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# Supporting local authorities to develop their research capacity

Final report for the LGA and LARC

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# Executive summary

This paper provides useful insights into the views and experiences of a range of 15 LA front-line staff, including locality managers and staff from central children's services recently involved in defining and undertaking research projects with support from NFER/Local Authority Research Consortium(LARC)<sup>1</sup>. LARC<sup>1</sup> round two (2009) explored the impact of integrated working on improving outcomes for children, young people and families by looking at the Common Assessment Framework (CAF). Around 25 authorities carried out local research on the CAF with the purpose of developing a national picture of progress towards integrated working. This LGA-funded project complements the LARC research by examining the views, perceived benefits and challenges of being involved in practitioner-led research with a sample of LAs from across England involved in LARC.

The reported benefits of being involved in LA practitioner-led research and LARC are to:

- inform and develop practice through learning and development leading to improved delivery and planning
- provide insights into front-line working and local practice, particularly for middle and senior managers
- value staff professionally, developing their knowledge and expertise
- evidence impact on outcomes for children, young people and families and, specific to LARC, share and learn with other authorities.

It was reported that where practitioners have autonomy for the research, it helps them to look for gaps in provision, explore what works and inform planning and decision making. Interviewees noted it is sometimes easier for front-line staff to embrace and embed recommendations when they have autonomy over research rather than seeing it as a separate activity.

LA examples of good practice included providing ten days of practitioner time to engage in research per annum and the inception of an evidence-informed practice steering group to support

decisions about the strategic direction of evidence-informed practice. It was hoped strategic buy-in would raise the profile of research locally.

The challenges associated with practitioner-led research were reported as relating to:

- insufficient allocation of time, capacity and resources
- low confidence and skill set of practitioners.

These challenges are not insurmountable and can be overcome with local strategic commitment to practitioner-led research and the sharing of knowledge, good practice and expertise locally. In addition, practitioners would value a clear steer from local and national Government on the value placed on practitioner-led research and its place within service improvement. More needs to be done locally and nationally to share examples of good practice and cost-effective service delivery grounded in practitioner-led research.

When conducting research, good practice dictates a need to:

- clarify local senior managers' positions on the value of engaging in research
- establish project set-up procedures with a steering group including senior managers
- develop a detailed project plan, indicating time and resource requirements
- access expert advice when considering research methodologies and analyses strategies
- disseminate findings and share examples of good practice stating implications for key audiences locally and nationally.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For further information about this project or being involved in LARC, please contact the NFER LARC research team at [LARC@nfer.ac.uk](mailto:LARC@nfer.ac.uk) or visit [www.larc-research.org.uk](http://www.larc-research.org.uk).

# 1 Introduction

This report presents the findings of a qualitative study with 15 local authorities (LAs) involved in the second round of the Local Authority Research Consortium (LARC). It reports on LA representatives' experience of being involved in LARC2, where authorities designed, carried out and reported on their own research project. It explores how LAs could be better supported to develop their capacity to engage in and conduct research.

## 1.1 Background to LARC

LARC<sup>2</sup> was formed at the start of 2007 with a purpose to:

- enable children's services teams to identify where they are (individually and collectively) with integrated working at a locality level
- help authorities identify how to make faster progress on improving outcomes
- report findings and recommendations nationally.

During LARC round one (2007/8), 14 LAs were involved in exploring the early impact of integrated working on key groups of children and young people with the research largely undertaken by NFER researchers. LARC1 found that most authorities were at the early stages of integrated working with improvements to processes and structures and professionals' attitudes and experiences (see Lord *et al*, 2008).

LARC round two (LARC2), carried out during 2009, continued with a focus on the impact of integrated working by exploring the Common Assessment Framework (CAF). Working with around 25 authorities<sup>3</sup>, this round of work adopted a practitioner-led approach, with a mix of front-line staff, locality managers and staff from central children's services functions defining and undertaking research projects with support from the NFER LARC team. LARC2 provides deeper understanding about the mechanisms

that enabled effective integration between targeted and universal services and provides insights into the impact that integrated practice has on children, young people and families, on the professionals who work with them and on the services themselves. LARC reports are available from participating authorities and the national LARC2 research report, which synthesises the findings from across individual LA projects, became available at [www.larc-research.org.uk](http://www.larc-research.org.uk) from February 2010.

