



Local Government  
Knowledge Navigator

# MAKING THE MOST OF RESEARCH

Final report of the

**ESRC Local Government  
Knowledge Navigator**

to the

**Economic and Social Research Council  
Local Government Association  
Society of Local Authority Chief Executives**

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# FOREWORD

The Local Government Knowledge Navigator was initiated in 2012 to help local government better benefit from national investment in research and influence future research agendas. In doing so it aimed to set a direction for stronger and more systemic collaboration between local government and the research community around challenges for local democracy and public services.

The programme is now moving into a new phase through the Placement Fellow, and will be implementing many of the findings and recommendations set out in our report 'From Analysis to Action: Connecting Research and Local Government in an Age of Austerity'.

This report records the experience and lessons learned from the Local Government Knowledge Navigators over the last two plus years. We hope it will be especially valuable to the ESRC Placement Fellow who is taking forward the work on the ground, and to the Steering Group of the Economic and Social Research Council, the Local Government Association and the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives as they continue to provide leadership for the agenda. It is also intended to all those who have engaged in this agenda and who recognise the potential value of developing a stronger research and development base for local government and local public services in challenging times.

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# SUMMARY

There is a strong case for supporting closer engagement between academic research and local government in the UK.

Councils face unprecedented challenges and need fresh thinking to help them to redesign cash-strapped services and reconnect with disaffected communities. The UK has a strong research base but engagement between local government and researchers is a hit and miss affair. Local government has very little awareness of the research undertaken by the UK's universities and dwindling capacity to engage with it. Relatively few academics see local government as an important partner in, or potential user of, their expertise or the evidence that they generate.

Our analysis demonstrates that:

- Councils have a wide range of evidence needs;
- There is relevant research and expertise in academia but local government fails to make the most of this;
- There are some impressive examples of collaboration but engagement is inconsistent, and often depends on existing links between individual researchers and local government officers or politicians; and
- There is a need for a change of culture in both communities and the development of more systematic approaches to achieving connectivity between them.

The barriers to engagement are not insuperable but local government, the research community and research funders need to take action to:

- Challenge existing cultures and mindsets;
- Stimulate demonstration projects and learn from them;
- Establish a web-enabled platform to better connect local government and research knowledge;
- Encourage the co-production of research agendas and projects; and
- Support strategic and scalable research interventions which are likely to have reach and impact in areas such as public health and social care.

The Local Government Knowledge Navigator:

- Mapped out the steps needed to create a productive relationship between councils and researchers;
- Demonstrated what can be achieved by piloting approaches to engagement;
- Developed and piloted a range of approaches to engagement including the commissioning of a series of 'Need to Know' reviews; and

- Assisted the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), Local Government Association and Society of Local Authority Chief Executives to establish an infrastructure that would achieve and sustain the greater connectivity that is needed, in particular by using web-enabled technologies.

The work of the Placement Fellow funded by the ESRC from April 2015 will be able to build on the analysis and the momentum generated by the Knowledge Navigator initiative and wider developments including the emphasis that research councils now place on research impact and the ESRC's decision to devolve funding for knowledge exchange activities to universities through Impact Acceleration Accounts (IAAs).

However, whilst IAAs and placement schemes offer real opportunities for what we have described as 'embedded research' (i.e. the collaborative development not only of research, but also of research agendas and questions), there is a risk that collaboration will depend too much on existing links and relationships at individual and institutional levels rather than become more systemic.

It is, therefore, important to promote opportunities for collaboration to local government and facilitate connections between councils and centres of research excellence that can meet their evidence needs.

There is also a need to draw in other research councils to ensure that their research agendas address local government evidence needs that lie beyond the expertise of social scientists, and to engage with the Local Authority Research and Intelligence Association, the Department for Communities and Local Government, and other Government Departments.

The 'Need to Know' approach that we piloted should continue to be developed and used as a 'tool' where there are clearly defined evidence needs that can be addressed by rapid and affordable reviews to draw together and distil the existing research base. Further ahead, the local government community needs to articulate a much greater ambition for its use of and contribution to research. Overall, this is a long-term agenda to build effective research and development capacity to support effective and affordable local government and local public services that are fit for modern purpose, and it will need sustained commitment to yield the very substantial benefits that we believe are within our grasp.

