



Alliance
for Useful
Evidence

SQUARING THE CIRCLE

EVIDENCE AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

Derrick Johnstone

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This is a paper for discussion.

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The paper presents the views of the author and these do not necessarily reflect the views of the Alliance for Useful Evidence or its constituent partners.

The Alliance champions the use of evidence in social policy and practice. We are an open-access network of individuals from across government, universities, charities, business and local authorities in the UK and internationally. The Alliance provides a focal point for advancing the evidence agenda, developing a collective voice, whilst aiding collaboration and knowledge sharing, through debate and discussion. We are funded by the BIG Lottery Fund, the Economic and Social Research Council and Nesta. Membership is free. To sign up please visit: www.alliance4usefulevidence.org

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About the author

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THE POWER OF LOCAL EVIDENCE – PREFACE BY MARTIN REEVES

Background

It was not that long ago – in fact probably less than two decades – when the power of robust evidence-based research and intelligence for influencing public policy and change on the ground was readily accepted. In the subsequent years, a chasm has developed between high quality fundamental research (often, but not exclusively delivered by UK universities) and the reality of practice in our localities.

The significant fiscal and economic challenges now facing public services in the UK, particularly local government, have been well documented. At the same time the most radical programme of reform ever is 'playing out' in real time, with real people in real communities and real places. So we must once again create a narrative which re-establishes the potency of research and intelligence grounded in practice; helping to implement and sustain positive change with our local communities. These disciplines are not mutually exclusive – far from it!

I am a recovering academic! I know the efficacy of well-founded evidence – but as a public service leader I also know that reality in localities is often very different from how it is perceived or framed. The inspiration of the Alliance is to ensure that useful evidence is valued in such a way that we can have a mature debate as to how we can meaningfully marry the discipline of evidence collection and research with emerging policy, insight and practice is very welcome. The contact sport as this all plays out in our localities is a fertile ground for active learning and positive change.

This is a debate well worth having – one where we will need to win hearts and minds. This paper helpfully sets the scene and whets the appetite for the action.

Martin Reeves

Chief Executive, Coventry City Council
President, SOLACE
Honorary President, LARIA

SUMMARY

How are local authorities and their partners making use of evidence as they try to square the circle: that is, tackle the seemingly impossible challenge of reconciling substantial cuts in funding and dealing with intractable issues such as a sluggish economy and pressure on services from an ageing population?

There are limits to the gains that can be made through shared services and improved back-office productivity. Local authorities are having to conduct root and branch reviews. They are asking fundamental questions:

- What are priorities for our area?
- How well and cost-effectively do we provide services?
- What good ideas across the country can we adopt locally?
- What can we do to reduce the demand for services?

Answering these questions requires good evidence. Despite many positive developments, fewer than half of senior managers recently surveyed by the Local Authorities Research & Intelligence Association (LARIA) felt that their authority makes 'robust, evidence-based decisions' all or most of the time.

This paper looks at how local authorities and their partners are using evidence to **develop strategy, prioritise spending and redesign services**.

They are using evidence in strategic needs assessments. They are placing greater emphasis on qualitative data and understanding the assets of local communities, not just needs defined by statistics and professional opinion. They are using evidence to decide where radical action is required, for example early interventions to overcome childhood disadvantage, services for troubled families, and integrated care for older people.

They are also using evidence to improve and redesign services, by: improving targeting and increasing the value for money of programmes; applying 'lean thinking' to drive out unproductive activities; prototyping interventions to encourage citizens to change behaviours; and engaging people to do more to help themselves.

Local authorities are **developing the resources** to underpin the effective use of evidence, and **typically can do more**. Actions include:

- Improving access to data and evidence through:
 - Local Information Systems, which provide online access to data, research and strategic assessments;
 - 'Sweating data assets' (taking full advantage of existing data gathered for administrative purposes or from dealings with customers);
 - Sharing data for operational, research and evaluation purposes; and
 - Using techniques such as cost-benefit analysis in decision making.

- Developing capabilities by:
 - Making the most of existing expertise, within the local authority, partners, universities and central government; and
 - Addressing skill needs in research and using evidence.

Making better use of evidence depends on action on several fronts:

- Fostering a culture that promotes effective use of evidence;
- Sourcing and sharing data and 'what works' evidence; and
- Developing capacity, skills and resources.

Leadership and culture

Organisational leaders need to 'craft a culture' that fosters effective use of evidence. This involves encouraging the use of:

- Planning and decision-making models which prioritise research and analysis;
- Rapid prototyping in service redesign;
- Techniques to make more of existing data and plug gaps, e.g. on service costs;
- Cost-effective solutions to improve the quality of evaluation;
- Sound evidence on 'what works' from other areas, translated to fit local needs and circumstances; and
- Techniques to bring data and analysis to life.

Sourcing and sharing data and 'what works' evidence

Improvements in data sharing are vital to improving the quality of evidence, e.g. through the use of anonymised data in evaluation. Indeed, they are essential to the success of innovations such as Payment by Results and Social Impact Bonds. This is recognised in the Open Data White Paper, and is being facilitated by new guidance from the Information Commissioner's Office. However, there is more to do, at both national and local levels. Proposed changes must be backed by strong arguments, including benefits for service users as well as organisational efficiencies.

Developing better strategy and better services requires access to **robust 'what works' evidence**. Government is supporting independent 'What Works' centres that focus on gathering, reviewing and disseminating evidence. **These centres will have limited impact unless a great deal of attention is paid to how evidence is accessed and communicated.** Much can be learnt from the concept of 'sustainability and spread' prevalent in the NHS.

Capacity and skills

Local authorities can achieve more by harnessing existing analytical resources and bringing analysts together into core or virtual teams.