This LGA-funded project examined one of the key principles underlying LARC: that LAs can gain value from being involved in the research projects the consortium supports. It provides further evidence of the benefits and challenges associated with practitioner-led research to support improved outcomes for children, young people and families and for developing multi-agency working and service development. This project explored LAs' experiences of and capacity to engage in research generally but many experiences reported in this research refer specifically to the LARC2 project.

## 1.2 Aims of the research

The broad aim of this research was to examine the support that LAs require to develop their research capacity; by this we mean capacity to engage with research findings and to conduct practitioner<sup>4</sup>-led research locally. More specifically, the research aimed to:

- explore LAs' experience/s of practitioner-led research
- examine the benefits and challenges of being involved in practitioner-led research (and specifically, LARC)
- provide detail of support needs to engage in practitioner-led research
- explore examples of good practice in using LA research data.

## 1.3 Methodology

The first stage of this evaluation comprised a basic analysis of a proforma sent by the NFER team to all LARC LA leads at LARC2 inception in autumn 2008. The proforma asked LAs what support they envisaged they would require to carry out their own LARC research project, for example, designing a research methodology or commissioning research (see Appendix 2 for detailed breakdown of responses). LARC leads anticipated that they would require most support with designing the research project and developing research instruments but this may be reflective of the timing LAs completed their proformas (that is, at the design and development stage).

Fifteen LAs were randomly selected from 25 LARC authorities and invited to participate in this study. The authorities were from across all nine Government Office (GO) regions and covered each type of authority (that is, county shire, London borough, unitary authority and metropolitan district).

The selected 15 LAs were initially sent an email in November 2009 inviting them to participate in the research. They were then telephoned to see whether they were willing to take part in a semi-structured interview. Interviews took place in November and December 2009, at a time when most LAs had completed their research reports. Telephone interviews were carried out with 13 LA officers (mostly managers) who were members of the LARC consortium. Two participants submitted their responses via email.

## 1.4 Structure of the report

This report is organised as follows:

**Section 2** examines the extent to which officers perceived there to be a culture of using practitioner-led research across their LA. It also outlines interviewees' involvement in practitioner-led research.

**Section 3** explores the benefits and challenges of being involved in practitioner-led research and LARC.

**Section 4** discusses what aspects of being involved in research or data collection LAs struggle with most. It explores the support received to carry out practitioner-led research and further support needs are discussed.

**Section 5** concludes the report by highlighting the key messages arising from the research and provides good practice guidance and recommendations for local authorities and national bodies.

### Notes

- 2 The LARC consortium comprises Research in Practice (RiP), NFER, Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA), LGA, regional Government Offices, around 30 LAs, with a small number of Directors of Children's Services (DCS) sitting on the steering group, and Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC).
- 3 Although around 30 authorities are involved in the consortium, research reports or data were submitted from 24 LAs. A list of LAs involved in LARC2 can be found in Appendix 3.
- 4 'Practitioner', for the purpose of the LARC research, refers to a range of front-line staff, locality managers and staff from central children's services functions.



## 2 Awareness and involvement in practitioner-led research

Interviewees were asked to briefly outline their current roles and responsibilities and involvement in research. The roles of participants varied with about a quarter having a research-focused role involving, for example, encouraging staff to make best use of available evidence and supporting practitioners to undertake their own research. Half of those interviewed said that they had undertaken a piece of research as part of their undergraduate or postgraduate qualifications. Three interviewees noted that they had been involved in undertaking research in a previous role. All interviewees had a personal and professional interest in engaging in research. (For a list of job titles of interviewees, see Appendix 1.)

Participants were asked to briefly describe their own involvement in practitioner-led research. Just under half of respondents focused on their involvement in LARC2 (and in one instance, the LARC1 project). Participants had also, for example, been involved in encouraging colleagues to use existing research to inform commissioning; carry out regional and local research projects; working with local universities; developing questionnaires or running focus groups to improve practice or undertaking a piece of research at doctorate or masters level as part of continued professional development.

