

Local Authority Research Council Initiative Conference

Checked against delivery

Putting research into policy

1. Good afternoon. I would like to start with a few thoughts about the timing of this particular event and the coincidence of work going on on the whole future of local government with a fairly ambitious research programme which is seeking to inform us better about some of the trends and developments in local government and how they're working. The research council-funded programmes are an essential part of informing the future agenda, giving us high quality, independent and long-term evidence on which to make decisions today about local government, decisions which will influence the actual reality of local government tomorrow and the day after tomorrow.
2. This conference is a good opportunity to discuss how we can make best use of your research to both underpin the policy agenda and influence delivery and practice on the ground.
3. We are currently asking fundamental questions about the role of local government with the aim of drawing up a shared ten-year vision. This will set out how local government should develop to deliver the services and community infrastructure that people will need and expect and it is very much looking ahead and trying to define what is the essence of good, effective local government and how can that develop in the years ahead. In the past change to local government structure has tended to be incremental. Reforms that have taken place not just under this Government but under previous governments have tended to be relatively minor, a slight change in course, but no really fundamental re-think about what is local government for, what is it really about, what are its strengths, what is it going to be expected to be delivering not just in the immediate future but say ten years down the line? I think that major rethink is important to ensure that local government can fulfil its unique place in communities throughout our country in the future.
4. To be effective, the shared vision we are working towards must recognise the changes in society that are going on now and what those are likely to be in a few years' time. These changes will be demographic, social and technological leading to very different lifestyles from today and consequently very different needs and aspirations. It will be a challenge for both local and central government to respond to, and preferably to anticipate, these changing needs. But to maintain and enhance its role at the heart of the community local government is going to have to ensure it is providing the right services in the right way that makes them accessible to the citizens of tomorrow.
5. To succeed in working out the vision for the future of local government we must build on current knowledge and experience. This comes from people working with and within local government, from users of the services and, of course, from researchers. You are the people who are engaged in analysing and understanding the context within which local government operates and the factors, which underlie success or failure.

6. Many of the issues you are discussing at the conference today - such as the changing pattern of household formation, the increasing proportion and prevalence of single person households, changing land use patterns, and public health - directly impact on the work of local government. These are factors that are part of life in local communities and so terribly important to local government. Local government, as the only body which is democratically accountable to the whole of the local community is in a unique position to lead its local community - a role which is likely to be increasingly important in the years ahead, which of course distinguishes the view of local government as an effective community leader from a rather more traditional analysis which used to see local government just as a deliverer of certain specific services. Local government has got an important role in delivering services. It is likely to go on I think the important role of delivering services but the role of community leadership is in my view likely to become increasingly important. To see local government as purely an organisation or tier of government to deliver services is in my view a rather impoverished view of the likely future reality of local government,
7. Research has a vital role to play in making sure that the future strategy for local government is based on the latest and most robust evidence available. As a Government we are committed to using evidence to inform the policy-making process, and the local:vision debate is no exception to this.
8. Of course ODPM itself has an extensive research programme that helps provide good evidence across the range of local and regional government activities. Last week I was speaking at a conference about the Local Government Modernisation Agenda and emerging results from many of our programmes were being discussed in the context of the strategy debate.
9. But our own research can only be one part of building up the wider evidence base we need in order to take well-informed decisions. It calls for a collective effort and an effective dialogue among all of us - those doing the research, those funding it and those using it. Many of the issues addressed in the research you are hearing about today are extremely complex and cross-cutting so we need to work in close co-operation with those doing research in other fields to truly understand the wider picture.
10. As we all know - and particularly you here - it is difficult to predict the future. But one certainty is that the pace of change is likely to increase. In our fast-moving world people's lifestyles change and expectations rise. In response, policy must evolve to meet those changing needs and expectations. This does lead to a possible tension between building up a long-term evidence base which is important for policy formulation and the demand for timely outputs to feed into rapidly developing policy.
11. However long-term research and short-term flexibility are not necessarily mutually exclusive. It is perfectly possible to build into longer-term programmes provision for a series of interim outputs and regular reviews of findings that are emerging. For example, the emerging findings might be used to produce digests of results, good - and bad - practice examples and case studies, interactive workshops and action learning sets. All these approaches could be used to ensure research feeds into policy thinking in real time, as concepts and new directions begin to develop.