More substantial, joint evaluations across several localities can generate robust evidence on 'what works'. This can strengthen local authorities' influence with central government, and attract social investors to back local interventions.

There is significant potential in strengthening relationships with universities. The Local Government Navigator Team, supported by ESRC, the LGA and SOLACE, will have a key role in promoting these relationships and identifying opportunities for joint working.

The need for more robust evidence places great demands on existing analytical staff and highlights skill gaps and learning needs, particularly in cost-benefit and cost-effectiveness analysis, using RCTs and other experimental methods, behavioural science and economics, and modelling demand for services.

Progress on skills gaps is hampered by a lack of collaboration at national level. LARIA is seeking to strengthen its role as a professional body, and success will depend on the active backing of other national organisations such as SOLACE and the LGA and the interest of members of the Alliance for Useful Evidence.

Users of research and analysis need to develop their evidence-related skills in order to challenge evidence, commission research, and judge what is likely to work in local circumstances. Voluntary organisations also require the skills in using evidence in order to better engage communities, support advocacy, compete for contracts and demonstrate impact.

1 SETTING THE SCENE

How are local authorities and their partners making use of evidence as they try to square the circle: that is, tackle the seemingly impossible challenge of reconciling substantial cuts in funding with intractable issues such as a sluggish economy, troubled families and pressure on services from ageing populations?

This paper sets out emerging practice in local authorities seeking to develop the evidence required to square the circle. It is intended to provide food for thought for a wide readership interested in finding solutions to this challenge, **whether their role be analysts, managers, commissioners, or senior decision makers in local government, or working in other public services, charities and voluntary organisations.**

It explores an agenda for action relevant to members of the Alliance for Useful Evidence and partners such as SOLACE (the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers),¹ in particular around:

- Ensuring robust evidence is available; and
- Building the analytical capacity and capabilities required to use evidence effectively.

After the 2012 Autumn Statement, the Institute of Fiscal Studies² estimated that budget cuts for local government will total almost 40 per cent by 2017/18, with deprived parts of the country the hardest hit.³ The National Audit Office⁴ expects that local authorities will find it increasingly difficult to maintain services.

Birmingham City Council estimates that it needs to make savings of £600 million by 2015/16.⁵ The Chief Executive, Stephen Hughes⁶ believes only so much can be achieved through shared services and improved back-office productivity. He concludes that *"there is no alternative to a root and branch review of all services"*. The central questions posed in their review – frequently echoed in other places – are:

- What are our priorities for the city, and what contribution does each service make?
- How well do we provide services and where can we be more cost-effective?
- What good ideas across the country can we adopt in Birmingham?
- What can we do to reduce the demand for council-delivered services, either by collaboration with partners, co-production with residents, or early intervention to prevent problems arising?

Local authorities across the country are searching for better outcomes with fewer resources. How can they avoid 'salami slicing' budgets? How can they foster innovation in a climate of retrenchment? Early intervention makes sense intuitively, but can they be sure that prevention is more affordable than the cure?

Answering these questions requires robust evidence based on good data and sound analysis. Martin Reeves, President of SOLACE, argues that effective change demands better evidence and deep understanding of 'place'.⁷ There are no simple solutions. But effective use of evidence can help to:

- Inform public debate on priorities and the future of local public services;
- Engage citizens in exploring options for radical changes in services;
- Identify ways to free up resources to tackle priorities; and
- Demonstrate value for money to both politicians and citizens.

In turn, there are implications for:

- Leaders (elected and executive), in how they foster a culture of evidence use;
- Managers, in planning, commissioning and operations;
- Front-line staff, in improving service quality and impact; and
- Analysts, in how they collect and analyse data and present evidence.

There have been many positive developments in the use of evidence at local level, not least in developing customer insight⁸ (building richer pictures of residents' needs, behaviours and experience of local services) and in informing outcomes-based commissioning. However, concerns remain about how local authorities use evidence. Less than half of the SOLACE members who responded to a recent LARIA survey⁹ felt that their authority makes 'robust, evidence-based decisions' all or most of the time, while nearly all thought they should do.

The next section of this paper looks at how local authorities and their partners are seeking to improve their use of evidence as they attempt to square the circle. It considers how they are using evidence for strategy development and service improvement. Examples are drawn from across different policy areas, including troubled families, adult social care, public health and vulnerable children. Developments in Community Budget areas in England – at both 'whole area' and 'neighbourhood' level¹⁰ – present useful 'directions of travel'.

The paper then considers the culture, resources and skills required to ensure that strategy development and service improvement is supported by robust evidence.

It concludes with some ideas on the way forward to improve local authorities' use of evidence.

2 USING EVIDENCE

This section considers how local authorities are using evidence to underpin their strategic thinking – for strategic needs assessment; developing place-based initiatives; determining priorities for investments; or commissioning services. It then looks at how they make effective use of evidence when services are redesigned or transformed as a consequence of those strategic decisions.

Evidence for strategy development

Local authorities are using evidence to varying degrees to shape their future direction and priorities. In Coventry, the Council has used evidence produced by the corporate research and intelligence (R&I) team to inform the budget process. This has shed light on a diverse range of issues, from fuel poverty to the impact of welfare reforms and the potential for neighbourhood action. Family-level analysis has influenced political debate about 'vulnerability' and taken some of the sting out of hard decisions on eligibility and alternative ways of providing services, including co-production with residents.

Joint Strategic Needs Assessments (JSNAs) are a statutory requirement, and core to the work of the new Health and Wellbeing Partnerships. JSNAs help set Partnership priorities and influence the work of the new NHS Clinical Commissioning Groups, local authorities and other bodies which have an impact on health. JSNAs are increasingly concerned with broader social challenges, such as the ageing population,¹¹ and wider determinants of health, such as unemployment and stress in the workplace. As JSNAs evolve, local authorities are improving the way in which they use and present evidence. Some are building on pioneering work in Wakefield¹² that takes greater account of community assets including the skills and talents of local residents. This approach contrasts with 'deficit thinking' that concentrates on problems rather than potential to be realised.

