



Improving evidence use in local government

Background

Fostering links between academia and local government has long been a concern for those interested in promoting evidence-informed practice. While the barriers and enablers of evidence use are well known (Langer et al. 2016) and there is a growing body of literature on local government practitioners and academics as research partners, less is known about how best to facilitate these partnerships.

To explore this issue, the Wales Centre for Public Policy (WCPP) partnered with Cardiff Council and Social Care Wales on a four-month National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) funded project to increase links between the council, public health, and academia. The project explored the mechanisms, relationships and networks needed to support and fund high quality research engagement in the Children's Services department at the council.

As part of this project we held three online workshops with representatives from Children's Services, Cardiff University, Social Care Wales, Welsh Government and the third sector, and ran a survey with Children's Services staff on approaches to research use and evidence-informed practice at the council.

In this briefing we report on findings drawn from the workshops and survey, grouped under three key themes related to evidence-informed practice and research use at the council:

- Current practice
- Barriers to good practice

- Opportunities and proposed ways forward.

Current practice

Most participants were engaged in evidence-informed practice in their work and thought it was important. They could point towards a wide range of activity where evidence-informed practice was used in Children's Services.

Participants reported a high level of reflective practice, generally related to Children's Services' use of the Signs of Safety approach. Evidence-informed practice was seen as central to this approach.

Several reported using evidence-informed practice in their pre- and post-qualification studies. Research undertaken by social work students was also highlighted as an example of existing practice, although there was concern that this was not integrated into the strategic aims of Children's Services and tended to exist in isolation.

Supporting staff to find relevant evidence is an important part of promoting evidence use. Participants reported several places where staff could access research reports. For example, one team uses a shared folder to add any new pieces of research they have come across to discuss in team meetings, and login details are shared to access online forums.

Barriers to good practice

Despite these areas of good practice, participants felt that evidence-informed practice was often disjointed and ad hoc, relying on the interests of key staff rather than being consistently implemented across Children's Services. One commented:

“We've got some models going on which we can attach this research lens to, but I think it is very patchy and probably underdeveloped and actually, teams are very busy as well. We have to make it part of their practice in a supportive way other than an additional job, because it won't happen”.

Existing structures and processes in this area were considered poorly coordinated and inconsistently implemented, with no overall framework. Participants did not necessarily know about work taking place within their team or department, or in the wider social services or Council.

Improving research literacy was felt to be important by survey respondents but almost all thought that staff need additional support in this area. This was also reflected in the workshop discussions. Participants wanted help in 'translating' research for use in practice.

Time and capacity were also seen as major barriers to this kind of practice, as identified in previous work in this area. One participant said:

“People just don't have enough time to leisurely read research. I think that if capacity wasn't such an issue there could be training opportunities for instance half a day a month per practitioner. To have dedicated time [for] reading and then take it back to a team meeting”.

Opportunities and proposed ways forward

Training and workforce development were seen as central to supporting staff and building their confidence to make greater use of research in their work. Principal and Consultant Social Workers were regarded as key to this, as

disseminating research is part of their job descriptions. However, the pressures of work mean that these staff are increasingly pulled into complex case work, leaving little time to focus on promoting evidence-informed practice.

Participants highlighted several opportunities for structures and processes to support the translation/distillation of research evidence into practice. They saw potential in the embedded researcher model (Coates and Mikan, 2020), where a researcher becomes a member of a practitioner team, and in the idea of research champions, where individual staff members are responsible for promoting and disseminating evidence in the council. Principal or Consultant Social Workers were considered best suited to the research champion role.

Interest in this project was initiated by the senior leadership in Children's Services, and the need for an ongoing commitment from leaders to support capacity was emphasised by participants. The importance of research use and evidence-informed practice was highlighted at strategic level, to align research and evidence use with corporate priorities and support decision making and budget setting.

Participants recommended that a steering group could take these issues forward and ensure a coordinated approach. One participant said:

“Any kind of working group, development group or steering group would be important and probably quite intrinsic in getting this off the ground and everyone working together cohesively. At the moment there are a lot of people doing some excellent work in very different areas, different ways, but none of it meets”.