### 2.1 LA culture of practitioner-led research

#### **There is limited awareness of current practitioner-led research within and across LA departments.**

There was a mixed response from interviewees when asked to comment on the extent to which there was a culture of using practitioner-led research across the LA. Six interviewees reported that, to their knowledge, there was no, or a fairly limited, research culture in the authority. One commented: 'I've been here a long time and it's nothing you hear talked about a lot.' Another interviewee said 'I think it needs developing'.

About a third felt that a culture was in existence across most services; but it was acknowledged that this was variable across different parts of the LA. For example, one interviewee noted that research was more evident across the social care division speculating that this was attributable to a strong research tradition for providing evidence within this sector. Interestingly, however, another interviewee said that while the LA encouraged staff to evidence practice, 'it still comes done to particular personnel that have got a particular interest that will drive it forward' as well as being dependent on good links with local universities.

## 3 Benefits of being involved in practitioner-led research

### 3.1 Benefits

**The benefits of being involved in practitioner-led research are informing and developing practice; providing insights into front-line working; finding evidence of impact on outcomes for children, young people and families and valuing staff professionally.**

Interviewees were asked what they thought were the main benefits of being involved in practitioner-led research. The most frequently reported responses are described below.

Every interviewee reported the benefit of **informing practice through learning and development** (that is, searching for 'what works') by prompting practitioners to be more reflective and try different approaches; identifying gaps in service delivery, informing strategic planning and decision making. As one interviewee explained: 'It's about reflecting what we do and making sure it's the best way of doing things based both from an efficiency and outcome point of view really.'

Providing a **real insight into what is happening at the 'grass roots'** level was mentioned by about half of interviewees. As one manager explained it is important to find out what is happening rather than what you think should be happening and practitioner-led research gives a 'bottom-up' perspective: '...it's good to step outside and analyse and just broaden your thinking a bit because you can get a bit focused and...bogged down'.

Finding out **how to evidence impact** on outcomes through local research was seen as a key benefit for around half of interviewees. They valued being able to use evidence to inform improvements and implement new or different ways of working.

Valuing and developing the **knowledge and expertise of front-line staff** as well as helping to enrich the research process was also a noted benefit

(by around half of interviewees). It was felt that the views of service users are often gathered but rarely the views of front-line service providers. Giving practitioners, who are interested and experienced in a specific area the opportunity to do research, over professional researchers, was seen to be beneficial because practitioners understand the reality and context of doing the job. It was also noted that where practitioners have autonomy for the research, it helps them to look for gaps in provision, explore what works and inform planning and decision making. It was explained that it is sometimes easier for front-line staff to embrace and embed recommendations when they have autonomy over research rather than seeing it as a separate activity.

### Benefits of being involved in LARC2

**Benefits for practitioners being involved in LARC include: sharing knowledge, experience and good practice; contributing to a national project while meeting local needs; having the opportunity to evaluate and inform practice and support inter-agency working.**

When asked to comment specifically on the benefits of being involved in LARC, almost all interviewees reported the **opportunity to share knowledge, experience and good practice with other LAs**. For example, on a personal level, one interviewee remarked:

*I don't get very many opportunities to interact with other researchers, so working on the LARC projects, for me it's a double whammy – I get to share knowledge and understanding, and network with local authority contacts who are carrying out research.*

They also added that these discussions provided reassurance that other LAs were tackling similar challenges as well as providing assurances about aspects of the research. Other benefits of being involved in LARC included:

- **links with other LAs** to produce findings and recommendations based on a large sample (mentioned by ten interviewees). One interviewee said:

*Whatever you are doing [locally], it's a small sample so it's about how you make best use of the sample and you can make best use of it by putting in into a bigger pot.*

- **LARC principles**, including availability of research support, access to workshops, contributing and benefiting from the national findings and raising the profile of research in children's services locally (mentioned by nine interviewees). One interviewee explained that LARC helped provide an impetus to drive forward developments and provided a validated platform for the CAF process:

*...as an objective body that sits outside, the validating is really quite important because what you get is a lot of directives that say you will work this way but who is to say that it actually right?*

Another explained: '[senior managers provide] a commitment to resources being put in, people will listen and act on the findings a lot easier.'

