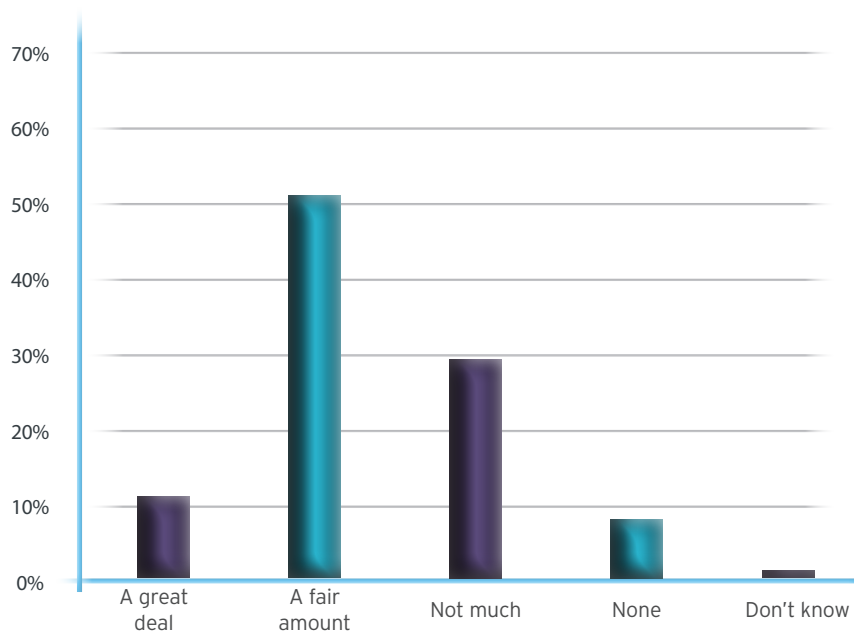
How much of the evidence and research used is developed in-house?



How much of the evidence and research used is obtained through partnership with others?



How much of the evidence and research used is obtained from government departments and/or agencies?



The survey suggests that government departments and agencies are another important source of evidence and research. Of 80 total respondents, 51% stated that they obtain a 'fair amount' of from government departments, with 11% indicating that this source provides a 'great deal' of their evidence and research.

A similarly important source of evidence and research is other local authorities. Of 81 total respondents, 58% indicated that they obtain a 'fair amount' of their evidence and research from other local authorities. It should be noted, however, that only 2% stated that they obtain a 'great deal' from other local authorities. This may reflect the increased trend towards data and evidence sharing between local authorities as part of efforts to enable them to continue to provide effective public services in restrictive financial conditions.

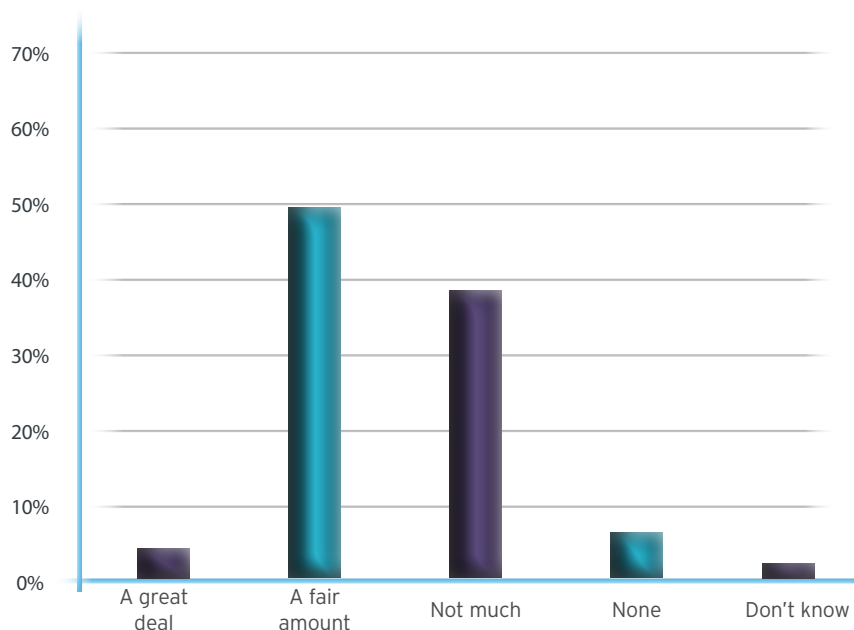
District councils tend to obtain more evidence and research from other local authorities than larger authorities. It is possible that this source is more productive for smaller councils because these authorities often require evidence and research for a specific issue, relating to specific circumstances, which is applicable to a certain size of

