



Local Government
Knowledge Navigator

From Analysis to Action:
Connecting Research and Local
Government in an Age of Austerity

Report of the
Local Government Knowledge Navigator

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Local Government Knowledge Navigator

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SUMMARY

There is strong evidence to support closer and more productive engagement between the research community and local government in the UK.

Local government is challenged both by the impact of austerity, and by pressures such as demographic change, and a shifting relationship between state and citizen. Robust knowledge and evidence are vital if the changes needed are to be well-informed and wise, both in the short and longer term.

The UK research base is a national asset, yet one that is inadequately harnessed to support local government, and the two communities lack systemic means to engage productively on the scale that would benefit both.

In reaching our findings and conclusions, we have engaged extensively across the local government and research communities in a journey that has yielded both a need for change, but also diverse success stories that graphically show why ESRC were right to push again for better-focused research impact in and for local government. We have found:

- Diverse and compelling knowledge and evidence needs across local government;
- A rich diversity of research-derived knowledge and evidence, that is barely tapped by local government; but
- Significant dysfunctions in the system that prevent the two from coming together;
- A need for practical action to tackle these issues.

We conclude that this coming together can be achieved, and that there are no insuperable barriers to achieving this provided local government, the research community and research funders are prepared to engage with an open mind.

The actions we recommend as the Local Government Knowledge Navigator combine a mixture of short and long-term measures, and a blend of existing and potentially new instruments. We have also set out explicitly how the Local Government Knowledge Navigator can contribute.

We propose action to:

- Change cultures to bring research and local government together;
- Stimulate demonstration projects and learn from them;
- Establish a web enabled Interactive Exchange Platform and explore a 'What Works' function for local government to better connect local government and research knowledge;
- Develop 'embedded research and analytics' in local government;
- Initiate the means for strategic research interventions with far-reaching benefits and impact, starting with public health and social care.

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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

investment in research and research-derived knowledge and evidence, and to influence future research agendas, programmes and investment.

The Knowledge Navigator team is Professor Tim Allen, Dr Clive Grace and Professor Steve Martin.

1. INTRODUCTION

There is strong evidence to support the need for closer and more productive engagement between the research community and local government in the UK.

Local authorities are responsible for a significant proportion of public services expenditure and face huge challenges. The UK's research community is a major national asset. Yet links between local government and social science and the wider research community are underdeveloped. With some notable exceptions, local government in general has little awareness of the large and potentially useful body of research-derived knowledge and expertise. Relatively few academics see local government as a partner in, or potential user of, their research expertise.

Recognising this, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) launched a bold initiative, the Local Government Knowledge Navigator project, to analyse the nature of this failure and, crucially, to help fix it. This two-year initiative is funded by ESRC, and steered by it, the Local Government Association (LGA) and the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE). The key tasks are to:

- Identify local government's knowledge and evidence needs;
- Establish how and where research-derived knowledge and evidence can meet these needs;
- Develop local government capacity to influence research agendas, become a smarter commissioner and a much greater beneficiary of the social and scientific research base;
- Offer a credible and widely supported proposition for longer-term arrangements to deliver local government research and knowledge needs; and
- Deliver practical examples to demonstrate the benefits, including through a series of rapid research reviews, to test out a variety of different ways of accessing existing research-derived knowledge and evidence.

This first report from the Local Government Knowledge Navigator addresses these. We see our role as identifying and exemplifying practical ways of connecting research and local government to improve policy-making and service delivery in an age of unprecedented austerity. In our view, this requires, among other things, a concerted effort to:

- Strengthen the relationships between researchers and local government policy makers and practitioners;
- Raise the profile and benefits of social and other relevant scientific research in local government; and
- Promote practical opportunities for new collaborations.

In this report, we present evidence-based analysis of how to achieve a wider and more productive engagement between local government and the research community. We build on previous analyses, and on new first hand evidence gathered by the Local Government Knowledge Navigator, to identify the key challenges involved, and we present what we believe to be practical solutions to meet these challenges.

Our Report is structured as follows:

- **Section 2** summarises the context for our work and the challenges facing both local authorities and the research community
- **Section 3** explains the main questions that we have sought to address, the propositions that we have tested in this first phase of the Local Government Knowledge Navigator's work
- **Section 4** summarises the approach that we adopted in gathering the necessary evidence
- **Sections 5 - 8** presents our key findings, and describes the key issues relating to the demand for and the supply of research knowledge and evidence that will meet local government's needs
- **Sections 9 - 10** set out our recommendations
- **Section 11** summarises how the recommendations will be developed over the rest of this 2-year programme.

Because of the richness and extent of our findings, we have provided more detail on some key topic areas in a series of working papers. These are:

- **Evidence Paper 1** - Local Government Knowledge Navigator: Local Government Knowledge and Evidence Needs.
- **Evidence Paper 2** - Local Government Knowledge Navigator: Case Studies and Examples of Local Authority and Research Collaboration.

We identify four big challenges, which we believe will need to be tackled if we are to see better use of research evidence by local government, and we propose practical ways to address these challenges.

We give examples of encouraging exemplars that address some of these challenges, but we also identify significant dysfunctions in current arrangements that need a system-wide response. The actions we recommend combine short- and longer-term measures, and a blend of existing and new instruments. Some will require bold thinking and action but all are achievable and will, we believe, lead to significant benefits for both the local government and research communities.

We have also set out explicitly how the Local Government Knowledge Navigator can contribute in taking forward the action that we propose.

2. CONTEXT

Local government

Local government¹ in the UK is currently under enormous pressure. After a period of sustained real terms increases in budgets in the early part of the previous decade, the pendulum has now swung decisively in the opposite direction. The resulting challenges play out differently in different parts of the UK. Since 2010, councils in England have had to cope with unprecedented budget reductions.

To date, the devolved administrations have protected local authorities from the worst effects of austerity, but, for example, the Welsh Government is now warning councils to brace themselves for 'English-style cuts'.