# 1. INTRODUCTION

The Local Government Knowledge Navigator was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) between 2013 and 2015. It was steered by the ESRC, the Local Government Association (LGA) and the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE).

The Local Government Knowledge Navigator team brought together a blend of experience of having worked at senior levels in both central and local government and in academia. As a result, it had strong networks of contacts in both communities and was well-placed to work with and analyse the issues from the perspectives of key stakeholders.

This report summarises:

- Challenges that the Local Government Knowledge Navigator was established to analyse and address;
- Our analysis of local government's evidence needs, the obstacles to engagement between research and local authorities, and what can be done to overcome them;
- The activities that we undertook and approaches that we developed and tested;
- What we found works in enabling engagement; and
- What we believe needs to be done next to build on the success of the momentum generated by the Local Government Knowledge Navigator initiative.

## 2. THE CHALLENGE AND THE PRIZE

Local government is hugely important. Councils are responsible for a swathe of public services which are relied on by many of the most vulnerable members of society. They also play important roles as community leaders and in co-ordinating local economic growth initiatives.

However, councils currently face enormous challenges. They have to absorb unprecedented budget cuts in the face of growing demand for local services as a result of demographic changes, technological advances and rising public expectations, whilst connecting with diverse communities that increasingly define themselves in terms of interests and identity rather than place.

As they seek to ride out this 'perfect storm', councils have already become adept at delivering more with less. But there is a growing recognition that they now need to transform services and reshape expectations of local government. This calls for fresh thinking and reliable evidence about what does and what doesn't work.

Academic research ought to provide some of the answers to the questions that councils are asking. The UK has invested in a strong research base. However, partnerships between local government and the research community remain hit and miss affairs, which are over-dependent on existing links and networks - at individual and institutional level. With a few laudable exceptions, local government has little awareness of the large and potentially useful reservoir of research in universities and dwindling capacity to scan for and engage with new evidence. For their part, relatively few academics see local government

as an important partner in, or potential user of, their expertise or the knowledge which they generate.

The Local Government Knowledge Navigator sought to address these problems by analysing local government's evidence needs, assessing the potential of existing ESRC funded research to meet these needs, and developing and piloting approaches to encouraging engagement between local government and academic researchers. It was not, of course, the first attempt to do this.

A decade ago, the Local Authority and Research Council Initiative (LARCI) pursued a similar agenda. In its early stages, LARCI depended on ESRC funding for a part-time and relatively junior co-ordinator post. Following the Grace report (2006)<sup>1</sup>, the ESRC and other research councils came together with senior academics and representatives of local government to sponsor a much higher level initiative.

However, an independent evaluation of this second phase of the LARCI<sup>2</sup> concluded that whilst it produced some good work, it had not addressed the fundamental obstacles to engagement between local government and academic research. The launch of the Navigator initiative was, in part, a response to that failure.

1. 'The Research Councils of the UK and Local Government: Co-producing knowledge to maximize public value'. Clive Grace (2006).

2. 'Partners in Impact: The national and local imperative to join up research and local government post-LARCI'. Clive Grace (2012).

## 3. ANALYSIS

Our work has highlighted significant obstacles to engagement between local government and academic research.

These include:

- A lack of systematic structures to encourage engagement;
- Significant cultural differences between local government and academia;
- The differential time horizons to which the two communities work;
- The hollowing out of local government's in-house evaluation and research capacity which has reduced its capacity to engage with academics;
- The perceived inappropriateness of some research engagement instruments;
- Concerns on the part of some academics that they might be 'captured' and their research be misquoted or misused; and
- Fears from some politicians that evidence might displace political judgment.

The Local Government Knowledge Navigator was launched at a time when there is increasing interest in, and incentive for, academia to work with potential users of research because of the ESRC's emphasis on the importance of engagement with user communities and the inclusion in the national Research Excellence Framework 2014 of a requirement for institutions to provide evidence of research impact. The substantial investment by the ESRC and several government departments in the 'What Works' centres has also encouraged interest in evidence-based policy and practice.

Meanwhile the introduction of Impact Acceleration Accounts (IAAs) has given universities much greater discretion over funding for knowledge exchange activities, potentially taking decisions closer to the needs of their localities. At the same time, as noted above, councils are facing new challenges which, on the face of it, might be expected to stimulate demand for research-based knowledge and evidence.

