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Supporting Evidence for Local Delivery

**National Research and Evaluation – Key Findings**





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# Summary and recommendations

This summary is taken from the full report, *Supporting Evidence for Local Delivery: National Research and Evaluation – Key Findings*.

## National evaluation of SELD regional pilots

This research is a national evaluation of the quality, impact, fitness for purpose, benefits, and cost effectiveness of the Supporting Evidence for Local Delivery (SELD) programme. It reviewed the impact of the SELD pilot services on improving the use of evidence by neighbourhood renewal practitioners and decision makers, and where possible, gathered best practice on how such use has changed policy, practice or services for deprived neighbourhoods.

The SELD 'model' was observed in terms of its utility and fit with the corporate objectives of Communities and Local Government (the Department) and Government Offices and its relevance at regional and sub-regional level. Furthermore, the evaluation reviewed the types of analytical skills required for supporting neighbourhood renewal and Local Area Agreements (LAAs), in particular, seeking to clarify the nature and extent of skill gaps and reviewing analytical resources available to partnerships<sup>1</sup>.

The national evaluation ran alongside the regional pilots to capture emerging best practices, covering principles, methods and illustrations to assist practitioners. Overall, the national evaluation was to appraise the SELD initiative and undertake contextual research to gather evidence of which to explain options for the continuation of SELD-type services beyond March 2007.

## Background

The SELD pilot programme was introduced in 2005 to promote better use of data, research and evidence in neighbourhood renewal through the provision of technical assistance to Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) and neighbourhood renewal partnerships. Such support was regarded as key to improving planning, evaluation and decision-making, leading to greater gains in closing the gap on outcomes for disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

### **Delivery of SELD Services**

Over a fifteen month period, SELD conducted pilots in four regions (North East, North West, South West and West Midlands), testing needs and demands for evidence support services in different settings. The pilots provided expert advice, workshops and seminars, and tailored support for individual partnerships. They were also intended to help the Department understand the critical issues that local partners

<sup>1</sup> For detailed findings, please contact Communities and Local Government for the reports, *Supporting Evidence for Local Delivery: Full Evaluation Report*, and *Supporting Evidence for Local Delivery: Analytical Skills and Support*.

face, and to support Government Offices (GOs) in their neighbourhood renewal functions. The pilots:

- supported target partnerships through 41 tailored assignments
- organised 26 workshops which were attended by over 500 people
- gathered evidence from a variety of case studies and briefing materials
- addressed nearly 120 enquiries

The assignments covered a range of topics including the sourcing of data, the use of evidence in strategic planning and, to a lesser extent, the use of research and evaluation techniques. The events focused on neighbourhood renewal themes such as raising education attainment amongst pupils from Black and Minority Ethnic communities, while several other technical workshops looked at the application of qualitative evidence.

The pilots also reviewed the guidance and practice on 'neighbourhood renewal and diversity' and of mandatory indicators used to deliver LAAs. The levels of activity significantly exceeded comparable activities in non-pilot regions, although demand for enquiries and assignments was lower than expected, based on assumptions of earlier consultations.

### **Relevance to policy developments**

The future delivery of analytical support will be through the National Improvement and Efficiency Strategy. Regional Improvement and Efficiency Partnerships (RIEPs) will be responsible for identifying and meeting improvement needs in their region relating to the delivery of LAAs and the new performance framework. The findings of this evaluation should be used to help develop their regional support strategies.

## **Key findings**

Effective use of evidence is especially important in partnerships by identifying steps to be taken, mobilising support and demonstrating not only success in delivering better services but also in achieving shared outcomes. This requires investment in information resources and in the skills of accessing, analysing and interpreting data which are skill needs that exist amongst managers, decision-makers as well as analysts.

### **Analytical skills for Neighbourhood Renewal**

The survey and fieldwork on analytical skills, undertaken across all regions, found that:

- 80 per cent of partnership managers identified analytical skill *needs* within their partnership, most frequently relating to interpreting and challenging data. Aspects of these needs include knowing how to 'create a narrative' from data analysis, assessing the quality of evidence, constructive questioning of partners, and developing shared understanding across neighbourhood renewal themes.
- 40 per cent of partnership managers indicated that limits on available analytical skills had hampered partnership performance, especially in slowing progress in 'closing the gap' on neighbourhood renewal targets.

- There is relatively short supply of expertise in statistical techniques, IT applications, indicator selection, and target setting. As a result, learning and training opportunities are limited by a small pool of practitioners with the time to coach and mentor others.
- The scale of the skill gaps is likely to be understated as “we don’t know what we don’t know” was a common refrain in the research. When partnership managers discussed their needs, there was a sense that more could be achieved through better use of data but they were often limited by not knowing which questions to ask or how analysts might be able to assist.

Despite major improvements nationally in the availability of neighbourhood level data, practitioners can still have difficulty finding appropriate data for activities such as target setting or tracking neighbourhood change. In turn, this can take up time that could have been used to analyse data rather than finding it.