The state of UK public finances means that resources will be very tight for the foreseeable future. At the same time, demands for local services continue to increase – partly because of difficult economic conditions but equally due to factors such as an ageing population profile. These pressures are accompanied by an underlying shift in the relationship between the state and the citizen, which is broadly recognised across the political spectrum.

Financial and demographic projections make challenging reading. Even without the imperative of deficit reduction, health and social care look set to absorb an increasing share of public spending over the coming decades, with the huge and seemingly unavoidable knock-on effects on many other public services. Local government will need to continue to innovate to make do with a lot less.

In our discussions with stakeholders within the local government sector, we have found contrasting responses to research. Some councils are focusing their efforts on safeguarding statutory services and cutting back on 'non-essentials' including corporate functions such as in-house research capacity. Others believe that the challenges facing local government will require councils to re-define their role and re-design their services. As a result, they see a greater need for robust evidence on which to base decisions about how best to serve local communities in these testing circumstances.

The research community

The context in which the research community is operating is also changing, albeit less rapidly and less dramatically. The 'impact agenda' means that academics have a greater incentive than ever before to work with potential 'user communities'.

The ESRC's strategic and operational plans demonstrate a strong commitment to finding ways to increase impact, and it has introduced a range of initiatives designed to foster knowledge transfer and exchange – at all stages in the research career ladder – as well as requiring recipients of research grants to spell out pathways to impact and approaches to engaging with potential users of research. Meanwhile, the RAE and REF frameworks² have given increasing prominence to evidence of research impact thus validating engagement with policy and practice.

Recently, the Alliance for Useful Evidence and NESTA's 'Squaring the Circle' report highlighted the importance of reliable data and robust analysis to underpin policy interventions, strategies and investment decisions. Meanwhile, the creation of the 'What Works Centres'³ to apply research and evidence are relevant to local councils (ageing, early intervention, economic regeneration and crime).

There are, however, barriers to local government engagement by academics, including competing pressures from teaching and administration roles and the premium placed on publishing in 'four-star' peer reviewed academic journals, as well as perceived threats to academic freedom and rigorous enquiry from becoming too closely involved in 'real world' issues.

1. To avoid repetition, we use the term local government to encompass all local public services that are commissioned by local government or governed or delivered by local government in partnership with other organisations.

2. The former and current system for assessing the quality of research in UK higher education.

3. These cover crime reduction, local economic growth, aging better, and early intervention, and they join two existing Centres promoting evidence-based decision making: the National Institute for Clinical and Health Excellence and the Education Endowment Foundation.

3. QUESTIONS AND PROPOSITIONS

The Grace Report (2006)⁴ highlighted the cultural and institutional divides between the research and local government communities and argued that there was a need for leadership if this was to be bridged.

The follow up report (2012)⁵ highlighted the need for urgent action on both the 'demand' and 'supply' sides of the equation. To benefit from national investment in research, local government had to become a much better client and customer of research, able to identify and articulate its needs for knowledge and evidence. The research community needed to translate rhetoric and aspirations about achieving 'impact' into practical actions that make a difference for citizens and service users.

Despite useful steps through the Local Authority and Research Council Initiative (LARCI) over this 2006 - 2012 period, the potential for fruitful collaboration remains barely tapped. So, the diagnosis and propositions in the two reports have been the starting point for the work of the Knowledge Navigator. To move the discussion from analysis to action, we have asked some key questions:

- What research, knowledge and evidence local government wants or needs?
- How and to what extent the research community is meeting these needs?
- Is the research community equipped and incentivised to respond to them?
- What instruments and funding are already available? Do these need to be tailored to local government, and are new instruments needed?
- What examples of good practice already exist, what has made them possible, and can they be replicated elsewhere?
- What are the opportunities for 'quick wins' and 'step changes' that will demonstrate the benefits of increasing connectivity between research and local government?

To address these questions, we first developed some propositions based on our existing knowledge and experience of research and local government - from both the demand and supply sides. Our starting point was that:

- Local government has substantial and diverse needs for knowledge and research evidence that could be met, at least in part, by the research community.
- These needs vary - for example between type of authority, region and services.
- Some needs can be met (at least in part) by the substantial existing body of research knowledge and evidence: here the challenge is to improve awareness and access to existing knowledge and evidence.
- Other needs will require original research. Here the challenge is to encourage researchers and local government to ensure that research is designed, commissioned and conducted in ways that generate relevant, rigorous and accessible new evidence and knowledge.
- In either case, there are no current systematic means in place to link the two communities. To change this requires concerted action - by local government, research funders, and the research community - to create conditions for effective knowledge exchange and knowledge creation.

4. The Research Councils of the UK and Local Government: Co-producing knowledge to maximize public value.

5. 'Partners in Impact' The national and local imperative to join up research and local government post-LARCI.' Dr. Clive Grace.

4. METHODOLOGY

We tested and refined the questions and propositions set out in section 3 (above) through an analysis of existing research, an examination of existing research instruments and funding, and consultations with a wide range of senior members of the local government, policy and research community.

Assessing local government's needs

We assessed local government's needs for knowledge and evidence (what, in shorthand, we describe as the 'demand side') through:

- A review of key documents including LGA Board papers, policy priorities from SOLACE and LGA, and the Grace Report on the lessons learned from LARCI, which closed in March 2011;⁶
- Interviews with key individuals and networks (including professional societies) from the local government sector to establish the broad extent, character, and patterns of unmet need (see section 5 below); and
- Interviews with research funders, producers and suppliers to test whether (and if so, how) resources can be better deployed to fill gaps, satisfy unmet need, and increase impact.