area. This may therefore encourage district councils to seek out evidence and research undertaken/utilised by other authorities of a similar size, in order to draw on their experiences in addressing issues.

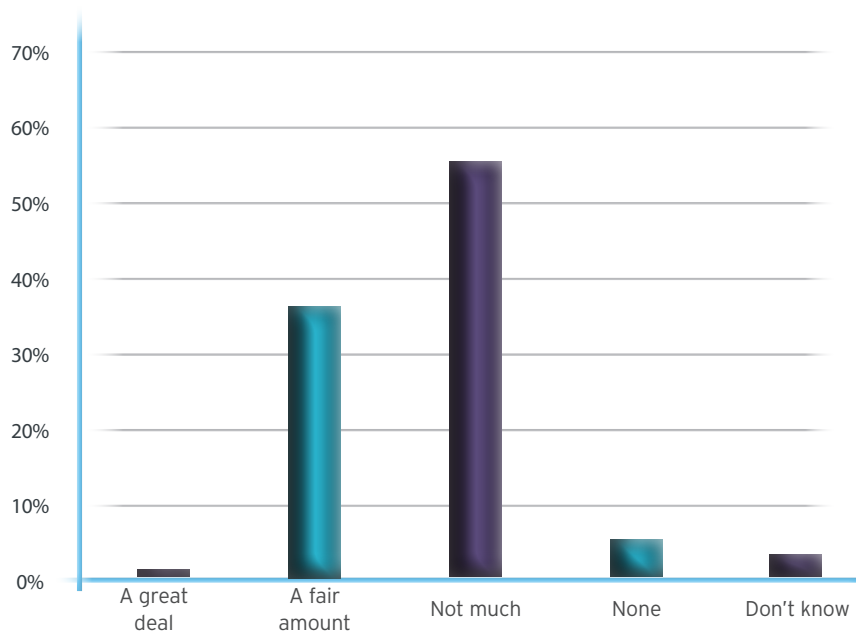
Of lesser significance is evidence and research obtained from third parties (such as consultancies). 47% of a total of 81 respondents identified this stated that this source provided a 'fair amount' of evidence and research, and 6% indicated that it provided a 'great deal'. However, 46% of respondents stated third parties provided 'not much' evidence and research.

Authorities also source their evidence and research from professional bodies. Of 81 total respondents, 49% obtained a 'fair amount' of their evidence and research from professional bodies, but 38% stated that 'not much' was derived from this source. District councils tend to source a greater proportion of their evidence and research from professional bodies than larger councils. Respondent comments did not provide any insight into why smaller councils appear to find professional bodies a more productive source of evidence and research for their purposes.