- provides an **opportunity to think critically within authorities** (mentioned by eight interviewees). LARC provided LAs with the opportunity to use and develop critical analysis skills, as one interviewee noted:

*The work would not have happened without LARC...one researcher visited from NFER ... and his feedback was very useful and should also help in the future.*

- helps **develop relationships** with other sections of children's services and other agencies (mentioned by three interviewees). One interviewee said that it gave a focus to those relationships, particularly as it has a national profile. 'That pushed people to get involved and work together.' In a few cases, inter-agency working had been encouraged through staff in other departments providing support by conducting some interviews.

Interviewees described local examples of how being involved in research had changed practice or procedures. These included:

- producing tools for practitioners to support the challenges they face
- responding to findings and recommendations straightaway, working with locality managers and across services, as one practitioner explained: 'You're not having to wait for the end report, you can do something quickly.'
- identifying the need for new procedures, for example, a new research governance framework
- sharing evidence with front-line practitioners and CAF trainers to support service development.

## 3.2 Challenges

**Inadequate time, insufficient resources, lack of senior manager understanding and limited research expertise are challenges for practitioner-led research within authorities.**

While responses about being involved in practitioner-led research were wholly positive, there were nonetheless some challenges identified by the interviewees.

**Time** was identified as one of the main challenges by the most interviewees (over two-thirds). They referred to underestimating the time it takes to do research, and to do it well, how difficult it can be to engage participants in research, the time and skills required to collect and analyse data and develop a meaningful report. In addition, while managers and front-line practitioners were keen to undertake research, for many, research was undertaken in addition to their existing workload. One interviewee commented:

*[Practitioners] just don't have it [time], no one has within their job... you are banking on people's own enthusiasm and interest... although people are enthusiastic about [it], when push comes to shove, the practice stuff usually takes precedence, quite rightly.'*

Another explained: 'When you're doing a very busy job... it is just very difficult to put your head above the parapet and to do it [research] properly, it does take time.' Consequently, despite its value, research can sometimes be perceived as an additional burden and is not always given the time it needs or deserves.

Other challenges related to **capacity, resources and skills** with almost two-thirds of the interviewees reporting that it was difficult to allocate resources. One LA had overcome the need to take front-line staff away from their jobs to do research by using research consultants; however, this was viewed as a costly alternative. Not only do staff require time but also a varied and specific skill set in order to undertake research effectively. Practitioners need to be guided through the process and have a point of contact so they can seek advice if they encounter any difficulties. One commented: 'People don't necessarily have the real knowhow and experience to really embed doing practitioner-led research as they are working.'

To overcome challenges of time, resources and capacity it was suggested that staff are given dedicated time to undertake research. It was acknowledged, however, that this would be difficult to facilitate in the current economic climate when sizeable budget cuts are imminent. In one LA there was a local expectation that staff conduct a number of research or evaluation pieces each year to try and develop a culture of research, therefore building research into day-to-day work.

## Challenges of being involved in LARC2

When asked about the specific challenges associated with being involved in LARC, responses corroborated the challenges stated above with **time, resources and capacity** (coordinating and undertaking research on top of existing workload) being identified by most interviewees. About a fifth of the interviewees also felt that the timescale allocated to undertake the research (around six months) was relatively short. However, it was acknowledged that the timescales should not be too long because staff would lose impetus.

Other challenges were cited including **lack of buy-in by senior staff** (mentioned by a quarter of interviewees) where hierarchies and bureaucracy make involvement in the process difficult. However, one interviewee felt that this challenge would be overcome as the LARC programme develops in the future because staff would be able to see the benefits of taking part for their LA: '...as long as you have got people [at a strategic level] saying this is very important to us, the time will be made'. Another explained: 'senior management have put the authority forward and should take greater responsibility for the overseeing of that.'

A further challenge focused on internal communication (which was highlighted by around a quarter of the interviewees) about what involvement in LARC2 would actually entail. For example, one interviewee felt misled by senior management about the level of involvement required to participate in LARC and another unexpectedly took the lead in order to complete tasks.