### **Availability and use of external analytical support**

Nearly half of partnership managers experienced difficulty in sourcing external analytical advice and assistance, although this was as much related to internal factors such as lack of time as the quality of external advice and assistance. There was an appetite for analytical support services such as workshops, evidence health checks, e-mail circulars on data/research developments and ‘How To’ toolkits – especially where these are designed to save them time and avoid duplication of effort.

The provision of analytical skills training and upgrading is patchy across the regions and typically not well developed to target the needs of neighbourhood renewal and LAA delivery.

### **Future needs for analytical capacity**

LAAs and strengthening performance management are the main drivers for the effective use of data and evidence in partnerships, and likely to generate greater need for analytical capacity. However, the recognition and prioritisation of analytical capacity still lacks sufficient commitment from many partnerships. Some areas are reasonably well-resourced, typically reflecting significant local authority commitment, while others lag. Furthermore, even the better resourced areas can have gaps in their analytical capacity.

The research further emphasises the importance of promoting ‘home-grown’ solutions within partnerships. LSP partners can gain by reviewing analytical capacity across the partnership to identify and address common skill gaps, and to maximise the use of available analytical resources and expertise. Moreover, to convince sceptics, practical examples are needed to demonstrate the performance benefits that can be gained through better use of evidence. A key is to integrate research and analysis functions with performance management, a developing practice, for example, amongst Community Safety Partnerships.

### **Delivering analytical support: SELD benefits to SELD users**

The SELD User Survey found that the most common benefits to **organisations and/or partnerships** were ‘greater awareness of data sources’ (nearly 50 per cent), ‘clearer definition of our data/evidence needs’, and ‘better understanding of what

the data can tell us'. Moreover, several partnerships taking advantage of tailored assignments reported increased confidence in dealing with data and analytical techniques, improved access to data from partner agencies, and enhanced ability to use evidence to demonstrate partnership progress and impact.

The **individual** benefits tended to be of a networking nature (gaining new contacts and knowledge sharing). Just under a quarter of respondents indicated that they could identify specific improvements in their organisation or partnership as a direct or indirect consequence of SELD, while more than half of them considered that SELD had helped them make more strategic use of evidence.

### **SELD programme benefits**

The SELD pilots emphasised the need to 'grow the market' for analytical support services through raising awareness and providing 'hooks' to attract take-up which are service features that directly address the practical challenges that face people in their jobs. Activities need to appeal both to organisations (e.g. in support of their performance management requirements) and to individuals (e.g. in support of their career development and job satisfaction). It is crucial to bring the evidence to life in relevant and immediate ways, e.g. in effective use of charts and maps and in digging deeper into data to counter myths and misconceptions.

In addition to the benefits to partnerships and individuals, there were broader gains from the SELD programme:

- For the Department, in addition to having an improved appreciation for evidence-based practice, SELD provided a first-hand insight into the challenges faced by partnerships in handling small area data, solutions for overcoming obstacles to cultural change and needs for greater co-ordination in the provision of analytical support services
- For the wider LAA context, SELD provided a collection of functional, relevant and practical guidance for applying evidence in local delivery
- Synergy was generated between key national and regional organisations (e.g. Neighbourhood Statistics, NOMIS, Regional Observatories and Regional Public Health Observatories), raising their profile and awareness of needs in neighbourhood renewal and LAAs.

However, the programme did not wholly achieve all of the Department's aspirations in driving up the quality of local evidence work, i.e. through undertaking innovative assignments and raising data access and quality issues requiring action at a national level. This reflects in part:

- the extent to which partnerships need first to tackle basic needs in sourcing adequate neighbourhood level data
- local partners not recognising or prioritising their need to improve the use of evidence
- the learning curve and marketing challenges for SELD pilots in introducing a new service

## Recommendations

### National action

A fresh vision is needed for how best to encourage the development of evidence-based approaches in LSPs/LAAs and neighbourhood renewal partnerships in the context provided by the 2006 Local Government White Paper (LGWP) and the National Improvement and Efficiency Strategy (developed by the Department, the Local Government Association and IDeA). This approach must:

- Emphasise the needs of data users to a far greater degree than in the past, informed by the practical and/or local challenges in accessing, gathering and interpreting data. This requires:
  - improved user consultation (involving analysts *and* decision-makers)
  - particular attention to *anticipating* needs, crucially in assessing the requirements of a reduced set of national targets as part of the new performance framework for local authorities/LAAs
  - further steps to ensure that there are sufficient, robust datasets available for LAA performance measurement (local *and* neighbourhood targets) relating to national Public Service Agreement targets
- Drive for synergy across parallel developments (i.e. Neighbourhood Statistics and Audit Commission Area Profiles) through shared technical developments such as interoperability and tools to help people take full advantage of nationally available data
- Encourage co-ordination at all levels to make better use of analytical resources in central government departments, Government Offices, Regional Observatories and sub-regional/local information systems and networks

Specific recommendations for **Communities and Local Government** include:

- Strengthen joint working with those parts of other departments which share common interests in improving data and analysis for LAAs, such as the Home Office (on Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships) and the Department of Health (the 'Informing Healthier Choices' strategy for public health intelligence), to align activities and promote cross-sector learning
- Explore scope under LGWP proposals for a 'shared services pathfinder' focusing on research and analysis, to extend and spread best practice in joint research and analysis arrangements by LAA partners
- Challenge national bodies with a direct interest in skills and professional training (the Academy for Sustainable Communities, Economic and Social Research Council, IDeA and others) to improve the supply of analytical skills for LAAs, through:
  - ensuring that analysis and evidence topics are addressed in professional and cross-disciplinary training, including leadership development programmes
  - developing and promoting professional standards for research and analysis

- promoting academic/practitioner collaboration on research and training (i.e. through targeted publicity for Local Authorities Research Council Initiative – LARCI)
- Consolidate national guidance and resources, identify and plug gaps in support of LAA delivery planning and service improvement.

#### Action on national guidance and resources

- Work with IDeA and LGA to ensure the further development of online resources to support the use of data, including updates on research/data relevant to improving neighbourhood renewal outcomes and performance management
- Prepare guidance on the availability, strengths, weaknesses and uses of data sources relevant to:
  - neighbourhood level indicators and targets
  - cohesion and diversity objectives (notably relating to disabled people, faith communities, gender and migrant workers)
- Work with IDeA to source good practice case studies featuring ways of:
  - exploiting local and national administrative datasets
  - developing neighbourhood-level citizen intelligence
  - integrating research and analysis functions in performance management
  - using multivariate techniques in understanding factors behind changes across neighbourhood renewal themes
  - managing cross-LAA performance management/data analysis groups
- Provide tried examples of analytical methods and tools:
  - design experiments in testing ‘what really works’
  - quantitative service improvement techniques
- Develop evidence-based materials in support of LAA delivery planning, including an ‘evidence health check’ component to LAA guidance developed with LGA and IDeA, intended to assist LAA partners in ensuring that they have the necessary data, resources and practices in place

### Regional action

Recommendations for **Regional Improvement and Efficiency Partnerships** include:

- Address analytical skill and support needs in Regional Improvement Plans, considering options for SELD-type seminars, workshops and other technical assistance services, developed in conjunction with LAA partners and regional ‘infrastructure’ bodies which support access to data, learning and knowledge management (e.g. Regional Observatories, Regional Public Health Observatories and Regional Centres of Excellence for Sustainable Communities).
- Regional Improvement Plans could usefully explore:
  - SELD good practice in networking practitioners, designing imaginative events which engage participants and push boundaries in thinking and practice
  - ways of growing demand for analytical support services
  - how best to spread and sustain improved evidence-based practices
  - how to address the needs of both analysts *and* decision makers: the former are more likely to be interested in technical detail and more advanced

techniques and the latter in interpreting and challenging data. In particular, partnership managers – as change agents – need greater awareness of the techniques that can be applied in improving performance management and promoting better use of evidence.

- Promote collaboration amongst the regional infrastructure bodies, to:
  - make better use of their expertise and resources
  - promote cross-disciplinary and cross-theme learning
  - identify and address common needs of partnerships which can be effectively supported regionally, i.e. in generating trajectories and scenarios for LAA performance management and developing the evidence base on diversity and community cohesion.

Recommendations for **Government Offices** relate to their role in helping to drive better use of data and evidence within their regions:

- Ensure that crucial analytical/evidence needs are addressed by LAA partners when reviewing LAA performance reports and improvement plans
- Develop their own capacity to interrogate data and evidence (in line with the findings of the 2006 Treasury GO Review)
- Promote and support actions by Regional Improvement and Efficiency Partnerships to make better use of regional data/analytical resources, working in conjunction with the Regional Assembly, the RDA, and the ONS Regional Statistician

### Local action

Recommendations for **LSPs and neighbourhood renewal partnerships** include:

- Ensure that the conditions for performance improvement are in place. Partnership leaders can often do more to:
  - demonstrate that evidence is valued
  - commit adequate resources to research, analysis and evaluation
  - govern the partnership in such a way that partners have the space and confidence to challenge evidence in pursuit of better outcomes
- Develop collaborative approaches to research and analysis across partner organisations, based on more extensive data sharing and better use of existing analytical resources
- Cross-theme analysis can help bring about deeper, shared understanding of neighbourhood renewal processes, of causality and the contributions of different interventions
- Ensure that analytical skills are addressed when reviewing skill needs within partnerships – for all in decision-making roles, not only those with research, analysis or performance management job functions. This includes those individuals from the voluntary and community sector who need knowledge and confidence when engaging and challenging mainstream agencies

## Further information

Further information is contained in the full report, *Supporting Evidence for Local Delivery: National Research and Evaluation – Key Findings*, which is available on the Communities and Local Government website: [www.communities.gov.uk](http://www.communities.gov.uk)