However, although several What Works Centres have developed their own links with councils and in some cases regional groupings of councils, the What Works model is a 'supply side initiative'. Its theory of knowledge mobilisation is based on 'push' rather than 'pull' and we found a general lack of awareness in local government of the initiative. Partly for this reason, we recommended that consideration be given to establishing a What Works Centre dedicated to local government's needs. It remains to be seen how effective existing centres will be in engaging with councils and vice versa.

Similarly, whilst IAAs are a welcome innovation that we believe have considerable potential, our analysis of IAA business plans and interviews with a sample of universities suggests that the level of council involvement is patchy and often dependent on existing links between individual researchers and research teams. Some universities told us that councils are finding it increasingly difficult to find the capacity to engage effectively in the development stages and are sometimes put off by the need to prepare bids for IAA funds which are not guaranteed to succeed. The way in which individual IAAs administer their activity will be crucial in determining how far local government and academics can engage productively and with impact.

## 4. ACTIONS

The Local Government Knowledge Navigator sought to identify and document councils' evidence needs, develop and pilot ways of meeting these needs, and enable local government to exert greater influence over future research agendas.

The Navigator acted as an advocate of the potential benefits of more effective engagement between academia and local government, as well as being an evidence broker, and developed new opportunities for future knowledge exchange and collaboration.

Key activities included:

- Developing new partnerships;
- Raising the profile and accessibility of social science research within local government;
- Working with key local government organisations to identify current issues and challenges facing councils and commissioning reviews to address these issues;
- Developing proposals for creating a web-based connectivity hub for research and local government;
- Influencing new research projects and programmes;
- Exploring alternative and comparative funding models of research/local government engagement from other countries; and
- Developing a sustainable model for future engagement and networking between local government and universities.

And the Navigator has also:

- Produced a comprehensive analysis of the opportunities for developing research and local government collaboration, and a route map for the steps needed to achieve this at a scale necessary to achieve genuine impact in a large and complex sector;<sup>3</sup>
- Identified exemplars where research and local government collaboration has - at various levels - worked successfully and an analysis of the ingredients that make these work;<sup>4</sup>

- Provided an analysis of the evidence needs of SOLACE members;<sup>5</sup>
- Produced six 'Need to Know' Research Reviews which provide an accessible summary of the current state of knowledge in areas identified to us as important evidence needs for local government (see <http://www.local.gov.uk>);
- Secured the creation of a web-based connectivity platform through 'Knowledge Hub' which met all key criteria and requirements of the major stakeholders at very low cost;
- Encouraged local government engagement in the ESRC Big Data Programme and IAAs;
- Recommended options for successor arrangements;
- Organised seminars hosted by the LGA to disseminate and examine approaches to effective engagement between researchers and local government drawing on international experience and the use of IAAs;
- Contributed to a range of other seminars and debates that have generated profile and interest, including the ESRC Big Data Launch;
- Engaged with key stakeholders, including the What Works Centres, DCLG, and the Cabinet Office, to raise the profile of local government evidence needs; and
- Submitted evidence to the Communities and Local Government Select Committee both by the Local Government Knowledge Navigators, and by two 'Need to Know' review authors.

The step change in engagement between academic research and local government that we have argued for cannot be achieved by a relatively modest and short-term initiative like the Local Government Knowledge Navigator.

3. 'From Analysis to Action: Connecting Research and Local Government in an Age of Austerity'. Tim Allen, Clive Grace and Steve Martin (2013).

4. 'Collaboration in Action: Local authorities that are making the most of research'. Jill Mortimer (2014).

5. 'The Role of Evidence and Research in Local Government'. Tim Allen, Clive Grace and Steve Martin (2014).

Nevertheless, the last two years have witnessed some encouraging developments including the:

- Invitation from the ESRC to local government to engage in the formulation of its forward strategy;
- Research impact agenda in UK Research Councils and the Research Excellence Framework, that enhance the incentive and opportunities for local government and research community collaboration;
- Increased LGA and SOLACE focus on evidence, knowledge and innovation needs;
- Advent of new instruments designed to promote knowledge exchange, including Impact Accelerator Accounts and What Works Centres.

The Navigator has contributed to these through:

- Bringing together ESRC, LGA and SOLACE through the Navigator steering group;
- Stimulating senior people to engage with the developments described above; and
- Exploring methods of encouraging effective knowledge exchange including the 'Need to Know' series of reviews.