Coventry: evidence for public health

At the heart of the vision for public health services in Coventry is a commitment to ensuring access to "flexible, evidence-based, quality services (that) support behaviour change."¹³ There are shifts towards services better in tune with stages in people's lives and working with communities based around neighbourhoods or shared interests.¹⁴

In keeping with this, the approach to the JSNA and the Health and Wellbeing Strategy is adopting an 'asset' perspective, seeking much more substantive engagement of service users. Partners recognise the importance of networks and peers, people in the community who act as health models and champions, accepting that professionals are not always the most influential in encouraging behaviour change. The JSNA – continually updated – is now viewed as the monitoring tool for the Strategy, with data on health outcomes to be presented in a dashboard format. This will show progress on the health issues that matter most to local communities and local politicians – not least in demonstrating progress against those outcomes that trigger payment of the Health Premium (reward payments from the Department of Health).

Tasks of the public health service include ensuring that a robust evidence base is in place and helping council services and partners navigate the evidence. The service sees the need to understand better the impact of wider determinants of health and is working with other departments on how their services can contribute more to health improvement in different parts of the city. The integration of public health into the Council's remit includes a requirement for service departments to adopt public health indicators.

The JSNA and Health and Wellbeing Strategy also provide the basis for joint commissioning. The Coventry and Rugby Clinical Commissioning Group has incorporated the key issues into its plans and is working with the Council on more integrated services designed around user needs.

The Yorkshire and Humber Public Health Observatory has reviewed JSNA practice. It welcomed developments such as greater attention to assets, engagement of councillors and GPs, and narrative presentation of findings that avoids data overload. But it concluded more could be done to build on good practice, particularly in relation to:

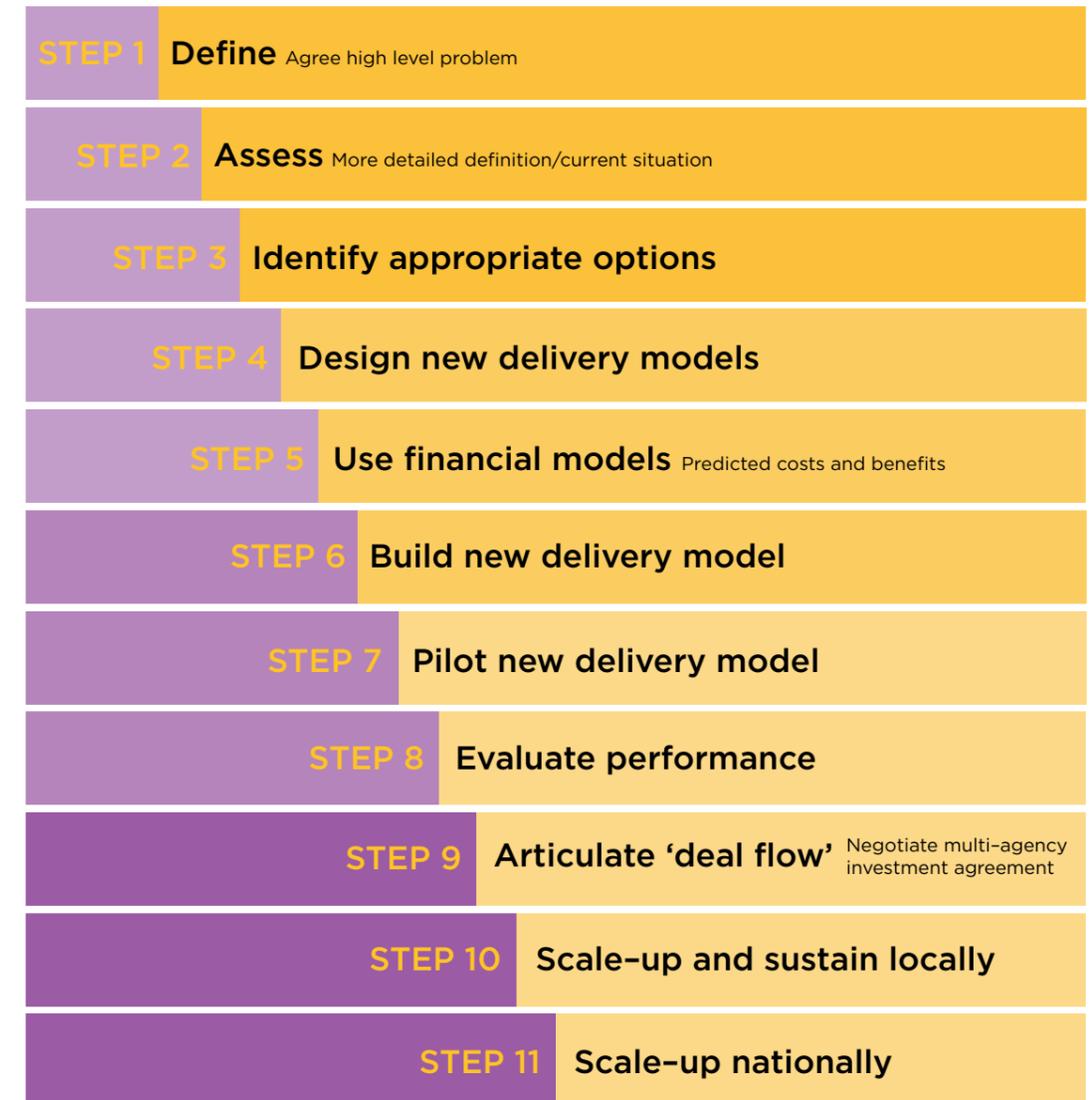
- Adopting more systematic approaches to evidence across all social determinants of health, with stronger treatment of ethnicity.
- Promoting greater co-production and innovation in preparing JSNAs, including drawing on intelligence captured by voluntary and community organisations (VCOs).¹⁵

