

- A partnership of public health researchers across the five universities in North East England
- Working with policy makers and practice partners to improve health and wellbeing and tackle inequalities
- A founding member of the NIHR School for Public Health Research (SPHR)

## LACoR: embedding a culture of research in local government

The Local Authority Champions of Research (LACoR) study, funded by the Health Foundation, explored how to embed a culture of research in local government (LG) to improve population health. The findings were translated into a logic model illustrating what helps and hinders evidence use in decision-making.

Local government is ideally placed to draw on and develop evidence to influence public health and reduce inequalities. The return of public health to local government in 2012 provided opportunities for public health to influence wider local government policy and decisions. Austerity and public sector funding cuts have limited investment in research and evaluation. Therefore, new models are needed to generate evidence through collaborative approaches.

The LACoR proof of concept study was undertaken in collaboration between Fuse, Queen's University Belfast and University of Southampton and four local authorities (Newcastle, Belfast and, Southampton Cities and Hampshire County Councils). We used a mixed methods approach including a rapid literature review, online scoping survey, 5 facilitated workshops, 14 interviews with LG staff in one local authority and social network analysis to explore factors influencing cultures of research and evidence use in local government. The study found no shared agreement about 'what counts' as evidence in LG, with multiple cultures of evidence use co-existing. Local authority staff who participated in this study were keen to use evidence to inform their work and some felt their research skills were underused.

Practical examples of innovative approaches to evidence use were identified in a changing landscape, including research champions and embedded researchers, operating in different ways as knowledge mobilisers and change agents.

However, organisational churn, rising demands, fragmentation and siloed thinking, combined with a lack of data sharing due to governance and access issues, and limited time and capacity for reflection and analysis, limit the ability of LG staff to use evidence as a part of decision-making.

The logic model identified three key themes that influence cultures of research and evidence use in local government: 1)

increasing practical data usage through data sharing agreements and governance frameworks and improved access to published evidence (data usage); 2) upskilling staff in academia and local government through Continuing Professional Development opportunities and secondments (people), and 3) creating conversational spaces with LG, changing relationships and enhancing career pathways between LG and universities to enable interdisciplinary approaches to local priorities (collaboration).

### Key Findings

- No one size fits all: embedding a research culture depends on context and organisational culture. Find an approach that fits best (and evaluate accordingly).
- Sustainable funding and incentives are required to support meaningful, co-production opportunities.
- Networks of research champions within and between local authorities and with academia are needed to address questions which reflect the priorities of LG.
- Researchers are needed as part of multi-agency teams working alongside research users, policy makers, and commissioners in local government to feed in insights and co-produce evidence-informed, context-relevant solutions.
- This requires trusting, respectful relationships and a system wide approach to promoting evidence use and creation between LG, academia and wider stakeholders.

### Key principles for building evidence-informed policy and practice in local government:

- Conceptual clarity - define the 'problem' together drawing on multiple perspectives and acknowledge that what counts as evidence may vary.
- Co-production - engage in dialogue from the outset and create conversational spaces.
- Co-design - create a flexible plan, not a detailed roadmap and recognise and develop assets and expertise which people bring.
- Culture - don't parachute in, build an organisational culture to test out ideas and learn from the unexpected.

## Policy relevance and implications

### Local government

- Create spaces and capacity for reflections between departments to encourage evidence use in decision-making.
- Build on existing assets, such as research champions, staff research skills and qualifications, and knowledge and expertise across local government (LG) in applying evidence.
- Pro-actively engage with universities and individual academics that share your values.
- Embedded research can improve links between policy, practice and academia with the right approach but may be limited in its sphere of influence.

### Academia

- Go where the energy is.
- Context is everything; take account of the social, political, financial, regulatory and legal context of LG and spend time with decision-makers to understand this context.
- Strive for an appropriate balance between academic rigour and timeliness – co-produce ‘good enough’ research for decision-making.

### Research funders

- Increase investment in meaningful co-production opportunities.
- Adapt the funding infrastructure to local government needs (responsive, rapid evaluation, flexible timescales and objectives).

## FURTHER INFORMATION

The research was undertaken from January to October 2019. Following the successful completion of the LACoR proof of concept study, the research team led by Professor Ashley Adamson has been awarded a UK Prevention Research Partnership (UKPRP) Consortium Development Grant building upon the work from this study.

*Local Authority Champions of Research Project: A Report for the Health Foundation*

[www.fuse.ac.uk/askfuse/resources/LACoR%20report%20final%20311019%20draft%20for%20website.pdf](http://www.fuse.ac.uk/askfuse/resources/LACoR%20report%20final%20311019%20draft%20for%20website.pdf)

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*“What I really want is academics who want to partner and who care about the outcome”*



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