This has established momentum for change (from a very low base) and provided:

- An analysis of local government's knowledge needs in relation to current priorities for policy and practice, but also in terms of how to deliver effective knowledge exchange and develop new research agendas;
- Evidence that there is a substantial and untapped asset for local government in the UK research base
- A dialogue at senior levels in local government, research councils and universities about what is needed to connect the two communities, and the subtleties and segmentation needed to achieve this;
- A series of recommendations outlining steps that are needed to develop engagement at sufficient scale to achieve impact; and
- Demonstrating what might be achieved.

## 5. WHAT WORKED?

This report is not a formal evaluation of the Local Government Knowledge Navigator initiative, but it is appropriate to summarise what has worked, in order to help inform future work including that of the ESRC-funded Placement Fellow.

### FROM ANALYSIS TO ACTION

The Navigator initiative has moved the agenda from examining the need, potential and challenges into the identification and piloting of ways of achieving 'connectivity', communication and engagement between local government and research.

### LOCAL GOVERNMENT NEEDS EVIDENCE

Our interviews and the survey of SOLACE members demonstrated that councils are keen to find evidence, which can help them to respond to the challenges which they face. But they are often unaware of how to do this.

There is a need for evidence about 'strategic' policy challenges, but often councils are looking for advice about narrower practical issues. The former calls for engagement at senior level, because this is where leadership and direction come from both in local government and the research world; whereas the latter points to the need to engage professional societies and academics who specialize in applied and practice-based research and teaching.

### FACILITATION

Our work has shown the importance of 'hands-on' facilitation in bringing research and local government together. We have done a lot of work to bridge the two very different worlds, languages and imperatives and heard from others about the time and effort which has been needed to develop collaboration in the past and now through IAAs.

It is important to match councils with research needs to those researchers who speak the right language and have an interest in the applied dimension of research. It is often the case that the research which councils need is grounded in knowledge accumulated by years of experience and research, rather than a specific study that provides all the answers. Knowledge exchange requires co-production of research agendas and problem definition as well as of the analysis which follows.

### EXEMPLARS

The exemplars of collaboration that we researched, wrote up and published provided a powerful demonstration of the benefits of councils working with and drawing on academic research. We believe that there is merit in continuing to highlight these kinds of examples so that councils can learn from each other's experiences.

### NEED TO KNOW REVIEWS

The 'Need to Know' reviews that we produced offered a cost-effective way of bringing together the research on issues that were identified by local government as important evidence needs. They required an investment of £6,000 to £7,000 each because they drew on existing evidence rather than producing new primary research. The role of the Knowledge Navigator was crucial to their value. Scoping the issues and who needed the knowledge and access to research findings, identifying and negotiating with experts who could curate and communicate this knowledge, managing the process and quality assuring the output, took a considerable amount of time and required an understanding of, and engagement with, relevant networks in both the research and local government communities.

If the 'Need to Know' model is adopted more widely, provision must be made for this commissioning, facilitation and 'translation' role. We produced the reports in attractive formats and disseminated them electronically through the LGA, professional networks and the Guardian's Public Services webpages.

We also experimented with presenting reports to relevant audiences but believe that to work this must have active and needy 'clients', and active promotion of the outputs to the client audience, for example through events and debates.

### SENIOR SPONSORSHIP AND ENGAGEMENT

The Steering Group comprising senior representatives of the ESRC, LGA and SOLACE has been important to the success of the Navigator initiative.

### OTHER MODELS

We demonstrated that some other countries have made greater progress than the UK in developing engagement between research and local government, and that at least some aspects of these models provide transferable learning.

### CONNECTIVITY

The arrangements for web-based connectivity designed by the Navigator will provide a modern, digital space in which researchers and local authorities will be supported in linking up and in being made aware of what is available in their respective domains.

## 6. WHAT NEXT?

The issue of 'What Next?' in making the most of research in this context has two major aspects.

The first relates to the immediate future - organised around the activities and objectives of the ESRC Placement Fellow but by no means exclusively through that. The second is the medium- to long-term aspirations and ambitions which need to be given effect.