Increasingly, areas are consolidating JSNAs and other themed assessments (on community safety, health, the local economy, etc.) to present 'a shared story of place' to which local people can relate. This can help service staff understand their wider contributions, e.g. in reducing health inequalities or contributing to local growth. Guidance for Local Service Boards in Wales highlights the need for Single Integrated Plans to be backed by an 'information strategy' that improves the use of evidence and analytical resources.¹⁶

Whole Area Community Budget pilot areas in England are using evidence to inform 'big picture' decisions on services and savings. Typically the pilots¹⁷ have been looking at system-wide costs and potential savings through pooling and aligning budgets. Common themes emerging across the pilots include integrating health and care for older people, raising local skill levels, reducing domestic violence and tackling troubled families. Decisions on priorities are underpinned by robust data analysis. For example, partners in Essex are using predictive modelling to identify people who might be the source of high care costs. In a similar vein in Scotland, partners in Community Planning Partnerships are expected to develop plans for prevention, integration and improvement under Single Outcome Agreements (SOAs).¹⁸ The SOAs are intended to have a clear and evidence-based understanding of place and be based on a review of preventative activity.

Partners in the Greater Manchester pilot have carried out detailed analysis in developing programmes for its early years, transforming justice and 'Healthier Together' programmes. They have developed a 'maturity matrix' for their Investment Framework (Figure 1). It sets out the stages involved in deciding whether, and how, to invest in specific programmes: from agreeing priorities, identifying options, designing services, piloting, evaluation and potential roll-out. This includes cost-benefit analysis to predict costs and benefits, and subsequently to appraise impact.

Figure 1 Greater Manchester Investment Framework 'Maturity Matrix'



The need for robust evidence is typically strongest when local authorities and their partners seek to direct more spending into prevention and early intervention.¹⁹ Returns for many programmes are long term and often difficult to quantify or ascribe to the interventions. They demand better information on baselines, costs, options and performance, including impact against a counterfactual (what would have happened without the particular intervention). Further problems can arise where partners do not share the same boundaries or lack detailed cost data at service or neighbourhood level. However, if commissioners are willing to embrace and invest in an evidence-based approach, preventative programmes can be evaluated. Birmingham City Council's Brighter Futures programme provides one example of what can be achieved.

Birmingham Brighter Futures evaluation

Birmingham City Council has sought to adopt evidence-based methods to improve the impact and value for money of children's services for several years. In 2007, Dartington Social Research Unit (SRU) facilitated discussions between service directors, informed by epidemiological data on the well-being of local children and evidence on 'what works'. This led to the 'Brighter Futures' strategy which embedded three evidence-based early intervention and prevention programmes in mainstream services: the Incredible Years and Triple P parenting programmes and PATHS (Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies - a behavioural programme with children aged four to six). Each intervention was evaluated using a randomised controlled trial (RCT), seen by many as the gold standard for evaluation in social research.

Results for the three programmes were mixed.²⁰ However, the Brighter Futures work provides a good example of how to create a 'pull' for scientific methods to be used in social policy. It led to the introduction of a new standard of accountability in gathering and using data to demonstrate cost-effectiveness. It also offered learning that was unanticipated, such as in how to boost take-up of children's centre services by harder-to-reach families. The evaluation results challenged attitudes and expectations, and prompted consideration of why some results were not stronger. Questions were raised, for instance, over how faithfully Triple-P was implemented in relation to practice proven elsewhere.

The SRU has been working on the 'Investing in Children'²¹ series of publications that provide policymakers, commissioners and practitioners with reliable, independent information on the costs and benefits of alternative interventions. These are backed up by a technical report which provides details on the methodology, sources and assumptions. Investing in Children builds on the pioneering work of the Washington State Institute of Social Policy (WSIPP).²² Birmingham and Manchester City Councils are amongst the project partners.

Developing and evaluating new interventions typically demands better understanding of costs. Work on Greater Manchester's Investment Framework demonstrates how cost-benefit methodology can be used to develop business cases and assess outcomes.

Greater Manchester Investment Framework

Greater Manchester local authorities and their partners are seeking to develop multi-agency investment funds across a number of themes: troubled families and worklessness, transforming justice, health and social care, and early years. The funds are backed by Investment Agreements²³ that set out contributions and expected savings for individual partners. The intention is that successful interventions will reduce demand for services and release cashable savings, which in turn can be used to scale-up investment.

Oldham's Investment Agreement pilot involved a cross-service, integrated approach to services for children nought-to-four year old. It sought to explore:

- What are the core elements of the business case?
- How do we ensure the business case is supported by robust cost-benefit analysis so that partners have sufficient confidence to invest?
- How do we engage partners to ensure their buy-in to the concept, and then ensure they invest appropriately?
- What does an investment agreement need to look like to ensure there is genuine shared agreement about the objectives, and clarity about who is going to invest what and how savings will be apportioned?

A cost-benefit analysis (CBA) was prepared for each pilot. Scaled-up, the estimated totalled costs across Greater Manchester were £138 million, with benefits estimated at £224 million, including £110 million of potential cashable savings. Partners are already reinvesting some savings: in Manchester, additional police officers are moving into early intervention work in Wythenshawe. The CBA on troubled families in Salford is being used to identify potential investors, e.g. health services, police and probation, in addition to those agencies already involved in delivery.