## 4 Support needs

**Practitioners need support to analyse qualitative data, to engage potential participants and a commitment from senior managers to address time, capacity and resourcing challenges.**

Several interviewees gave a range of responses when asked what aspects of being involved in research/data collection they felt the LA struggled with most. The analysis stage of qualitative data was noted as a particular challenge due to the wealth of detailed data collected, a lack of skills and confidence in interpreting data to write a report and the time required to do analysis and reporting (by around half of interviewees). It was acknowledged by some that interpreting and writing up data was a relatively skilled job of which many LA staff lacked experience. '...I'm not a researcher...and I don't know if I'm writing the right things or not to be honest.'

Interviewees (over half) felt that they had received limited support and/or guidance from within their LA to carry out research. Of the few who had received support, they mentioned resource allocation, funding to commission a member of the psychology team to undertake the research, funding for postgraduate qualifications and dedicated time to undertake research. Examples of good practice include providing ten days of time for research per annum and an evidence-informed practice steering group to support decisions about the strategic direction of evidence-informed practice. It was hoped strategic buy-in would raise the profile of research locally:

*The more likely it is to be driven at the top, the more likely it is to work on the ground. It amends the priorities in a way because if you have got people higher up championing the cause then that makes it a higher-level priority within people's workload.*

Interviewees valued being able to discuss ideas and challenges with expert researchers either from local universities, LA colleagues or from NFER.

Other responses included needing support to secure participant involvement in research (about a third of the interviewees). For example, it was difficult to get families involved in the research and asking colleagues to give time to share their views and experiences.

### Support from LARC

When asked about the support or guidance received from LARC/NFER, interviewees valued the:

- **workshops** to design research questions, consider data collection and research methods and a general update on LARC progress (mentioned by six interviewees). 'Wherever you can bring practitioners together who are working in the same field and are involved in that kind of evaluation or research, those seminars...are incredibly useful.'
- **support** via meetings, telephone or email communication on an ad hoc basis (noted by around a third of interviewees).
- **individual advice, guidance and feedback** on designing the interview questions, questionnaire design, analysis or the validity of particular methods (mentioned by four interviewees). Interviewees talked about the development of skills which would help embed new skills into the organisation.

On the whole, interviewees valued the support that they had received from LARC with one interviewee noting 'it was flexible to meet our needs'. When asked what further support they would like in order to be involved in LARC, interviewees mentioned:

- **targeted support from LARC/NFER** researchers to share experiences, good practice and potential solutions to any problems authorities might be experiencing

- **internal support and capacity** from other staff either from within the LA or externally to collect qualitative data
- a **project plan** detailing key milestones ‘...because LARC was bottom of the list...it was what I came to when everything else was done and I had little bits of time’.
- clarity or **quality assurance** that the different stages of the research process are being done **correctly, in particular, the analysis stage**
- **short web-based clips** on how to carry out, for example, focus groups to enable staff to develop their skills to carry out interviews.
- guidelines and active learning sessions on research methodologies, methods and sample sizes and access to research reports and abstracts
- senior management appreciation of the time commitment required to undertake research effectively
- an appreciation from academic and national research institutions about the limited resources available in LAs when conducting research.

Moreover, practitioners would welcome a **central government steer** about whether or not practitioner-led research is important, as one interviewee explained:

*I don't think practitioner-led research is anywhere near as important and until it is perceived as being important, the incentive to do it is probably going to come from a few key researcher-minded individuals rather than the local authority as a whole.*

A few further practical recommendations for improvements to the LARC process were made, including:

- ongoing support throughout the research process for practitioners through either face-to-face or email contact to review progress and provide guidance where needed
- a more formal way of informing LAs about usage of the five days support entitlement
- supporting LAs with the research process via active learning which could be discussed and developed with LAs at the workshops
- encouraging proactive senior management buy-in for the project: a suggestion was made that LAs create a local governance framework and/or local research steering groups.

Another interviewee felt that if practitioner-led research was given a higher priority nationally, it might encourage LAs to have more involvement. This comment was supported by another interviewee who suggested that case studies should be provided to Association of Directors of Children’s Services (ADCS), DCSs or strategic leads about how practitioner-led research has impacted on outcomes and/or had generated efficiency savings. It was felt that a greater awareness and understanding from leaders about how research could be used to inform service delivery would help gain their support to conduct future research.