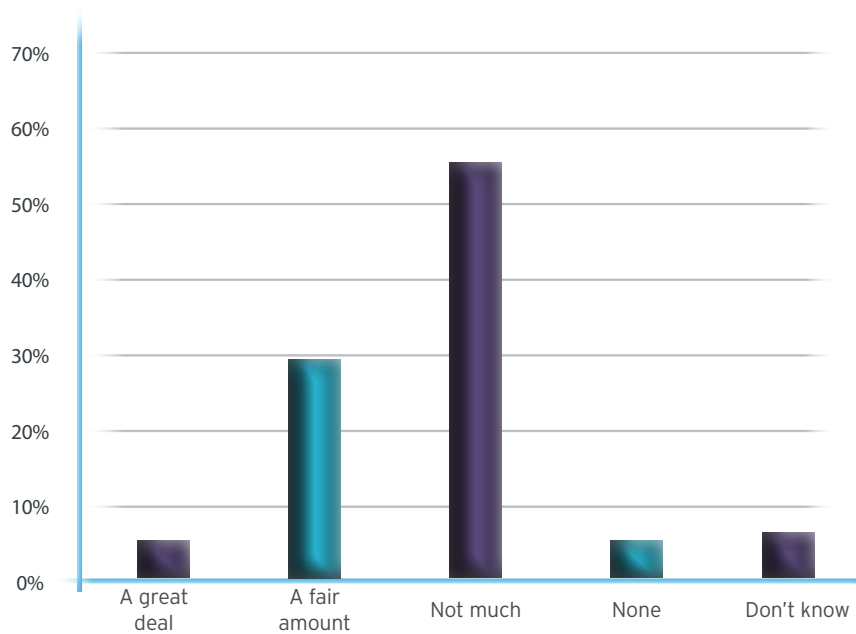
How much of the evidence and research used is obtained from professional bodies?



How much of the evidence and research used is obtained from academic institutions?



How much of the evidence and research used is obtained from think tanks / independent research funders?



The survey data suggests that academic institutions are one of the more under-utilised sources of evidence and research draw upon by local authorities. Only 36% of a total of 80 respondents stated that academic institutions provided a 'fair amount' of their evidence and research, with 55% indicating that they obtained 'not much' from this source.

In contrast to professional bodies, the survey responses indicate that larger authorities are more likely to source their evidence and research from universities etc. than their smaller district counterparts. While the difference between larger and smaller authorities in the use of academic institutions as a source of evidence is relatively small, it suggests that larger councils may find it easier to develop working relations with academic institutions than smaller ones.

The least significant source of evidence and research for authorities, according to the participants in this survey, is think tanks/independent research funders. Only 29% of a total of 80 respondents stated that think tanks/independent research funders provided a 'fair amount' of their evidence and research, while 55% indicated that they obtain 'not much' from this source.

A small number of survey participants also mentioned additional sources of evidence and research based in Europe. These include organisations such as the European Commission.

IN-HOUSE OPERATIONS AND RESOURCE ALLOCATION

The responses received in the survey demonstrate that there is a range of operational practices and differing levels of resource allocation in relation to evidence gathering and research activities. Many councils, particularly the smaller district councils with fewer resources, do not have a dedicated in house research and evidence resource (post or team). Instead, the responsibility for obtaining, assessing, and using evidence is shared among members of staff who conduct this alongside their other duties. Identification of relevant evidence and research is also often undertaken on an ad hoc basis by staff in relevant policy areas as needed. Consequently, it was difficult for respondents from these councils to represent this as a number of FTE equivalents or cost figure.

Other councils maintain research and evidence staff or teams within the corporate centre, whose primary role is to conduct research and gather evidence required for policy and decision making (although they may perform additional tasks). Some councils also sustain individual research posts in specific departments alongside the corporate research presence. Due to the limitations of available resources, larger councils are more easily able to implement and maintain research teams than smaller district councils.

The size of internal strategic corporate research teams (in terms of full time equivalents) appears to vary widely from council to council. Some councils maintain a single post, while others have teams of up to 14 FTEs (again, this variation appears to be somewhat attributable to the size of the council in question). The survey responses received suggest that the most common size for a dedicated strategic research team is approximately four FTEs, with other staff in respective departments also conducting evidence and research activities as required.