There was significant interest in Cardiff Council becoming more research active, and ultimately being known as a site for cutting edge research and practice. Despite the evident enthusiasm to increase the use of research and evidence-informed practice at the Council that emerged during the project, there were few existing links between Children's Services and the University. Most survey respondents said they were not

currently involved in research activity. Discussions at the workshops suggest that Council staff are also not engaged in the regional and national work to promote evidence-informed practice undertaken by Social Care Wales. There was significant interest in developing this in future, particularly on improving long-term outcomes for children and families. Participants were keen to develop a bottom-up approach to developing a research agenda.

There was interest in developing links with Cardiff University on a range of potential research areas across Children's Services, such as pre-birth, contextual harm, outcomes for children looked after, safeguarding, criminal and sexual exploitation as well as improving health outcomes and integrating health and social care. This included improving data collection and statistical information, particularly on strategic decision making and service delivery, but this needed to be relevant to the strategic priorities for Children's Services. Participants also wanted research to focus on the impact of the work of Children's Services.

Participants called for research to examine longitudinal outcomes at a local level, such as examining the impact of the 'trigger trio': domestic and sexual violence, substance use and mental health problems. There was also a demand for more comparative research and data so that work in Cardiff can be seen in a wider context, to help inform practice.

Finally, participants wanted to work with a range of stakeholders, including public health, the third sector and Cardiff University to develop a multi-agency approach to research and evidence use.

Reflections

Research has found that local government has very little awareness of the research undertaken by UK universities and dwindling capacity to engage with it (Allen et al. 2015). This was found to be generally true in Cardiff, but there was evidence of a genuine appetite across all levels of Children's Services to improve connections with academia and make the

boundaries between the 'two communities' more porous (Caplan, 1979). Better collaboration with Cardiff University was seen as an opportunity for the Council to increase evidence-informed practice and become a site for cutting-edge research and practice.

The Council already has structures and processes in place that are intended to: facilitate access to research evidence; embed evidence-informed models of practice; and have designated sources of expertise throughout Children's Services (i.e. Principal and Consultant Social Workers). However, this project has highlighted that these measures have been insufficient, leading to pockets of 'good practice' without these becoming widespread or mainstreamed.

In the short-term, **Cardiff University is well placed to support Children's Services** in terms of facilitating access to research, promoting evidence-based practice, and supporting workforce development.

The research suggests a possible role for knowledge brokers who could 'translate' research for use in practice, rather than expecting academics to change how they communicate their research and social workers to have sufficient time to read research evidence. The experience of WCPP in working with both Welsh Government and public services suggests that a high value is placed by officials on contact with experts (e.g. roundtables or 1:1 briefings) rather than reading documents, and these are also opportunities for reciprocal learning. A knowledge broker or embedded researcher could facilitate these activities and organise meetings and events to build understanding of evidence use, develop research questions, and share the results from research in an easily accessible format.

There is potential to co-produce small projects which synthesise evidence in key areas and presents them in a suitable format for use on the frontline. A range of research topics have already been suggested, from pre-birth and ACEs to health and educational outcomes for children looked after. A steering group of

representatives from across the key stakeholder groups would agree on the research topics and the evidence needed to answer them, and then commission an expert.

This project has complemented the ongoing work of WCPP and Children's Services at Cardiff Council, and laid firm foundations to establish Cardiff Council as research active, able to fully participate in social care and public health research. **There are opportunities to build on the emerging relationships developed through this project** to explore areas of mutual research interest and introduce approaches to support knowledge co-production. Building on the recent research in a health setting in Bristol (Wye et al. 2020) a Cardiff research system could include a combination of knowledge brokers and embedded researchers who can facilitate exchange within and between different council departments, as well as research champions, and co-producing small research projects. This infrastructure would help to deliver sustainable research activity and ultimately lead to improved outcomes for children and families. The steering

group being established will explore opportunities to develop this infrastructure.

References

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Find out more

For the full report see Bowen, K., Bristow, D., Taylor-Collins, E., and Downe, J. (2021). **Improving Decision-making and Practice in Public Health and Social Care Research by Making the Connections between Cardiff Council and Cardiff University.** Cardiff Council and Wales Centre for Public Policy.

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