As well as the findings presented in this report, the evidence we gathered about the demand side informed the choice of topics for a series of Need to Know Reviews that the programme is commissioning.⁷

Assessing the research community's capacity to meet local government's needs

We then tested the extent to which existing research knowledge and evidence can meet the local government needs that we identified (the 'supply side') through a strategic assessment of the extent to which a complex UK research landscape has the capacity to meet local government's needs for evidence and knowledge (the 'supply side') by:

- Examining research projects funded by the ESRC over the last five years to identify studies that might be relevant to local government;
- Undertaking a content review of the web sites of a sample of ESRC-funded research centres and independent research organizations;
- Interviewing senior staff in research centres that have received significant funding to address issues which are relevant to local government, including ESRC-funded research centres, those of other UK Research Councils, and a selection of research institutions;
- Interviewing key funders that commission or produce analytical work that is relevant to local government; and
- Interviewing organisations that are active in considering local government's knowledge and evidence needs (including SOLACE Foundation, ESRC, NESTA, Big Lottery Funded, Alliance for Useful Evidence).

We drew on the complementary skills of the Knowledge Navigator team by dividing responsibilities in a way which reflects our individual experience, expertise and networks, but ensured consistency of approach through a variety of quality assurance mechanisms. These included writing up detailed notes of interviews, which were shared among the team, keeping in regular touch via email, phone and face-to-face meetings to review progress, share emerging findings and analyse their implications.

We also learned from the experience of the Retail and Retail Data Knowledge Navigators, which are also ESRC funded.

6. 'Partners in Impact' The national and local imperative to join up research and local government post-LARCI.'

7. Reviews published to date include Learning Disabilities, Local Economic Development, Public Health and Local Government in the Digital Age. Please email: admin@ukracs.co.uk for copies or to learn more.

5. FINDINGS: LOCAL GOVERNMENT NEEDS AND CAPACITY

Local government's needs

As we expected, there were a variety of views in local government about the need for and potential usefulness of research evidence. Some interviewees were sceptical about the value of research, for example, questioning timeliness and relevance.

Not surprisingly, the lack of a local government research-base was not identified as a pressing issue for local politicians or managers, and our proposition that there would be benefits in improving local government's access to research knowledge and evidence, was unfamiliar to many. It was also clear that most knew very little about existing research and were unclear about how they could access it.

However, whilst the notion of an improved research-base was not a high priority, the need for better and more reliable knowledge and evidence as a basis for well-informed decision-making was a consistent theme. Many interviewees could see that access to the right kinds of research evidence was important.

There was both considerable interest and support for finding ways to make publicly funded research more relevant and useful to local government, and no shortage of topics about which they said they would like better evidence.

A wide range of topics was identified. There were some recurring themes. Many of the issues interviewees spoke of were complex and crosscutting. Few were entirely new, and some are the subject of existing initiatives (including, for example, the LGA Future Councils Programme).⁸

Not surprisingly given the context that local government is operating in, there was a clutch of questions about the future role and shape of local government and local public services. Interviewees expressed interest in research that could inform 'place-based' approaches and better inter-organisational working. They were interested in evidence about reorganisation and restructuring, demand management, and commissioning. There was also an appetite for evidence about ways of achieving radical cost savings and meeting needs across a locality, and on key areas such as public health

and social care, children and young people, troubled families, and supporting local economic growth.

The desire to improve access to, and the quality of, data available to local authorities was a recurring theme. There was interest in making better use of statistics and administrative data to understand local needs, gaining access to other organisations' datasets and to generating 'real time data'.

A separate paper '[Evidence Paper 1 - Local Government Knowledge Navigator: Local Government Knowledge and Evidence Needs](#)' provides a more detailed analysis of these needs.

Local government's research capacity

The interviews confirmed that 'in-house' research and research-commissioning capacity in local government is highly variable, and, that overall, it is weak for a sector that operates at this scale and complexity. Authorities lack the capability to scan for and make the most of existing knowledge and evidence, most lack resources to commission new external research, and have modest internal capacity.

We found a mix of approaches including specific research teams, service-based specialists and commissioners, and staff in the corporate centre with a role in accessing knowledge and evidence. There was though a general acceptance that, wherever this in-house resource was based, it has come under increasing pressure in recent years and will continue to be cut back in the future in many councils. Interestingly, some interviewees expect to see a widening gap between 'haves' and 'have nots' in terms of in-house research capacity.

Some interviewees argued that research ought to become increasingly 'local public service-based', rather than local government-focused. However, they acknowledged that there are barriers to achieving this. In particular, organizations were, they said, tending to become more inward-looking and less inclined to commit to partnership-based approaches. Individual services and departments within councils also risked becoming increasingly insular.

8. http://www.local.gov.uk/web/guest/productivity/-/journal_content/56/10171/3510591/ARTICLE-TEMPLATE

There were notable exceptions including public health and social care. Here, some interviewees saw potential for integrating data sets and research capacity across organisations, noting that public health has a stronger tradition of accessing and applying research-derived knowledge and evidence.

For many, the notion of building research and development capacity in local government was unfamiliar. But we found some initiatives designed to achieve this. The SOLACE Foundation is considering how to develop local government research capacity and agendas around 'evidence into policy'. NESTA recently published a local government evidence document,⁹ which identifies a need for local government to strengthen its role as a client of research evidence, and is exploring what kinds of instruments might be deployed to strengthen local government capacity.

Local government pre-requisites for effective capacity building and meeting needs for knowledge and evidence

Issues that our interviewees identified as important aspects of both capacity, and meeting needs for knowledge and evidence, included:

- The need for knowledge and evidence that is accessible, usable and reliable;
- A desire for 'navigation' aids and segmentation - an understanding of who needs what knowledge and how to bring it to their attention;
- Translation and transferability - help in understanding 'replicability' and application of research knowledge in a diversity of local contexts / localities;
- A focus on local government's perspective on issues;
- Co-definition of problems as well as co-production of solutions;
- Timeliness - answering today's questions today; and
- The role of research methodologies to support innovation.

9. Alliance for Useful Evidence: 'Squaring the Circle Evidence at the Local Level' Derrick Johnstone, May 2013

6. FINDINGS: RESEARCH SUPPLY AND FUNDING

Research supply

Given the extent and scale of the existing research-base, we could not test the rigour or relevance of each study we identified. However, we identified plenty of studies that, on paper at least, appeared highly relevant to a range of local government priorities, including several of the issues that were on our local government interviewees' lists of knowledge and evidence needs.