The Greater Manchester Investment Framework seeks to address the disincentive for collaboration between public agencies where benefits and savings to individual agencies are deemed disproportionate to their contributions. The Cabinet Office has introduced the Social Outcomes Fund²⁴ in England to overcome the difficulty of aggregating benefits and savings that accrue across multiple public sector silos. The Fund is available to top up budgets for interventions tackling complex and expensive social issues. It is expected to improve the evidence base to inform future joint commissioning, as reporting and assessment of performance data is a condition of funding.

Rethinking public service delivery requires local authorities to use both quantitative and qualitative evidence. Increasingly, they are looking at the experiences of citizens, for instance using ethnographic techniques to better understand their lives and encounters with public services. SILK (Social Innovation Lab Kent)²⁵ produced ethnographic case studies for the Sherwood Neighbourhood Community Budget in Tunbridge Wells to improve understanding of what motivates residents, how they are affected by local policies, their attitudes to engaging with services, and their willingness to volunteer. This trend in using qualitative evidence is particularly welcomed by VCOs, who often argue that the needs of their client groups are not well served.²⁶ Citizens and service users are increasingly seen as research assets. This is exemplified by Turning Point's Connected Care²⁷ model.

Connected Care: co-produced commissioning in health and social care

Turning Point's Connected Care model of community-led commissioning features an evidence-based methodology that involves local people in the design and delivery of services. The premise is that *"if you spend time and resource researching community*

*need and bring this together with commissioner priorities, the redesigned services will be more integrated, inclusive and cost-effective.*²⁸ They reckon that working in this way can produce resource savings of up to £2.65 for every £1 spent, illustrated by their work in Warrington.

Turning Point emphasises the need to build capacity in local communities to increase their influence. It has trained over 200 Community Researchers to prepare community audits. Further training and ongoing support is available through the Community Leadership Network²⁹ for researchers who want to become more involved in local projects.

By mid 2012, the Community Researchers had engaged with almost 10,000 people (one in 15 in the Connected Care areas). Turning Point argues strongly that the local knowledge of the researchers is invaluable in reaching to the heart of communities and working with seldom-heard groups.

The London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham has used Community Health Champions, trained as Community Researchers by Turning Point, to gather the opinions of over 500 local residents for the White City Neighbourhood Community Budget. Their feedback, alongside a neighbourhood assessment prepared by analysts at the authority, has informed initial priorities for service improvement. The analysts' work has been aligned with the process adopted for other strategic needs assessments, such as those on Drugs and Alcohol and Community Safety. Findings were carefully presented in ways that would promote local understanding and engagement.

Evidence for service improvement

Much service redesign has been informed by developments in customer insight, where local authorities have increasingly sought a deeper understanding of citizens' behaviours, motivations, experiences and needs. The LGA's Customer Led Transformation programme³⁰ provides many examples of good practice. For example: Havering has used customer profiling to promote take-up of services amongst vulnerable older people and develop a volunteer outreach network; Lambeth has used cognitive interviewing, focus groups and workshops to map service user experiences and identify improvements to domestic violence services; and several authorities, such as East Yorkshire, Lancashire and Thameside have used 'circles of need' exercises³¹ to gain a more rounded view of specific groups of residents, such as young parents on low incomes. These exercises have sought to identify how teams and organisations can work better together, reduce costs resulting from duplication and remove unnecessary stages in service provision.

The first tranche of Community Budget areas have been at the forefront of evidence-based service transformation. Leicestershire's Family Insight Review provides one example.

Leicestershire Family Insight Review

Of all the original Community Budget areas, Leicestershire undertook the most extensive evidence-gathering exercise for its Family Insight review.³² The exercise included:

- Ethnographic research with individual families.
- Workshops with members of other families and practitioners.
- Journey maps for families setting out their experience of services.
- A review of the evidence base on family intervention models.

Partners mapped and profiled 1,300 families using government criteria on complex needs. They then developed a new Family Model, with partners committing resources and agreeing a joint evaluation framework. The Model focuses on risk triggers and life events, and draws on the findings of the customer journey mapping exercise to identify the best points at which to offer services.³³

Along with customer insight, **the concept of 'lean thinking' has been spreading widely in local government**, inspired by successful applications in the private sector. Lean thinking requires sound evidence in helping to understand the nature, type and frequency of demand for particular services; clarify the value of the service to users and stakeholders; identify and remove waste; and weigh up alternatives for improving service delivery. The Coventry ABC (A Better Council for A Bolder Coventry) programme emphasises the need to for services to establish a robust, quantified baseline before moving forward .

Lean thinking is usually applied at an operational level within individual organisations. In a search for wider and more substantial efficiencies and improvements, Greater Manchester commissioned a 'whole system' review of state interactions with troubled families in Oldham and Thameside.³⁴ It used case studies to map the number of entry points to services that families might encounter and to describe their experiences, including the causes and frequency of their interactions with services. Professionals acknowledged that their services often pay insufficient attention to service user experiences. The exercise found multiple 'touch points' with services, with significant costs relating to failure to address the root causes of family problems – potentially exacerbated where decisions to cut services may result in families passed between agencies until their needs become more acute.

Another growing trend in local government is the **adoption of 'design thinking'**. Promoted by the Design Council,³⁵ it is often **associated with behavioural change initiatives** and the related work of the Behavioural Insights Team in the Cabinet Office. This so-called 'Nudge Unit' has been complimented by the British Academy in its report, 'Nudging citizens towards localism?',³⁶ notwithstanding concerns about the level of understanding of relationships between government actions, citizen behaviours and desired outcomes. The Academy has advocated a significant expansion of experiments if the potential of behavioural change policies is to be realised, and the Behavioural Insights Team has published the guide, 'Test, Learn, Adapt'³⁷ on the use of such trials.