Future Evidence and Research Resource Availability

CHANGES TO LEVEL OF RESOURCES AVAILABLE FOR EVIDENCE AND RESEARCH ACTIVITIES

In a fiscal environment in which local authority budgets are likely to continue to be reduced, decision and policy makers in local government may be forced to curtail certain activities and services in order to prioritise others. In relation to research activities, the survey responses suggest that the majority of local authorities expect that the level of resources available to them to undertake evidence and research activities will remain the same until the financial year 2015/2016. 62% of the 74 respondents stated that they believed there would be no change in the level of resources available to them until 2015/2016. 31%, however, indicated that they expect the resources available to be reduced.

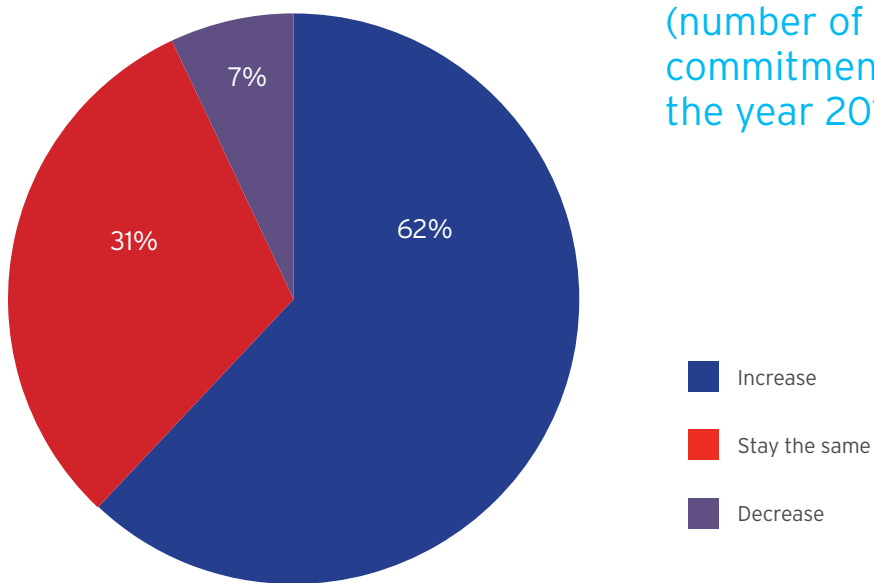
Only 7% of respondents expect there to be an increase in available resources. Interestingly, the views of respondents from smaller and larger authorities differed somewhat on this issue. The vast majority of district council respondents believe that the available resources will remain the same. Although the majority of respondents from larger authorities also stated that the available resources will remain stable, a much greater proportion of this group stated that they believed they would see a decrease in resource levels. Moreover, a larger proportion of district council respondents indicated that they expect an increase in resource levels (although this was still a very small proportion of the overall sample).

CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

The most common factor cited by respondents as the reason behind why they expect a decrease in the resources available for evidence and research activities is the further reductions to local authority budgets. General restructuring and a decrease in overall employee numbers will affect the strategic research departments and increasingly these activities are likely to be undertaken by staff alongside their other duties. This is expected to result in fewer financial resources available for this kind of activity, and also reduced capacity which will place an increasing reliance on already published research. Some authorities are investigating the possibilities of developing an evidence and research consultancy model that can be shared between authorities, thereby reducing financial pressure on any one council.

Conversely, a number of respondents identified factors which they expect will contribute to an increase in resources. Some authorities are increasing the remit of its research units (and consequently are dedicating more resources to them) because they believe that investing in analysis and evidence across the board will result in more effective savings in the longer term. Furthermore, while overall funding is being reduced, councils are increasingly targeting new sources of short term and one-off funding which will enable them to dedicate more resources to research units. As part of this strategy, authorities are targeting external funding for research projects designed to further develop council work streams and ensure the implementation of more targeted public services.

How do you expect the resources available to you (number of FTE/ financial commitment) to change by the year 2015/2016?



Benefits, Disadvantages and Challenges in the use of Evidence and Research

BENEFITS

The survey demonstrates that respondents see a number of benefits to using evidence and research in their policy and decision-making. This suggests that councils value the impact that evidence and research has on their work, and on the development of policy concerned with the provision of effective public services.