Following on from this, interviewees were asked how they would like to receive the support. Responses varied and included:

#### 4.1 Future support or guidance

Interviewees were asked what they thought should be put in place to support practitioner-led research in the future. Interviewees tended to answer this question in relation to LARC but the messages can be applied to all practitioner-led research. Corroborating the above findings, they mentioned:

- **guidance** such as template structures which allow staff to refer back to the documents when required
- **good practice examples** which indicate where practitioner-led research has made a difference: ‘I think that would certainly open the ears of my director of children’s services.’
- **small, regionally based seminars** which allow staff to meet with other LAs carrying out similar pieces of research
- qualitative analysis
- thorough project set-up and project planning

- **workshops** to share ideas and experiences with other LA staff going through a similar process.

A small number of interviewees felt that support should not be received through one single medium because it would depend on who was accessing the support and the nature of the materials.

Interviewees were asked what advice they would give to someone in another LA thinking about undertaking a research project. Around half of interviewees stressed the need for people carrying out their own research to be realistic about the time and support needed. As one person explained:

*Make sure you have got the time and capacity to do the research ... and do it well and be realistic in terms of what it is that you are actually trying to achieve. There is no point in setting yourself up to evaluate and do a massive piece of research and a third of the way into it, you realise that the time commitment is enormous and that actually it's not realistic and you can't do it.*

When commenting on the support LAs need to conduct research, interviewees stressed the importance of having commitment locally, particularly from senior managers, to provide resources, and from colleagues and/or funds to access national or local organisations that had research skills and expertise. A couple of interviewees felt it was important to have a project steering group or equivalent and to be clear about local governance structures, which vary across the UK.

## 4.2 Supporting LAs to engage in research

When asked what would support LAs to engage in research, interviewees most often expressed the need to **share the impact of research on outcomes**

**for children, young people and families and on service development**, particularly in the current economic climate where financial cuts are imminent. It was suggested that this would support other LAs/teams to implement cost-effective good practice, as one interviewee explained:

*For authorities to find the time you have to stop them dead and say, well, actually this works because – and show them pieces of research which actually evidence that have been effective.*

As noted throughout this report, interviewees explained the need for adequate time to do research, to reflect on and engage with findings. To support LAs to do this, interviewees suggested that researchers provide findings in a short and concise way. One interviewee said: 'People would find it difficult to read or put the time aside to read ... a five-page briefing.' Another felt that there was a bridge to cross between the academic world of research and that carried out in local authorities.

A small number of those interviewed explained that more could be done to support LAs to engage in research at a national level from research organisations, in terms of providing accessible briefings and affordable evaluations, but also a clear steer is required from the Government. It was felt that it is not clear whether the Government and Ofsted valued research conducted by local authorities.

Suggestions made by two or fewer individuals included a need to implement change following evidence of outcomes through research – whether good or bad. One interviewee cited a good example of a LA which had a dedicated role whereby someone collated research, summarised its implications for specific services and disseminated them to individuals or teams. It was felt that this should be replicated within LAs to support engagement in research.

# 5 Conclusions and recommendations

This research project provides useful insights into the views of practitioners recently involved in their own research project to improve outcomes for children, young people and families through enhanced integrated working and service delivery.

The reported benefits of being involved in local authority practitioner-led research are to:

- inform and develop practice through learning and development, to improve service delivery and planning
- provide insights into front-line working and local practice
- enhance the knowledge and expertise of front-line staff
- find evidence of impact on outcomes for children, young people and families
- value staff professionally.

There are, however, challenges associated with practitioner-led research and these related to:

- an insufficient allocation of time, capacity and resources
- low confidence and skill set of practitioners.

These challenges are not insurmountable and can be overcome with local strategic commitment to practitioner-led research and the sharing of knowledge, good practice and expertise. In addition, practitioners would value a clear steer from local and national Government on the value placed on practitioner-led research and its place within service improvement. More needs to be done locally and nationally to share examples of good practice and cost-effective service delivery grounded in practitioner-led research.