A key stage in 'design thinking' is prototyping. Nesta has been championing prototyping as a means of testing innovations before taking them to scale.³⁸ In the current climate, the need to devise low-cost tests is paramount, while ensuring that evaluation of those tests remains robust. However, prototypes or 'pilots' often run into resistance from officers and councillors who believe that there have been too many ephemeral initiatives with little impact. It places an onus on those developing prototypes to make the case for robust evidence-based methods in promoting innovation; and on leaders to understand the purpose of prototyping and be tolerant of ones that fail.

There is considerable potential for 'design thinking' and behavioural change approaches to reduce demand for services. Coventry City Council, for instance, wished to address escalating home-to-school transport costs while improving outcomes for children with special educational needs. Through the Travel Assistance Programme, the Council sought to understand the needs of parents better, communicate with them more effectively, and offer incentives for them to become more involved in making home-to-school arrangements. The results have exceeded expectations, with the Council expecting to save 12 per cent (over £1 million) over 2012/13 and 2013/14.³⁹ This has encouraged the Council to adopt the approach for other services where there are opportunities to reconfigure service delivery.

As we have already illustrated, **local residents are an invaluable source of evidence.** Service transformation activities must have citizen engagement and insight at their heart. Public engagement is crucial to the development of Neighbourhood Community Budgets (NCBs).⁴⁰ Part of the government's localism agenda. NCBs are intended to:

- Explore ways of reducing service demand.
- Enable people to do more to help themselves and their neighbours.
- Find ways of drawing in new resources, e.g. social finance and sponsorship from businesses wanting to addressing social responsibility objectives.

Evidence prepared by council analysts for the White City NCB has helped shift perceptions of priorities from crime to employment and parenting. Local residents took part in 'challenge workshops' on delivery themes to ensure that the NCB proposals were both ambitious and realistic. In the 'Good Parenting' workshop, delivery partners discussed residents' support needs with them. Residents challenged statistics presented on educational attainment in relation to a particular school, highlighted potential risks in developing a volunteer mentoring scheme, and flagged the particular challenges that 'blended families' (where parents form new relationships and bring their families together) can present.

As well as seeking residents' input when re-designing services, it is equally important to inform residents about the impact of any re-design. The Ilfracombe NCB has developed a 'virtual bank account' as a means of letting residents track how an estimated public sector budget of £82 million is spent in the town and see where they have influenced spending and outcomes.

3 EVIDENCE: RESOURCES, CAPACITY AND SKILLS

The previous section illustrated the many ways in which local authorities are using evidence to drive strategy development and service improvement. But if they are to use evidence effectively, they need the right infrastructure. In this section, we consider local evidence resources and the capacity and skills needed to produce, analyse and present evidence effectively.

Resources

Access to good data is a prerequisite for the effective use of evidence. Much progress has been made through Local Information Systems (LISs)⁴¹ set up by local authorities, sometimes with partners. There are now nearly 100 in Great Britain. Some like Norfolk Insight⁴² have increasingly become more than data repositories, they are actively involved in:

- Developing access to local datasets.⁴³
- Promoting what the sites have to offer and educating data users.
- Keeping strategic assessments up to date.

The Warwickshire Observatory combines a corporate R&I function with a strongly promoted LIS. It describes itself as *"a centre of excellence in research, data collection and analysis, supporting evidence-based policymaking across the public sector in Warwickshire."* Its website⁴⁴ provides a public face, with full use made of blogging, video, regular email and Twitter updates. The Observatory are trying out different data visualisations and promoting new ways of engaging residents through the Ask Warwickshire consultation project.

Local authorities are increasingly looking to 'sweat' existing data assets such as administrative and customer intelligence datasets. They are designing systems with the 'COUNT' mantra ('collect once, use numerous times') in mind. The University of Essex is re-analysing local data to identify factors that help explain why individuals become users of social care services for the Essex Whole Area Community Budget delivery plan. It is exploiting this data to develop predictive models that can help manage demand. It will analyse small area data to help understand variations in rates of hospital admission, and help steer advice and information services that channel access to services and encourage informal care.

In keeping with the potential of 'Big Data',⁴⁵ there is scope in linking administrative datasets (recognised in the Open Data White Paper, 'Unleashing the Potential'⁴⁶) to offer richer possibilities for analysis. The gains could be very considerable, given care to respect privacy, and overcome barriers such as incompatible legacy systems and a lack of data tagging. The Government's Data Standards Board⁴⁷ has launched the Breakthrough Fund in an attempt to tackle some of these barriers. The national data linkage strategy in Scotland⁴⁸ sets out plans to create a culture where legal, ethical and secure data linkage is accepted and expected, with risks to privacy minimised and benefits fully realised.

Linking data from multiple government datasets offers great potential for evaluation, both in strengthening evidence and reducing research costs. Evaluation of the Drugs Payment by Results pilots proposes to link national information on drug treatment clients with data from

DWP, the Police National Computer, the Drugs Intervention Programme, and ONS mortality statistics.⁴⁹ The Ministry of Justice have accepted the case made by New Philanthropy Capital (NPC) for a Justice Data Lab⁵⁰ to provide a national system for accessing offender data. The Data Lab works through charities submitting details of their clients to analysts at the Lab, who then provide re-offending rates for the whole group. They can then see whether their work is having an impact without revealing individual identities. NPC argue that this will help charities learn what works, fine-tune their services, and provide stronger evidence for commissioners.

Such developments are seen as vital within the voluntary sector. The NCVO has called for the wider publication of “*evidence on service user needs, motivations, choices and wishes*” with associated “*clarity on where resources are spent*”⁵¹ in order to help providers develop more innovative, cost-effective services designed around the needs of service users. NCVO cites the work by Barnsley Hospice, which combined data about beneficiaries with spatial data on health inequalities. The analysis showed how the Hospice could improve its reach into more deprived areas and led to the introduction of new outreach activities.