We found substantial bodies of research funded by both ESRC and by other Research Councils, and also produced through other research institutions and universities.

For example, a scan of ESRC funding on some selected topics yielded over 100 projects of potential relevance to local government in the last four years. A comprehensive scan would be likely to yield thousands.

In addition, there are numerous research centres and programmes funded by the ESRC, the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) and the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC), and a wide range of centres and institutes funded by other bodies.

However, despite exceptions, this resource is not widely known or accessed in local government, although elements are likely to filter into the sector through intermediaries. Additionally, much published research material assumes an academic readership, and tends to address academic perspectives and media.

ESRC and EPSRC both have journals ('Society Now' and 'Pioneer') that report findings in summary and accessible terms; but we have no sense that they reach (or are widely read by) local government, or that local government professional societies / local government media such as Local Government Chronicle and Municipal Journal pick up on relevant topics. Also, some research-funder and institution websites, backed by our own experience, can be challenging for those unfamiliar with the research world, to locate material, and there is little help in routing the enquirer to separate websites produced by research council-funded research centres.

Research funding and knowledge exchange

The research councils invest in a wide range of initiatives and instruments to encourage and fund knowledge exchange opportunities and knowledge transfer, and new research.

Our interviews showed that awareness of these schemes in local government is low unless local authorities are directly approached by academics. When we explained some of the existing instruments, interviewees from local government expressed some concerns about councils' ability/willingness to invest up-front in proposals that have uncertain prospects of being funded given resource constraints.

Overall, research council funding has produced relatively few in-depth collaborations with local authorities, or research designed around local authority research questions: although there are some excellent examples where both have been the case, some of which we highlight in section 7 below.

More widely, proposals for funding may be supported by local authorities, or may have some level of engagement during the research, but it is not clear that this leads to measurable impact in ways that would be understood by the local authority. Researchers reported challenges in engaging councils or people in councils, or in lack of continuity of local authority staff, or ability to invest time in projects (although we believe this to be a challenge for at least some other areas of the public sector also).

Overall, opportunities are being missed. In conducting an initial examination of available initiatives and instruments, with a particular focus on these of ESRC, we noted the relevance of the three strategic priorities that guide ESRC work which are:

- Economic Performance and Sustainable Growth
- Influencing Behaviour and Informing Interventions
- A Vibrant and Fair Society.

ESRC have also identified a number of areas under these where they intend to fund research activities over the next 24 months. Those of potential relevance to local government include:

- Cities
- Innovation in health and social care
- Civil society
- The new dynamics of work
- Green economy
- Big Data

These priorities, coupled with national research policies that increasingly require demonstrable 'impact' from research activity, and accompanying requirements to show that user communities are engaged, represent an opportunity that is currently being missed by local government.

We have not conducted a comprehensive study of the varying research instruments and funds, but looking at ESRC and related means is instructive. Examples with potential for local government include:

- PhD studentships (and MSc placements also) where there are two main schemes that fund research placements. One flexible scheme is via 21 Doctoral Training Centres distributed in universities around the UK with a simple process for approaching an appropriate Centre. The second scheme is run by ESRC twice a year.

- Knowledge Exchange Opportunities scheme (run on a 3 times per year cycle of approvals) which offer opportunities to bring experts and research users together around specific topics and problems to maximise the impact of social science research outside academia. Whilst requiring co-funding, this can be in kind. Success rates are typically 25% for applicants. The scheme can accommodate a range of activities such as setting up a network to help inform the development of a research proposal; arranging an academic placement, or developing existing research to make it more applicable to policy or practice;
- Knowledge Transfer Partnerships: these have a higher applicant success rate (70%) but are more focused on business. There may be potential to develop the concept to support local government oriented activity, and we cite one example where the Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE) has successfully used this scheme in a local government context (see Section 7 below); and
- Ventures Scheme: this is a co-funded scheme (co-funding can be in kind), which has potential for application to local government.

7. FINDINGS: ILLUSTRATING THE VALUE OF RESEARCH AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT COLLABORATION

First-hand accounts

Despite generally modest research capacity in local government and low levels of awareness of initiatives designed to promote knowledge exchange, we found a rich diversity of examples of local government and research collaboration. Whilst these were often 'one-offs', they illustrate the potential benefits of research and local authority collaboration across a diverse range of circumstances and local authorities.

In identifying these examples, we spoke to the researchers involved and the local authorities to understand how both parties viewed the collaboration, unless validation was already available to attest to the impact achieved. We describe these projects in more detail in 'Evidence Paper 2: Local Government Knowledge Navigator: Case Studies and Examples of Local Authority and Research Collaboration'.

Some characteristics emerge from this aspect of our task in terms of 'what works', for example:

- Successful collaboration often stems from the initiative and enterprise of individuals or groups of like-minded individuals who are committed to the use of research to inform local policy and/or practice
- Where council leaders or chief executives drive collaboration, for example in using knowledge and evidence as an integral element in organisational leadership and strategy, for example in Sunderland where the Chief Executive has an academic background and is working to create an evidence-based council and an intelligent client for research and evidence
- Service or topic specific collaboration at service level, for example in social care, housing, economic growth (e.g. Enfield which has a longstanding practice of building research relationships and worked with Manchester University on economic renewal), and environmental services
- Collaboration between local authorities and the local university, particularly where this is based on the development of established relationships: e.g. Sheffield City Council on the Strategic Housing Market Assessment
- In some cases, local universities and / or local authorities have adopted active policies for engagement
- Long-term applied research, such as the winners of two ESRC impact awards on literacy and school catering; both involved local authorities as essential partners
- The role of intermediaries in bringing local government and researchers together: both the Institute for Local Governance and the Research Exchange for Social Science (RESS) act in this capacity.