A total of 80 respondents unanimously agreed that the use of evidence and research makes it more likely that decisions and policy makers will deliver the outcomes being pursued. Furthermore, over 90% of 80 total respondents agreed that the use of evidence and research ensures better value for money than the alternative options considered.

Evidence and research can also help to ameliorate disagreement on policy and provide a foundation around which consensus can be built. 84% of a total of 80 respondents stated that they agreed that the use of evidence and research made it easier to build political consensus.

Furthermore, 86% of 80 respondents agreed that the use of evidence and research makes it easier to bring partners together when there is a difference of opinion.

Another benefit to using evidence and research, is that it helps to legitimise decisions made. Policy developed on the basis of evidence and research is less likely to be criticised than that which is not. Of a total of 80 respondents, three quarters agreed that the use of evidence and research reduced criticism and disagreement about the issue at hand.

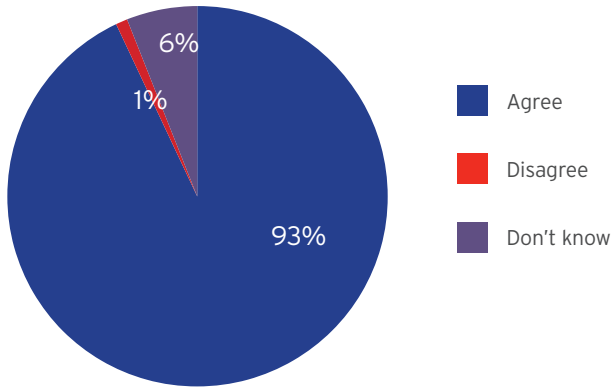
The majority of respondents also view the use of evidence and research as an important tool in building and maintaining a relationship with clients who use their services. 73% of a total of 79 respondents indicated that they agree that the use of evidence and research builds trust with communities and/or service users.

Interestingly, there was one potential benefit on which respondents were split. Presented with the proposition that the use of evidence and research speeds up decision making, the respondents were equally divided between those who agreed and those who disagreed with the statement. 43% agreed with the proposition, 43% disagreed with it, and the remaining 14% were unsure.

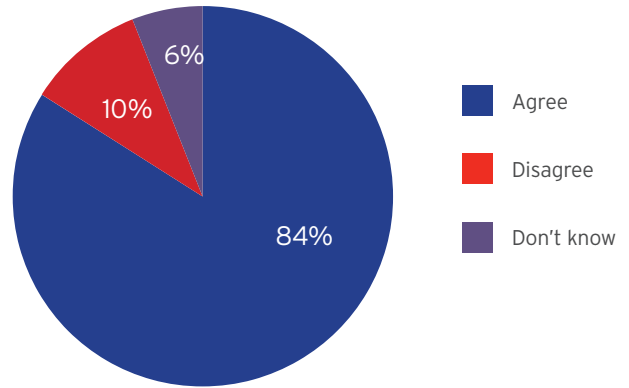
On a comparative level, respondents from larger authorities were generally more sceptical about the ability of the use of evidence and research to speed up decision making than their district council counterparts. In fact, the majority of respondents from larger authorities disagreed that this was a benefit of evidence and research.

A number of respondents also identified other benefits to the use of evidence and research in their comments. Evidence and research helps to 'provide a better judged set of policies' and 'ensures focus on issues that really matter'. Alongside reducing disagreements and potential challenges to decision making, the use of evidence and research can also facilitate future audit and scrutiny activity. One respondent simply stated that using evidence and research in decision and policy making 'increases the likelihood of going the right thing for residents and businesses'.