The Administrative Data Taskforce,⁵² set up by the ESRC, Medical Research Council and the Wellcome Trust, has recommended the creation of UK Administrative Data Research Network, with centres in each country of the UK. The centres would provide secure access to ‘de-identified’ data from government departments, agencies and statutory bodies, open to accredited researchers. This is a promising way forward, opening up potentially rich sources of data such as DWP’s Work and Pensions Longitudinal Study⁵³ for research and evaluation purposes.

Local authorities have made frequent pleas to central government to facilitate data sharing, not least in the context of Community Budgets. The subject is fraught, with copious frustration, misunderstanding, and wasted energy. While there are legislative barriers (stemming from specific legislation as well as the Data Protection Act), issues often relate to the practical difficulties posed by partnership working and in building arrangements for seeking personal consent for data to be shared.⁵⁴ Leicestershire and Greater Manchester have produced an Information Sharing Toolkit⁵⁵ to help overcome some of the obstacles to data sharing identified by the Community Budget pilots, while Essex has prioritised development of its Information Sharing Framework.

Essex: Enhancing use of data and intelligence

The Essex Whole Area Community Budget is driving forward action on data sharing through the Essex Trust Charter Information Sharing Framework.⁵⁶ This involves tackling challenges relating to technology, data matching, legislation and culture. Progress requires:

- Understanding differences in information governance and legislation affecting each partner organisation.
- Adoption of national information standards.
- Mapping master data sources (for geographical data).
- Matching data relating to individuals, families, groups, places and assets across public services.

Standards and practices will be driven through public service supply chains, involving consistent contract terms which identify datasets, expertise, technologies and methodologies that can be shared or re-used.

The Community Budget submission also identified specific scope to improve data sharing:

- On community safety, drawing on police data on domestic abuse, victims, perpetrators and crimes.
- On skills, adopting a common identifier number to track individuals’ progress, including those who people drop out from or re-engage with provision.

Partners submitted ‘asks’ to central government to allow relevant local authority staff to access specific DWP data and to strengthen guidance to say that data should be shared between health and social care. They called for “*trusted local/national data sharing team(s) across a wide variety of agencies whose function is to datashare to support cross-cutting initiatives like troubled families*”.

One promising development is the Anonymisation Code developed by the Information Commissioner’s Office (ICO)⁵⁷ to help organisations adopt a structured and methodical approach to assessing risks,⁵⁸ and potentially very relevant to tackling issues around data for research and evaluation purposes. The ICO acknowledges the need to improve understanding of how society operates, while protecting individual privacy. The ICO argues that more needs to be done to share knowledge about anonymisation techniques and is supporting the Anonymisation Network⁵⁹ to this end.

As noted earlier, **there is growing interest in cost-benefit analysis as a tool to generate better evidence and inform decisions.** It enables local authorities to determine where scarce resources can most effectively to achieve desired results. However, CBA expertise is in short supply and the resources required to complete such analyses should not be underestimated. For instance, although Leicestershire identified significant potential savings for their new family services model they struggled to produce estimates of cashable savings for each partner, casting doubt on the feasibility of using Social Investment Bonds to help fund interventions.⁶⁰ In addressing such issues, Greater Manchester has been at the forefront of developing the tools and skills required for CBA.

Greater Manchester cost-benefit framework

New Economy, an arm of AGMA (Association of Greater Manchester Authorities), has developed evaluation methodologies⁶¹ to support the work of the six member local authorities on Community Budgets. It has:

- Established common approaches to evaluation.
- Developed a cost-benefit model to underpin the Greater Manchester Investment Framework, for use in business case development, tracking progress and outcome evaluation.
- Trained staff to use the new tools and approaches.

The work has been supported by central government analysts. They have contributed to and accepted the validity of the technical guidance produced.

AGMA see CBA as a priority, to:

- Enable decision makers to roll out services that have the greatest impact, with common measures and monetary values used to produce benefit-cost ratios.
- Enhance the knowledge of delivery teams, in understanding and improving impact.
- Improve joint working and ensure equitable funding agreements between agencies – evaluation should allow all partners to see how much each pays to deliver a certain service and how much benefit they derive.

Early examples of CBA work included evaluations of a family intervention pilot, minor illness clinics and parenting courses. The exercises elucidated cost savings, and where negative returns were identified, pointed to how savings and wider social returns could be achieved. The National Audit Office, in their review on measuring the costs and benefits of Community Budgets,⁶² commended the approach and welcomed the use of randomised controlled trials as part of the evaluation methodology, though observing that RCTs are not always feasible.

One of the main challenges for CBA, and for service transformation generally, is the paucity of readily available cost data for services and outcomes.⁶³ Several national initiatives have sought to tackle this, e.g. for adult social care⁶⁴ and troubled families. But such data needs to be used with caution – averages generated from national datasets may be misleading, warranting more local work, as in Sheffield on services to families. There is a strong case to involve finance professionals as part of the analytical team; in Birmingham, the support of a finance officer working across the three Neighbourhood Community Budget areas has been much appreciated.

Capacity

Many local authorities have sought to strengthen existing R&I resources.⁶⁵ Different authorities have adopted different approaches. Some, such as Worcestershire, have centralised the function; some have created virtual teams drawn from analysts housed in individual directorates; and others have striven to improve use of customer intelligence throughout all directorates. In Hull's case, this is supported by a corporate Customer Insight Team, with research and analysis geared to business planning cycles and foresight (using predictive modelling and scenarios).⁶⁶ Others have geared resources to specific priorities such as early intervention programmes, with dedicated intelligence hubs developed to manage information, monitoring and evaluation. Some, such as Lambeth, have protected funding for R&I, as they see the function as critical in helping them navigate difficult waters.