Examples include:

- The London Borough of Newham where the Mayor is directly engaged and research is used to test and evaluate what works and to inform policy and practice, for example, on local demography, housing markets, household resilience, life courses for young adults and commissioning¹⁰
- ESRC Celebrating Impact award winner 2013: Professor Cathy Nutbrown, Sheffield University, who worked with early-years practitioners to adapt the family literacy framework to help families raise children's literacy achievements, and to work with a wider group of practitioners to share the results. This involved schools and children's services departments in places such as East Sussex, Peterborough and Kirklees¹¹
- Hampshire Adult Social Care Services had links Southampton University, e.g. using Masters and PhD placements: in this case, Southampton University is working with them on an EPSRC funded 'Care Life Cycle Model' to understand the factors that impact on supply and demand for health and social care in an ageing population, with a secondary benefit in enabling elements of the system to see the whole picture.

10. Newham also 'mirror' the ESRC Understanding Society publication locally, using UEL, Essex and IFS as contributors.

11. <http://www.esrc.ac.uk/my-esrc/grants/RES-189-25-0219/read/outcomes>

- The ESRC-funded Institute for Local Governance in the North East of England to bring together regional academic resources with local authorities in the region. Examples of outputs include a knowledge exchange project for Middlesbrough Council on worklessness, social exclusion and the experience of young people with Teesside University, following engagement that included the Council's Chief Executive.
- APSE-led work on the future shape of councils and local democracy: this includes an ESRC-funded Knowledge Transfer Partnership with DeMontfort University.
- The previous leader of Southampton City Council driving the appointment of a Chief Scientific adviser from Southampton University, for example to combine energy saving and carbon reduction with economic regeneration and the creation of local employment in improving housing stock owned by the council, e.g. through supervised PhD placements to look at project payback and viability.
- Hull City Council and Lancaster University's collaboration on the impacts of 2007 on flooding on Hull.
- RESS, funded for 5 years from the Higher Education Innovation Fund to engage with private, public and community stakeholders within the Sheffield city region and beyond. Based in Sheffield University and Sheffield Hallam University, they do considerable work with Sheffield Council and are building relationships with Doncaster, Barnsley and Rotherham councils.
- German and Scandinavian researched models for energy, sustainability and low carbon practice;
- MSc and PhD studentships on specific projects.
- The Education Endowment Foundation (now a 'What Works Centre');
- 'Living With Environmental Change'¹² guidance on knowledge exchange to support researchers in engaging with policy makers and end users;
- National Foundation for Education Research experience of research into practice and of working with local government;
- The Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE), particularly as it improves the accessibility of relevant research and other resources around a series of hubs.

Experience from the ESRC Retail and Retail Data Knowledge Navigator Projects

We also looked at experience from the ESRC-funded Retail Knowledge Navigator and Retail Data Knowledge Navigator which parallels local government in that retail and research also lack systemic collaboration. Overall outcomes from the two include:

- The 2013 £2.5m ESRC-funded Retail Sector Initiative for collaborative projects focused on research and knowledge needs in retailing;
- The use of ESRC-funded MSc Studentships with 16 projects earlier this year and a seminar where students presented to a retail audience. A second round is open;
- Seminars to bring together experts and retailers around specific topics;
- An ESRC-hosted retail data website to guide people to public sector open data as current access isn't particularly user friendly;¹³
- Retail Data Knowledge Navigator engagement with the Demographic Users Group, a data group of major retailers was key to effective engagement with the retail sector.

Other cited examples

In our interviews and conversations, we invited suggestions from experience about where research and research-derived knowledge had made a difference or had potential to do so. These included:

- Dartington experience in evaluating children's services: an example where there is a robust existing body of knowledge to be 'mined';

12. <http://www.lwec.org.uk/>

13. <http://www.opendataprofiler.com>

8. FINDINGS: TACKLING BARRIERS TO LOCAL AUTHORITY AND RESEARCH COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The exemplars summarised in the previous section are 'shining lights' that point the way. More widely, there is much untapped potential to better connect local government and research: there are plenty of points where the two might connect and lots of potentially relevant research activity and research-derived knowledge.

However, academia and local government are two very different communities subject to very different pressures with incentives that operate in relative isolation from each other. So, to develop collaboration needs facilitation.

For example, where local authorities seek specific expertise outside of existing connections into the research world, they struggle to find it given the absence of the means to find and connect to relevant research expertise and knowledge. This is more than a search engine for research findings, but a need to connect people, initiate conversations and knowledge exchange, with filters for relevance: local government and local public services at the applied rather than the theoretical end of public policy.

To address what we identify as the barriers to bringing demand and supply together, we need to:

- Raise low levels of awareness - particularly in local government - of the opportunities that exist;
- Develop variable but still generally low levels of interest in engagement with user communities among researchers (especially those who are not interested in research funding);
- Tackle different timescale tensions where there are shorter term needs of local government and longer timescales over which most research projects operate;
- Shift current approaches to engagement that are often producer-led to create mechanisms and incentives to encourage co-design of research;
- Adjust the balance in the peer review process by academics and the low level of local government representation on research council committees;
- Tackle the inaccessibility to local government of many research outputs - either because they are published in academic journals to which councils do not have access and/or they are presented in language which is not accessible to non-academics;
- Address fear on the part of researchers that their research will become politicised and academic independence will be compromised, and concerns that if researchers allow (central or local) government to set the agenda research priorities will become skewed;

- The belief that policy-relevant research is not easy to publish in top academic journals valued in the REF; and
- Address the problems attached to research which is delivered as a linear process, with a false distinction between research and knowledge exchange.

Ideas suggested by interviewees included:

- A focus on 'what works', why and in what circumstances. This implies the development of 'causal models' where they are possible, and establishing approaches that are transferable from one context to another;
- Regular and targeted communications with key people in local government (including directors, chief executives and elected members) to highlight research coming out of universities that is of interest to them;
- Generating and facilitating informed dialogue between local government and the research community about key themes and ideas to build a basis for greater understanding on both 'sides';
- Capacity to help interpret the implications of academic research for councils;
- Cultivating and learning from existing local government relationships with the research community, including those between councils and local universities; and
- Being careful to eliminate duplication and avoid re-running research that has already been undertaken.