## 5.1 Recommendations

This research provides various recommendations, each for a specific audience. These are presented below.

### Recommendations for local and central Government

Practitioners would value a position statement from central and local Government about the value of practitioner-led research. Practitioners would value clarification of the Government's view as this might support engagement of colleagues in conducting research for service improvements in the future.

Based on the strength of evidence in this report, we recommend that **senior managers within local authorities:**

- must understand and commit adequate time and resources to support practitioners to conduct research locally. Specifically, they need to understand the time it takes to collect data, analyse qualitative or quantitative data and the time needed to process findings to produce a meaningful report with clear implications for service delivery.
- should encourage many teams and colleagues to get involved in research, therefore sharing the load and not overburdening individuals who have an interest or background in research.
- must develop effective communication mechanisms to ensure teams that are carrying out their own research share their knowledge, experience and findings with colleagues within and across departments.
- support colleagues in other departments to learn from the culture and experiences of social care and health colleagues who have a history of engaging in research.



- when considering involvement in a research project must thoroughly consider the time and resource implications for staff, providing support as necessary.

Authorities should consider:

- developing a specific role or allocating protected time to individuals to collate, summarise and disseminate research findings to relevant teams to support the development of good practice and cost-effective service delivery
- providing staff with an opportunity to develop and share research skills locally, for example, via a support network to enable practitioners to access research expertise. This could be at a regional level and/or within individual local authorities who have relevant research skills
- sharing research findings, examples of good practice and improvements to service delivery with national bodies such as DCSF and ADCS as this might improve support and resources for practitioner-led research in the future.

## Recommendations for practitioners

Practitioners must:

- be realistic about the time, capacity, resources and support required to conduct their own research projects
- clarify with senior managers what time, capacity, resources and support will be available
- develop a detailed project plan at the outset
- ensure they share with colleagues the importance of their research for service planning, delivery and

potentially on outcomes for children, young people and families

- wherever possible, access support from colleagues or local/national research organisations to discuss ideas and/or challenges.

## Recommendations for research organisations and LARC

Research organisations must present findings in a short, concise way, clearly stating implications for specific audiences.

When supporting LA practitioners to engage in research, they should provide support through a range of mediums.

Key recommendations for LARC are to:

- run a project planning meeting with each LA
- continue to offer targeted research support to LAs
- host workshops that offer active learning sessions on different research methods and processes
- provide more dedicated support for data analysis to each LA.

This project provides further evidence to support what LAs often say that they need to help them better engage in research findings and/or to conduct their own research. The recommendations should be considered by local and national bodies to support future engagement in practitioner-led research to improve service planning, delivery and ultimately outcomes for children, young people and families.

## Reference

Lord, P., Kinder, K., Wilkin, A., Atkinson, M. and Harland, J. (2008). *Evaluating the Early Impact of Integrated Children's Services: Round 1 Final Report*. Slough: NFER.

# Appendix 1

In total 13 semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted with LA officers and two responses were received by email. The participants' roles were as follows:

- Commissioning Manager
- Research and Evaluation Manager
- Service Manager for Policy, Planning and Partnership
- Head of District Partnership Services
- CAF Project Manager
- Research Analyst
- Head of Additional Needs Services
- Strategic Lead for Locality Support Services
- Partnerships, Policy and Commissioning Manager
- Case Work Team Leader
- Research and Information Manager
- Head of Partnership and Performance
- It was unclear what one participant's current job title was but this interviewee appeared to work within the research and analysis team within the LA.

## Appendix 2

LARC authorities were asked to specify where they anticipated that they would need most support to conduct their LARC research project. A proforma was sent to LAs in autumn 2008. Responses were received from 21 authorities and findings are presented in the table below.

Activity	Yes	No	Not sure	Non-response
Designing the local research project	16	0	1	4
Designing local research instruments	10	1	3	7
Commissioning the local research	3	6	4	8
Defining how local data will be collected	5	1	6	9
Identifying how local data can be collated	4	4	5	8
Analysing data	4	4	5	8
Other:				
<i>Understanding what the LA needs to do and what NFER will provide*</i>				
<i>Identifying a context and developing a hypothesis in advance of workshops*</i>	2	0	5	14

\*Open-ended responses

The research processes that LA LARC-leads anticipated that they would require most support with was designing the research project and research instruments.