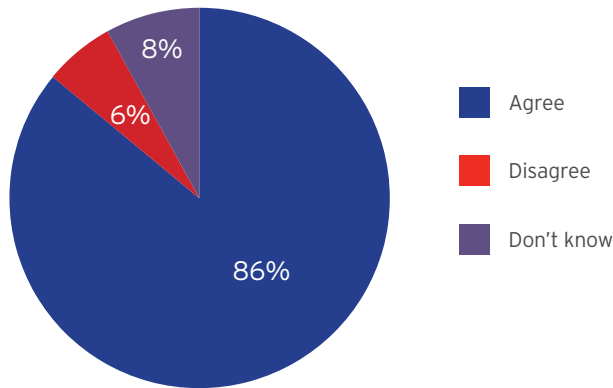
Use of evidence and research ensures better value for money than the alternative options considered



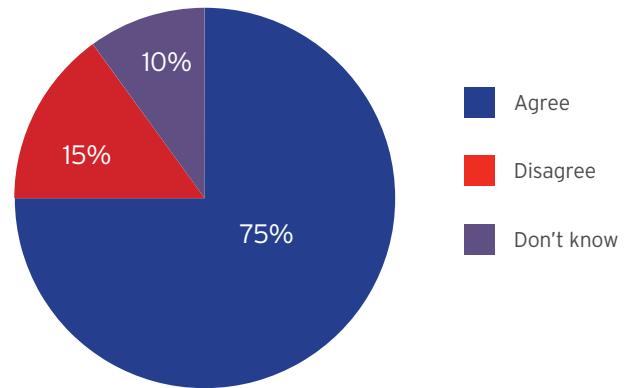
Use of evidence and research makes it easier to build political consensus



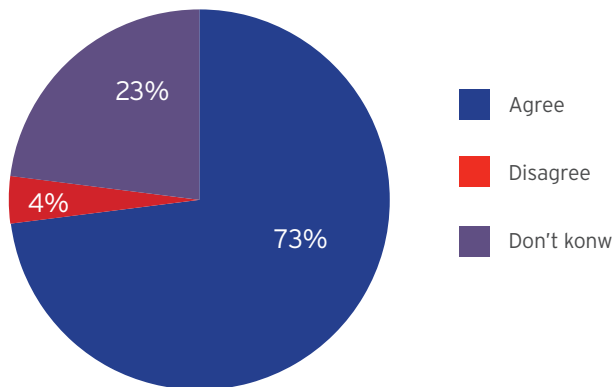
Use of evidence and research makes it easier to bring partners together where there is a difference of opinion



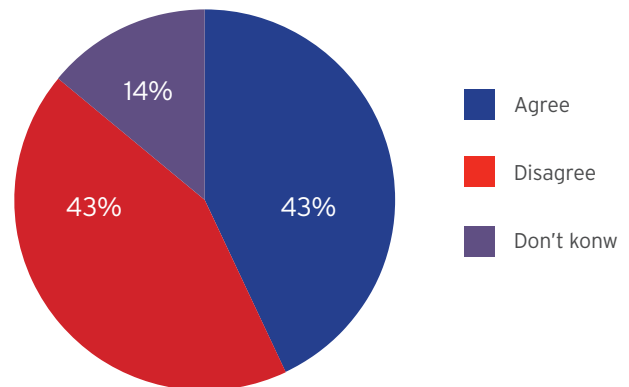
Use of evidence and research reduces criticism and disagreement about the decision at hand



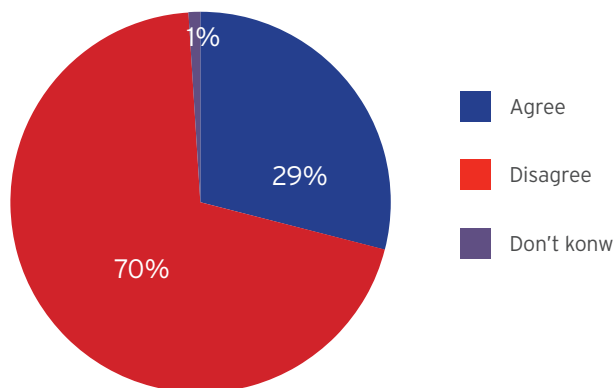
Use of evidence and research builds trust with communities and/or service users



Use of evidence and research speeds up policy and decision-making



Are there any disadvantages to using evidence and research?



