



executive summary

supporting local authorities to develop their research capacity

Introduction

This paper provides useful insights into the views and experiences of a range of 15 local authority (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 the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) and the Local Authorities Research Consortium (LARC). LARC 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 Local Government Association (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.



Key findings

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
- provide evidence of the impact on outcomes for children, young people and families and, specific to LARC, share and learn with other authorities.

It was found 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, as one interviewee said '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.' Interviewees noted 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.

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.

Conclusions/recommendations

The 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.

About the study

The first stage of this evaluation comprised a basic analysis of a proforma sent by the NFER team to all LARC LA leads at LARC round 2 inception in autumn 2008. The proforma asked LAs what support they envisaged they would require to carry out their own LARC research project. 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 (i.e. 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 (i.e. county shire, London borough, unitary authority and metropolitan district). The selected 15 LAs were invited to participate in the research. Interviews took place between 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.

Publication and dissemination

For details about this project can be found at www.larc-research.org.uk.

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