Running through these suggestions were two consistent themes:

- First, effective communication with strategies to tailor material for different user groups with segmentation between for example chief executives, senior staff, elected members, practitioners, front-line staff and specialists. This requires understanding of specific requirements such as informing national policy making, local policy making, the development of new practice, and the needs of different regions and different types of councils.
- Secondly, timeliness: the perception remains that research answers yesterday's questions and can't keep pace with the issues facing local government. There is an important distinction to be drawn between connecting local government to existing research-derived knowledge and data where evidence can be assembled and communicated relatively rapidly and those circumstances where new knowledge is needed and therefore, where timeframes will be dictated by the nature of the research question.

9. FROM ANALYSIS TO ACTION – WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE?

Diagnosis

We have built on previous examinations of the relationship between local government and research by looking in detail at the issues identified by local government where it would value evidence; the potential of the existing research-base to shed light on these; and the reasons for disconnection between the two.

We have found that – despite the success stories identified in section 7 – research is not sufficiently high on the local government agenda, and that relatively few academics develop partnerships with local government or see it as a primary user of research: the latter probably as much through unfamiliarity as reluctance to engage.

When prompted, many local policy-makers and practitioners have long lists of topics about which they would like reliable and robust knowledge and evidence to inform decision-making. However, most have very little awareness of any existing research on these themes and there is dwindling organisational capacity within local authorities to engage in the design and delivery of new research.

We conclude that there is a considerable body of publicly-funded research that could potentially be relevant to local government and that this is rarely exploited – because potential users in local government are unaware of it and cannot access it.

Much of the existing research base has been commissioned by central government or funded by the research councils:

- The former is driven by national priorities and programmes that are not always relevant to the needs of local councils who operate at the applied end of public policy and practice; and
- The results of the latter are typically presented in ways suited to a primary academic audience in language and in journals that are not readily accessible to local government practitioners.

Our examples of where local government, research funders and researchers have come together graphically demonstrate the potential benefits for local government, the research community and society more widely if we bring the two closer together for collaboration.

Research Council funding has produced relatively few collaborations which engage local authorities as partners in any depth, or which produce research designed specifically to address local government needs. And few lead to measurable impacts in ways that would be understood by a local authority.

Meanwhile, researchers engage with local government report difficulties finding councils and individuals within councils who can invest sufficient time to be active research partners and problems with the lack of continuity of local authority staff.

Overall then, the picture that emerges is one of a missed opportunity both for local government (and local public services more generally) to benefit from research, and for research funders and researchers to add demonstrable value and impact. The national asset of potentially relevant research and research funding is not being exploited properly, and is certainly not being ‘sweated’, as an age of austerity requires.

Our conclusion is that the current ‘market’ for research is dysfunctional. The ‘consumer’ (local government) does need reliable and robust knowledge and evidence. Existing research outputs and expertise could help to provide this but the consumer is unaware of the ‘products’ (research output) and services (research expertise) on offer.

Meanwhile few ‘suppliers’ (researchers) notice the potential demand for their expertise, and prioritise local government, focusing their efforts instead on more obvious constituencies (fellow academics, students, and national policy makers).

Mechanisms for information exchange between potential consumers and suppliers are few and far between, and the ‘currencies’ that could help to facilitate interactions (the reward and incentive systems in both communities) are ambiguous and undervalued.

None of this comes as a surprise. But it is a serious concern that we think demands action. Local government, research funders and researchers need to nurture the ‘market’ and enable it to function far more effectively.

Recommendations

We recommend action on four main fronts to achieve:

1. A significant **change of culture** and working practices in both communities;
2. **Greater connectivity** between local government and research, using both the power of the web and by creating enduring institutional mechanisms;
3. More **research that is embedded** in councils with joint problem definition and research design by researchers and practitioners; and
4. Local government, research funders and researchers need to seize the opportunity offered by current developments for strategic **investment in interventions** with the potential to achieve significant impact across the local government sector as a whole.

We consider that these recommendations would reinforce one another and that between them they would enable the national research asset to be far better applied to local government and local public service policy, community planning, and service delivery functions in the UK in the interests of local communities, local democracy, and the wider national interest.

1. CHANGING CULTURES

There needs to be a change of culture in both communities. The current disconnection between the local government and research will not be resolved by one-off interventions. It needs a concerted effort to change the culture across the local government sector as a whole and within our universities: in effect, this would harness current and recent work by NESTA, Solace, the Alliance for Useful Evidence, the APSE, SCIE, and others to bring it together and deliver practical next steps.

Culture change needs effective leadership to set a vision and continually to reinforce the necessary attitudes and behaviours. The relevant 'summit' organisations here - the ESRC, the LGA, and Solace - have made a good start in sponsoring the Knowledge Navigator and by working together to understand the barriers and to overcome them. There is much more that they all can do, and the Navigator can help.

As to local government:

- LGA leadership on research is needed and would be powerful: this would promote research as an asset and the effective exploitation of existing research-derived knowledge, for example, by equipping councils to make the most of research community expertise.
- We also suggest that the LGA consider including evidence and learning in Peer Challenge: the Navigator would help.
- Solace, the professions and professional bodies need to develop strategies to promote greater awareness of relevant research, at both corporate level and service by service.
- Local councillors and council officers need to access good practice, including the exemplars we have highlighted, and consider how to maintain the necessary in-house capacity to access external knowledge in conditions of austerity, for example by arrangements to share information and capacity with local partners and/or other councils.
- In the short-term, we recommend sharing the exemplars we have identified to demonstrate how councils and researchers can work together and the practical benefits that this produces.

As to the research community:

- We recommend that research funders need to act to encourage a change of attitude and activity among researchers: relevant research programmes and initiatives should be designed and/or applied in ways that promote meaningful involvement by local government in the design of research projects and a requirement that relevant research is actively disseminated to councils.
- There needs to be:
 - i. A stronger voice for local government in the design of relevant Research Council-funded programmes
 - ii. A greater local government presence on Research Council committees;
 - iii. Local government representation on the advisory boards of relevant research centres that receive research council funding;

- iv. Greater emphasis in the review process on research which can demonstrate that it has potential to meet local government's needs;
- v. An enhanced role for practitioner reviewers; and
- vi. A requirement for researchers to demonstrate evidence of engagement/impact in end of award reports and for this to be one of the key criteria used to grade projects.