### THE PERIOD IMMEDIATELY AHEAD

The appointment of a Placement Fellow funded by the ESRC, partly co-funded and hosted by SOLACE and accountable to the ESRC, SOLACE and LGA, represents the fourth national initiative to promote engagement between social science research and local government in the last decade. It is an important if modest investment and it has again fallen to the ESRC alone of the Research Councils to engage in this direct and practical way with local government stakeholders. The Placement Fellow has the advantage of being able to build on the momentum generated by the Knowledge Navigator initiative. She will also benefit from high level engagement with local government, in particular backing at senior level from both SOLACE and the LGA, which we believe is a pre-requisite for any attempt to promote engagement at scale.

The web-based connectivity arrangements will provide the ESRC Placement Fellow with a key instrument for engaging both researchers and local authorities. It can help develop 'reach' to segment and match local government needs to relevant and willing research supply from sources able to work with local government (so it's about professionals, as well as chief executives and politicians). It will also provide opportunities to engage local authorities in the new IAAs.

IAAs and placement schemes offer real opportunities for engagement, and in particular for 'embedded research'. But there is a risk that collaborations are based largely on existing links and relationships, at both individual and institutional levels. It will require focused effort by the major stakeholders as well as the Placement Fellow to ensure that they lead to a significant increase in the extent and intensity of engagement. We have highlighted exemplars that we believe are worth drawing on, and the Local Government Impact Acceleration Account Special Interest Group should be a good way of gauging what works and what does not, particularly as different institutions are adopting very different approaches to engagement with local government.

We believe that many universities and councils will need support if they are to make the most of the opportunities provided by IAA funding. We have found that councils are often still unaware of the range of funding provided by the ESRC for research and knowledge exchange. Those that do know of these initiatives often regard the timescales and, sometimes, the complexity, of applications as off-putting, and the prospects of success as too small. We have found that some universities do not know how to connect with councils; and those councils who have found their local universities lack the expertise they are seeking do not know how to link up with institutions that do. There is, therefore, further work to be done, by the ESRC and perhaps by the Placement Fellow, to promote opportunities for collaboration to local government and to facilitate connections between councils and centres of research excellence that can meet their evidence needs.

We see real possibilities for change by incorporating councils' use of evidence into local government peer challenge processes. We believe that this will encourage councils to promote a learning culture that seeks out relevant and challenging knowledge and evidence. Knowledge and evidence as part of peer review and local government sector-led improvement could be key as a driver to embed culture change.

We also believe that the 'Need to Know' approach that we have designed and piloted should be developed and rolled out more widely. This could be useful where there is a clear and identifiable evidence need which can be addressed by a rapid review, drawing together the existing research base. The reviews should be grounded in local government needs and facilitated to ensure profile and local government / researcher engagement in the findings.

#### **FURTHER AHEAD**

It is also very important indeed to recognise, simply, that the IAAs are a very small part of the ESRC budget, and focused (broadly) on 'knowledge exchange', and that the ESRC has relatively small resources. We believe that there is need to draw in other Research Councils to ensure that research agendas address a range of issues that are highly relevant to local government but lie beyond the expertise of social scientists. Obvious examples include climate change and flooding but there are many others. We also recommend that the work of the Placement Fellow and of the major stakeholders engages with LARIA and DLGC and other Government Departments. We see this as one way

over the longer term to help connect local government into the emerging infrastructure of evidence-based policy-making, as reflected, for example, in the 'What Works?' centres, and in the greater concern with impact signalled in the Research Excellence Framework.

Perhaps the single most important longer term objective, however, is for the local government community especially to develop a different scale of ambition and vision for how they can draw on and contribute to research. They need to articulate the research needs which they have as organisations and as partners with others, and in respect of the communities they serve, focused around a practical agenda of interventions and development. They should promote a strategic agenda built on long-term relationships and a sustainable funding model, drawing on the existing examples available from overseas. The aim should be ultimately to achieve success 'at scale' around a much longer term agenda.

In achieving this, we also believe that political leadership will be important. We encountered local politicians who championed the use of independent research in the work of their council. These politicians understood that research can aid and inform decision making and council effectiveness, even where it cannot provide 'the' answer. We believe that applied research knowledge can support and strengthen local democracy by informing decision making, service delivery, peer review, scrutiny and evaluation functions and, in doing so, provide local politicians with a stronger basis for informing and challenging decisions.