DISADVANTAGES

The data above clearly shows that the survey respondents believe there are a number of benefits to the use of evidence and research. A minority of participants, however, indicated that there are also disadvantages. While 70% of a total of 80 respondents stated that they felt there were no disadvantages to using research/evidence, 29% indicated that there were identifiable issues.

The respondents cited a number of specific disadvantages to the use of evidence and research. The most prevalent was that using evidence and research can slow down the decision making process, and time and financial resources are required for their utilisation. Related to this is the issue of relevance and applicability of evidence. Evidence based approaches are not necessarily universally applicable to all policy decisions for all local authorities. Current problems are often complex, dynamic, and locally specific, and therefore evidence and research from other sources may have limited utility for a particular authority on a particular issue. If evidence and research is not specifically relevant, it can blur the issue at hand, causing confusion and taking focus away from the issue at hand, and therefore ultimately resulting in slower, less effective decision making.

Another significant disadvantage arises from issue of political influence within local government units. Evidence and research can be selected to support and validate existing political priorities and direction of policy, rather than used to develop policy on a more objective, empirical basis. Conversely, evidence and research may challenge the prevailing political direction, which may lead to resentment from members and a subsequent disregarding of that evidence.

Respondents also commented that the use of evidence and research can limit creativity and innovation in policy making. Rather than developing novel and progressive policy, there is a risk that authorities will take too much of an 'academic' approach to making decisions on fundamentally local and political issues.

CHALLENGES

The survey data indicates that authorities face a number of challenges in using evidence and research. The most prevalent of these, and one that is exacerbated by the cuts to local government funding, is that councils do not possess the capacity to undertake their own research. 50% of a total of 84 respondents cited this a challenge. Furthermore, 36% stated that they do not have the capacity to commission research from other sources. This general lack of capacity to conduct or commission research is by far the most significant challenge cited by respondents to the survey.

Other challenges relate to the relevance and applicability of evidence. 14% of respondents stated that they could rarely find evidence and research applicable to their authority's circumstances, and 12% indicated that they could rarely find evidence applicable to the questions they were seeking to answer.