12. One example is the Local Area Agreement concept, which we are currently piloting with twenty-one local authorities. The concept for Local Area Agreements comes from two main sources. One is the Local Public Service Agreement programme which has been in place for about three and a half years which has been very much welcomed by local authorities as a way in which they can influence the setting of priorities and indeed to receive financial benefits for achieving targets. But we wanted to go beyond that. The second main source of the genesis of the Local Area Agreement concept was frustration at the very fragmented situation created by a whole series of separate funding streams, all designed to support particular initiatives, which can result in an absolute plethora of different initiatives going hand in hand, all with separate accounting and funding requirements. We wanted to try and get greater flexibility and greater scope for cross-cutting approaches, to joining up not just within local authorities, but between local authorities and other public sector bodies. Local Area Agreements come out of this double wish on the one side to build on the success of the LPSA concept and secondly to achieve a much more holistic approach towards problems and cutting down the plethora of separate income streams that local authorities have to currently work with. So how will Local Area Agreements work? As I said, they will bring together separate funding streams from not just local authorities but from across the public sector. They take partnership working a significant step further and give local government more freedom to find local solutions for local problems which are a priority. The LAA policy is being developed and underpinned by what we have already learnt from the early work of the evaluation of Local Public Service Agreements.
13. Likewise, wider discussions around the ten year strategy for local government cannot wait until we find out all there is to know about our modernisation agenda policies but we are using the emerging findings to feed into the discussion about the whole future for local government and local governance.
14. Today we are publishing a policy paper on the role of political mentors that has emerged from an on-going long-term evaluation of local government intervention and recovery programmes. Philip Whiteman and his team from INLOGOV have been looking at peer mentoring in local authorities recovering from poor performance. The paper highlights aspects that are working well, and are highly valued by both parties, as well as aspects that give food for thought, such as the role of national political parties.
15. One key finding was that political mentors are providing support way beyond steering the poor-performing authority through the immediate steps necessary to recover. From their own experience as political leaders in local government the mentors are able to provide a wealth of knowledge and support so their colleagues can act with renewed confidence and become effective political leaders.
16. The mentoring paper provides a valuable picture of current practice and draws out lessons to build on. So how do we make best use of it? A key finding of research undertaken by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation underlined that it was not enough to publish a report - we need to be much more active in disseminating the findings so local government and stakeholders can learn from the research. I agree.
17. We need to make real efforts to disseminate findings in a useable, timely way to the most appropriate audience. All the contributions from the high-quality research programmes result in our having a growing body of invaluable information available and we must use it fully. Conferences like this are an essential link in the process but not the complete answer. It is in all our interests to think innovatively about what more we can do to spread the messages further.
18. Another way to share knowledge and expertise is through working in collaboration. The 'Towards a Sustainable Energy Economy' programme which you heard about this morning is a good example. By working together the Research Councils involved have been able to take a holistic approach to energy research, make important connections and find sustainable solutions to complex problems.

19. At ODPM we continue to explore options for undertaking research and gathering evidence, particularly with other organisations, through our research programme. Of course we have a particular interest in the Economic and Social Research Council's key programmes on local and regional government. I will just mention four which I will categorise as 'past', 'current' and 'future'
20. In the 'past' category, the local governance programme led by Professor Gerry Stoker provided crucial insights into the emergence of community leadership as an important role for modern local government. It identified the need for building effective relationships with a range of other stakeholders including stakeholders from the public, private and voluntary sectors.
21. Secondly, the democracy and participation programme led by Professor Paul Whiteley, which finished a year ago. This gave us a more complete picture of how people are involved in local communities, better evidence than we had before. Citizen participation and engagement is a key issue for the long-term success of our communities and so, not surprisingly, it is a major theme in the strategy debate. This research is very helpful in giving us a much better informed view on this important dimension.
22. In the 'present' category there is the devolution and constitutional change programme. It is led by Professor Charlie Jeffrey and will give us a fund of information on the impact and outcomes of devolution and other emerging forms of governance.
23. And finally, to the 'future' programme. Professor Christopher Hood is leading a five-year programme starting next year looking at the quality, performance and delivery of public services. This is another key theme in the strategy debate and will have clear interest for all practitioners in local government and for us in central government.
24. I was pleased to see the launch last month of the third round of the joint ESRC and ODPM research studentship and fellowship programme. This year the programme focuses on governance and quality of life - and is being co-funded by PriceWaterhouseCoopers. This programme helps strengthen the links between government and other researchers - another way we can benefit from emerging thinking and findings. It also increases our capacity to ensure policy is evidence based across the whole range of our activities.
25. I would just like to finish by re-emphasising a few key points.
26. Research is vitally important in giving us an accurate picture and real understanding of the context within which local government is currently operating. But we can only make full use of that research if the findings are easily accessible to the people who need them and enables them to act on them for the benefit of all.
27. Organisations such as LARCI and events like this, are vital conduits for disseminating information about the research and maintaining a dialogue between researchers and practitioners. We must look for other opportunities too.
28. And finally, at a time when we are about to take some pretty fundamental decisions on the future of local government and set out the routemap for its long-term development and success, the value of research in providing an evidence base to inform policy has never been greater. But things move on rapidly and that research input is much more valuable if it comes at the time policy is being developed, even if the whole programme has not been completed.
29. Thank you.

Speech by Nick Raynsford on 7 December 2004.