# Appendix 3

Local authorities and Children's Trusts involved in LARC2 include:

- Birmingham City Council
- Bradford Metropolitan District Council
- Coventry City Council
- Cumbria County Council
- Devon County Council
- Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council
- Gateshead Council
- Hertfordshire County Council
- Kent County Council
- Leicester City Council
- London Borough of Bexley
- London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham
- Luton Council
- Norfolk County Council
- Nottingham City Council
- Oxfordshire County Council
- Portsmouth City Council
- Salford City Council
- Sheffield City Council
- Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council
- Somerset County Council
- Southend-on-Sea Borough Council
- Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council
- Suffolk County Council
- West Berkshire Council
- Wolverhampton City Council.

Please note that final reports were not received from all listed LAs.

# Recently published reports

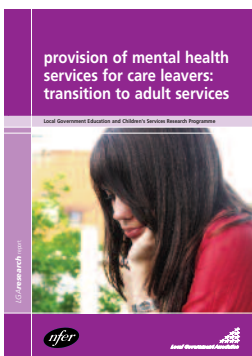
The Local Government Education and Children's Services Research Programme is carried out by the NFER. The research projects cover topics and perspectives that are of special interest to local authorities. All the reports are published and disseminated by the NFER, with separate executive summaries. The summaries, and more information about this series, are available free of charge at [www.nfer.ac.uk/research-areas/local-government-association/local-government-association\\_home.cfm](http://www.nfer.ac.uk/research-areas/local-government-association/local-government-association_home.cfm).



## **The Sustainable Communities Act: analysis of proposals submitted by councils**

This report disseminates findings from an analysis of the proposals submitted by English councils under the Sustainable Communities Act. It aims to provide a snapshot of key patterns and trends emerging from the different types of local authorities in the nine regions and with varying political control.

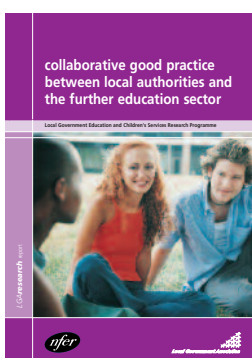
[www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/EMX01/](http://www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/EMX01/)



## **Provision of mental health services for care leavers: transition to adult services**

The Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 was designed to address the wide variation in local authority provision for care leavers and to promote a more multi-dimensional approach to the process of leaving care. This report examines the extent to which developments since the Act have improved outcomes for young people leaving care.

[www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/LAT01/](http://www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/LAT01/)



## **Collaborative good practice between LAs and the FE sector**

What does collaboration between local authorities and further education colleges look like, and how does it benefit students? This report from NFER examines nine case studies of good practice, drawing out the key elements of collaboration that work to improve outcomes for young people.

[www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/LAP01/](http://www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/LAP01/)

For more information, or to buy any of these publications, please contact: The Publications Unit, National Foundation for Educational Research, The Mere, Upton Park, Slough, Berkshire SL1 2DQ, tel: +44 (0)1753 637002, fax: +44 (0)1753 637280, email: [book.sales@nfer.ac.uk](mailto:book.sales@nfer.ac.uk), web: [www.nfer.ac.uk/publications](http://www.nfer.ac.uk/publications).

This report sets out the findings from an LGA-funded project that complements the Local Authority Research Consortium (LARC) research by examining staff views on the perceived benefits and challenges of being involved in practitioner-led research. It provides useful insights into the experiences of 15 front-line staff from a sample of authorities, who were recently involved in defining and undertaking research.

The reported benefits of being involved in practitioner-led research and LARC are to:

- inform and develop practice through learning and development leading to improved delivery and planning
- provide insights into front-line working and local practice, particularly for middle and senior managers
- value staff professionally, developing their knowledge and expertise
- provide evidence of impact on outcomes for children, young people and families
- specifically with reference to LARC, share and learn with other authorities.

This report will be useful to local authority staff, including locality managers and staff from central children's services, who are considering participating in practitioner-led research projects. It is also important reading for staff at national bodies who commission and deliver such research.