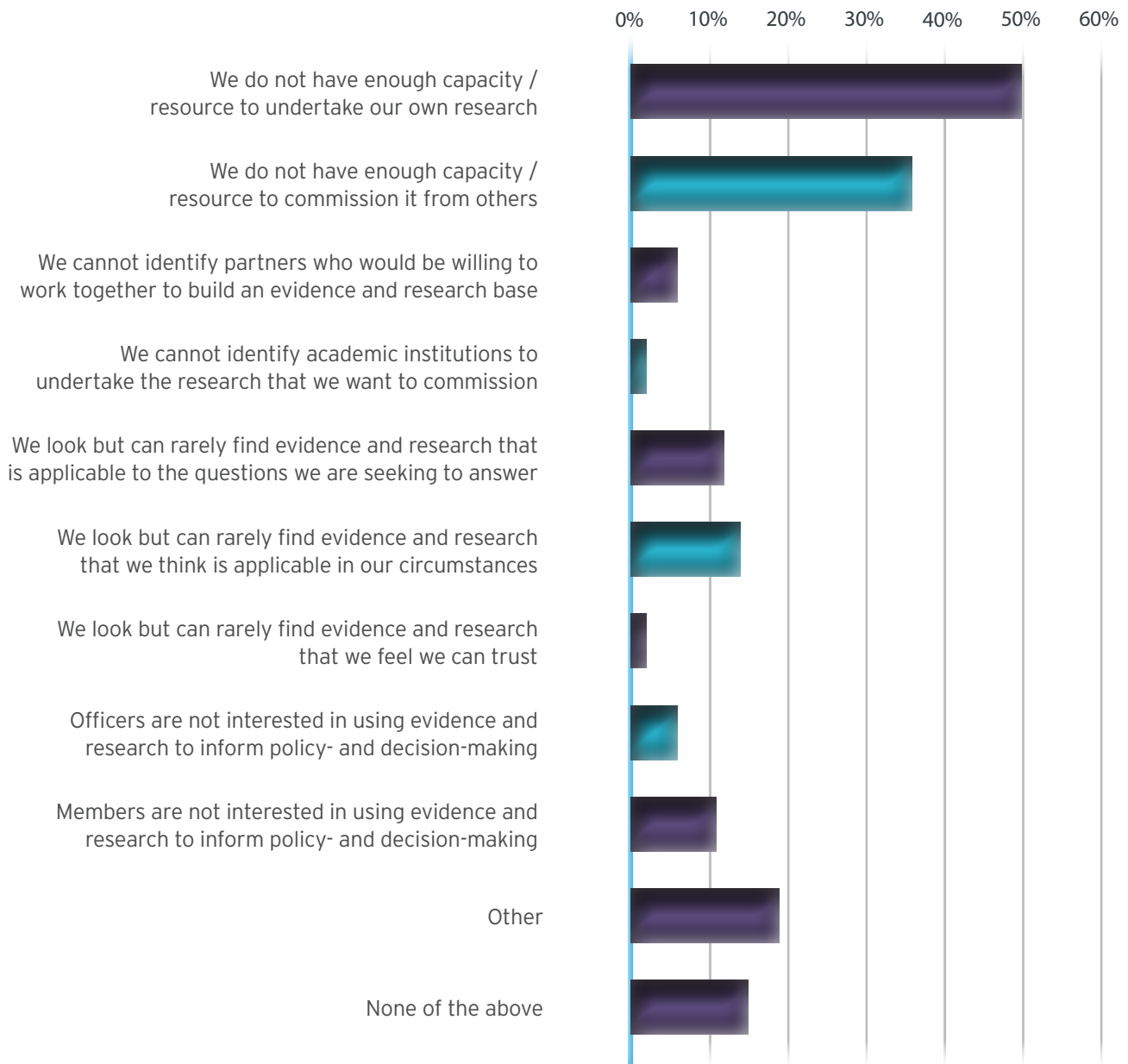
11% of respondents stated that a lack of interest in the use of research/evidence from members was also a challenge. Finding partners willing to work together to build an evidence base, or academic institutions willing to undertake authority-commissioned research, was cited as a challenge only by a very small number of respondents.

The survey responses also suggest that there are some differences between smaller and larger authorities with regard to what they find most challenging. While a lack of capacity is undoubtedly an issue which affects both groups, respondents from larger authorities more commonly identified the lack of capacity to commission research from others as a challenge. Moreover, respondents from larger authorities were the only survey participants to state that a lack of interest from officers was a problem. Smaller district council representatives on the other hand, cited difficulties in finding evidence applicable to the questions they were seeking to answer, or applicable to their particular circumstances, far more often than their counterparts from larger authorities.

19% of respondents identified other challenges faced by their organisations in the use of evidence and research. There is often a lack of evidence and research on smaller geographical areas with a level of granularity that is useful for local authorities. This is a particularly pertinent issue for small rural authorities. Furthermore, the plethora of available evidence and research available can make it difficult to identify what is useful and applicable to a particular issue and the specific circumstances of a local authority. A lack of compatibility of data sources and coordination or research activities both within and between organisations exacerbates this issue.

Officers and senior managers can underestimate the time and resources required to properly gather, analyse, and utilise evidence and research most effectively. Moreover, some officers are uninterested in conducting research activities due to the extra workload it entails. In some councils there is also a skills gap amongst officers and councillors, who lack knowledge and the ability to effectively source, analyse, evaluate, and utilise research for decision and policy making processes.

Which of the following challenges do your organisations face in the use of evidence and research?





Local Government
Knowledge Navigator