As to the Local Government Knowledge Navigator, we can assist by:

- Acting as a champion for research and a bridge between the research and local government communities;
- Writing up exemplars of existing successes;
- Using these exemplars to stimulate interest in ways of connecting research and local government;
- Facilitating and reviewing demonstration projects that use current ESRC and other relevant RCUK instruments and funding arrangements such as PhD and MSc placements, data-funding initiatives and knowledge exchange. Early experience with rapid research reviews suggests that they will provide some candidates for further exploration in this context;
- By reviewing the alternative approaches we are adopting to produce Need to Know Reviews, which we are currently trialling;
- Exploring a possible role for the Local Area Research and Intelligence Association (LARIA) in interpreting research for local government and helping to answer the 'what does it mean for the locality' question; and
- Contribute material for the ESRC Impact Toolkit on how to make connections and achieve impact through collaboration with local government.

If there is to be a sustained shift in culture, though, there will need to be processes within local government and academia to build on the progress we help to make by the time the Knowledge Navigator's term comes to an end.

2. IMPROVING CONNECTIVITY

One way of achieving a sustainable shift will be to create new ways of connecting local government and research. We believe that this ought to have at least two components:

- A web-based Interactive Exchange Platform, and
- An institutional 'Local Government What Works? Centre' or a similar arrangement to enable this. This would exploit the 'natural laboratory' of UK local government to foster greater understanding of what works in different places and why, drawing on lessons from research and evidence.

Interactive Exchange Platform: current arrangements such as those run by ESRC and the RCUK Gateway to Research¹⁴ offer helpful means to identify research projects and outputs, but don't necessarily meet the needs we have identified alone as they do not offer the requisite navigational aids for local councillors and local government officers, and do not have visibility. In the case of the UKRC Gateway to Research, we also note a current focus on SMEs.

The LGA's Knowledge Hub provides effective means to connect communities of practice within local government, but it does not feature social science research prominently nor are there many researchers who actively engage with councils through the hub.

The need is for an Interactive Exchange Platform in the space between these two existing web-based resources which connects researchers and local government policy makers and practitioners by:

- Showcasing good practice and promoting ideas and opportunities;
- Offering access to existing evidence and knowledge from social science research;
- Enabling research teams and councils with shared interests to find each other; and
- Enabling engagement at a strategic level between Research Councils and the local government community.

14. Part of the BIS Innovation and Research Strategy with a final live system launched at the end of 2013.

The Retail Data Knowledge Navigator has created an excellent ESRC-hosted website for knowledge exchange (albeit with a narrower focus) which we think provides an example of what might be achievable. There would need to be capital investment in the initial infrastructure and resources to maintain and manage the site, and the content and operation of the site will need to be thought through in detail.

As Local Government Knowledge Navigator, we can help facilitate and contribute to discussions to determine whether (and if so, how) the site should be taken forward.

A 'Local Government What Works? Centre' The 'What Works?' Centres initiative is a bold step forward in harnessing the UK national research asset to the need for better evidence-based policy and delivery. The initial six Centres are all based on major substantive policy and research themes that include ageing and local economic development.

In our view there is a strong case for a 'What Works?' Centre founded on the 'institutional' logic of UK local government. It would have the same underlying rationale as the other 'What Works?' Centres but be applied to the range of local government functions and responsibilities not covered by existing (and planned) 'What Works?' centres - in relation to which the Local Government 'What Works?' Centre would both draw from and contribute to through the proposed 'What Works?' Centre network led by Cabinet Office. Our recommendation is underpinned for example, by NFER experience and input to the Knowledge Navigator.

Particular areas of scope would be the 'corporate', place-shaping and community planning responsibilities of local government, along with local 'wicked issue' problems calling for research and evidence across conventional policy and functional boundaries, and issues of horizontal and vertical inter-governmental relationships with strong policy and delivery implications.

The Centre would exploit the 'natural laboratory' of UK local government across the four principal sub-national jurisdictions in order to foster greater understanding of

what works in different places and why, and how lessons from research and evidence can best be communicated and applied.

The Local Government Knowledge Navigator could help by bringing together key potential partners in such an enterprise, and helping to scope and shape a practical proposal.

3. EMBEDDED RESEARCH

More than anything else, local government policy makers and practitioners expressed a need to be able to draw on academic expertise and analytical skills to support them at the point of development and/or delivery of major policies, interventions, and evaluations of local government activity.

They wanted research and analytical skills that addressed directly the issues they are grappling directly and in 'real time' by researchers who understand the challenges and constraints they are facing: in short, researchers who are engaged and involved in problem definition and in developing solutions, with provision for feedback and lessons during the life of the research as well as on receipt of a report at the end.

We conclude that this needs 'embedded' rather than arms-length, research. Support could take many forms. Researchers might, for example, act as:

- **Gateways** ('portals') to existing research, identifying relevant materials and methodologies from social science;
- **Translators** of research findings so they are available and accessible to the local government;
- **Animateurs** who help councils to identify research issues and sources of evidence; and
- **Impartial recorders** of the ongoing delivery and development work.

The ESRC has a range of instruments and initiatives designed to foster knowledge exchange and engagement of this kind including KTPs, the Knowledge Exchange Programme, PhD internships and MSc placements.

However, academics using these kinds of instruments both to work with councils and communities have highlighted some significant challenges:

- First, there is little awareness in local government of their existence. Councils simply would not think of using them or of approaching the ESRC with innovative ideas that might be funded, for example, from the Ventures Scheme.
- Second, some of these initiatives call for what looks to local authorities like a significant upfront investment with uncertain prospects of success. In the current funding climate, councils do not have the spare capacity to devote to what they regard as speculative ventures.
- Third, there can be mismatches between local authority needs and the timescales involved in ESRC calls for, and review of applications, even though these initiatives have more rapid decision times than traditional grant regimes.
- Fourth, there is an impression (rightly or wrongly) that the review process puts too much emphasis on academic rigour and pays too little to relevance to local government's needs.

Rather than pass judgement on these views, and therefore the immediate need for a new instrument, we recommend further exploration and dialogue to determine what would work best for councils and what is feasible for the ESRC by exploring how, and how far, current ESRC/RCUK instruments and funding meet the need, need some adjustment to meet the need, or whether a new instrument/s are necessary.

We are prepared to offer facilitation and support as part of the role of the Knowledge Navigator and suggest that this be integral to the action in Recommendation 1 to 'facilitate and review demonstration projects that use current ESRC and other relevant RCUK instruments and funding arrangements'.

However, this exploration and dialogue should embed what we recommend as core design principles for instruments and funding, which are as follows:

- We suggest that the instrument (or instruments) should have a strong role for the ESRC KE/KTP team;
- They need to be actively promoted by a researcher and a practitioner champion and by the LGA, Solace and professional bodies and networks within local government;
- Councils should be able to apply for 'pump-priming' research support to enable them define issues and work up proposals;
- Applications may be developed by individual local authorities, groups of authorities or partnerships between councils and other local agencies;
- Research questions should be co-designed with, but not dictated by, the council's research partner(s);
- There needs to be significant practitioner involvement in the review process;
- Instruments should be sufficiently flexible to fund researchers at all stages in their careers and combinations of early career and more senior staff;
- The council(s) and academic partners should be funded and required to jointly produce a short end of award report reflecting on the achievements, difficulties, strengths and weaknesses of the work they undertook;
- The academic partner(s) should be expected to publish at least one academic paper from the research engagement on-line within 12 months of the project end.

In short, the result should be a methodology and process for joint exploration of issues in identifying research questions, potentially using a developed rapid research review format to examine the existing research landscape, and then, where relevant, to planning and conducting new research.

The Local Government Knowledge Navigator can help either by advising ESRC on revisions to the modus operandi of its existing programmes, and/or on the design of the new ones that may be necessary.

4. STRATEGIC INVESTMENT IN SECTOR WIDE ENGAGEMENT

Finally, we believe there would be benefits in a concerted effort by research funders and the local government sector as a whole to develop a significant programme (or programmes) of work in one (or more) strategically important area(s) for local government. This should have a high profile and the potential to secure some quick and significant 'wins' which are both valuable in their own right, and which develop and demonstrate the value of embedded research of the kind we have advocated and outlined above in Recommendation 3.

The transfer of responsibility for public health to local government is an obvious candidate for this kind of strategic investment because of the interest which it has generated in local government in the opportunities for councils, the appetite for evidence about what works, and its links to other major programmes and problems at local level. There could be a joint programme involving a significant number of researchers over (perhaps) 2-3 years, co-funded by a range of agencies.

An intervention of this type could make a major impact at a critical junction in the development of local government by helping to promote understanding and drawing on the body of public health research. It would connect the dominant public health research paradigm with local government's 'well-being' focus, and support implementation of central government's agenda in this area. Other topic areas might benefit from a similar approach - for example on local economic development - and initiatives on these two themes could connect to and complement the 'What Works' initiative.

The Local Government Knowledge Navigator can help by drawing together proposals for such interventions, and testing them with potential key sponsors and actors.

10. CONCLUSIONS

We propose action to:

- Change cultures in local government and the research community
- Stimulate demonstration projects using existing ESRC/RCUK instruments and funding
- Establish an Interactive Exchange Platform
- Create a Local Government 'What Works?' Centre
- Develop the instrument of 'embedded research and analytics' in local government
- Imagine and give voice to strategic interventions with potentially far-reaching benefits and impact.

We have indicated where we think the Local Government Knowledge Navigator can help take forward these areas for action - and entirely within the scope of our current responsibilities and funding.

The actions themselves would of course require specific funding, and the commitment and effort of others. We are very conscious of the pressures on time and resources in both the research and local government communities.

Nonetheless we consider that the actions we propose are proportionate and credible from a financial perspective and in terms of the returns they would generate in better policy and delivery.

11. NEXT STEPS

In considering the analysis and recommendations contained in this report, our Sponsors (ESRC, LGA and Solace) have agreed a programme of work for the Local Government Knowledge Navigator and the Sponsors for the remainder of the current programme, which in summary, is as follows:

Culture Change

- To input the findings and recommendations as a contribution to the ESRC strategic priorities review which was launched in June 2014;
- To use the findings and accompanying exemplars to engage and stimulate research and local government audiences: for example, through the Solace Annual Conference, through a series of events around specific topics addressed in Need to Know Reviews, and to engage the main professional societies representing local government services (e.g. children and young people, adult social care, planning etc.) in how to meet their knowledge needs;
- To systemise the identification, refreshing and publicising of good research-derived knowledge and evidence applications in practice
- LGA will lead in developing a knowledge and evidence assessment tool that could potentially become part of - or an aid to - the peer review system that is designed to support councils in improving their services and efficiency;

- Further work to understand local government knowledge and evidence needs, for example, through a survey in summer 2014;
- To design and promote a research community impact 'toolkit' for working with local government, and to produce a practical review of methodologies and approaches for researchers to work successfully with local government.

Connectivity

- Whilst the sponsors want to consider further whether a 'What Works?' Centre is an appropriate solution, we will work up both a model for how to achieve brokerage of local government research requirements and the means to achieve the connectivity recommendations in this report, including necessary web enablement.

Embedded Research

- To work up in more detail how this approach might be developed and applied, including a potential for how the Need to Know Review approach can become part of wider research 'machinery'.

Strategic Investment

- As a first step, to develop the potential requirement further by considering some key current challenges including public health and social care, troubled families, children's services and potential Northern Ireland and Welsh local government re-organisation as a start point.