Lambeth: research for resilience

Research in Lambeth has played a key role in turning round the performance of the Council. The Council has developed a programme of regular research, including a residents' survey supplemented by qualitative research in intervening years. The programme is supported by trained consultation officers in each council department. They have used ethnographic research and improved equalities monitoring to engage better with the diverse communities in the Borough. The Chief Executive, Derrick Anderson, recognises that, *"Often traditional research methods cannot reach them or provide credible answers, particularly in those communities that are small and appear closed to public agencies."*⁶⁷

The Council is committed to sustaining its own research and analysis capacity, on the basis that in-house researchers provide added value through their understanding of the borough. They also appreciate what is needed to ensure that research is relevant and digestible to officers and politicians without a research background.

The cost of purchasing external fieldwork can be a barrier to some services undertaking research. Lambeth has therefore sought to develop its own in-house field force, advertised through local employment hubs and with young care leavers.

Lambeth has a commitment to become a 'co-operative council' by 2014, working through 'intelligent commissioning', at both borough and community levels. This provides the context for continued investment in research, intelligence and consultation capacity. For Derrick Anderson, *"This function is the 'eyes and ears' of the organisation and provides the basis on which the brain can better function without which our organisation and our communities are less resilient. The question is not 'how can I afford it?' but rather 'how can I afford not to invest?'"*

Unlike other 'back office' functions, there has been limited development in shared R&I services. There is scope for greater collaboration across authorities and partner organisations. LARIA's member survey in 2012 found support for more joint working to improve access to evidence, share of intelligence and achieve economies of scale.⁶⁸ In Leicestershire, the Strategic Research Partnership⁶⁹ has evolved to ensure R&I is geared to the business requirements of partner organisations. The tasks of the Partnership include:

- Identifying partner requirements and determining priorities for joint research.
- Promoting evidence-based R&I.
- Providing a more robust evidence base for strategic needs assessments.
- Avoiding duplication.
- Creating a research culture supported by partners.

In Greater Manchester there are ambitious plans to make more of R&I resources across the city region, described in the following box.

Greater Manchester Research Review

In anticipation of increasing demand for R&I, the Greater Manchester partners undertook a Research Review in 2011/12 with the intention of developing a more integrated, multi-disciplinary research function.⁷⁰ The scope included the local authorities, Police, Community Safety Partnerships, Fire, Probation, NHS, Transport for Greater Manchester and city region economic development bodies. The aim was to create a function that was more 'front-line facing', providing commissioners with the evidence they need to develop business plans, quantify costs and benefits, evaluate performance and execute investment agreements. Core components of the function included baseline analysis to facilitate tracking of performance and making outputs tangible to non-experts.

The Review has led to:

- A single Greater Manchester assessment in 2012/13, and progress towards this at district level.
- Rationalisation and integration of research resources at the sub-regional level.
- Reduced duplication, with resources freed for work in support of commissioning.
- An open day to promote mutual understanding and networking amongst R&I staff, along with a 'swap' programme to facilitate mutual learning.
- Development of expertise hubs, e.g. on the census and on cost-benefit analysis.
- Promotion of DataGM, the city region open data platform.
- Brokering of links with local universities, including specific engagement, e.g. on the Community Budget 'Transforming Justice' theme.

In other areas, arrangements are less formal. In Bristol, for instance, the Research Network⁷¹ brings together people interested in research and statistics, from the Council and partners from the NHS police and voluntary sector among others.

Skills

LARIA undertook two surveys in 2012 which cast light on evidence and related skills issues. One, with members of SOLACE (chief executives and senior managers),⁷² revealed significant concerns about how R&I supports evidence-based decision making. Only 52 per cent expressed satisfaction on this, with only 4 per cent 'very satisfied'. SOLACE members identified five main areas for improvement:

- Evaluation of the impact of past decisions (46 per cent of respondents).
- Benchmarking data with other areas (39 per cent).
- Assessment of options available (33 per cent).
- How evidence is presented (29 per cent).
- Feedback on public engagement and consultation (25 per cent).

They also identified six areas for R&I staff development:

- Strengthening customer insight and data analysis (49 per cent).
- Impact evaluation (48 per cent).
- Strategic/corporate thinking/awareness (48 per cent).
- Political acumen (46 per cent); raising profile/reputation of the council for evidence-based decisions (37 per cent).
- Guidance/mentoring on use of research for other officers (25 per cent).

The second LARIA survey, of their own members, highlighted the need to find innovative and low-cost alternatives to traditional methods of training, including accredited, online learning developed with members. It revealed particular interest in learning about smarter ways of generating evidence, techniques such as predictive modelling, and developing a better grounding in economics and econometric methods. LARIA has made a commitment to professionalise the sector, starting with a better definition of what local researchers are and what they should be able to do. In conjunction with Skills for Justice (the Sector Skills Council covering local government), it has developed a 'functional map' that sets out job requirements linked to occupational standards.⁷³ LARIA recognise the need to showcase the best of the sector, through awards, promoting best practice, and stimulating thought-leading research, with their 2013 annual conference is designed to highlight the value of R&I. It is working towards a 'handbook for evidence-based decisions', and is calling for researchers to *"up their game by fighting to get evidence into the decision-making process"* and decision makers to *"put their money where their mouths are and invest in research."*⁷⁴

If decision makers are to 'put their money where their mouths are', it is important to recognise that they also need the skills to be able to use evidence effectively. There is no single, authoritative picture of the evidence-related skills needs of decision makers. However, the Sector Skills Assessment for Government Services prepared for the UK Commission for Employment and Skills⁷⁵ identified evaluation skills as a high priority.

As well as developing in-house skills, there is **great potential to tap into skills available outside local government**. Historically, engagement between universities and local authorities has been patchy. Good relationships are often driven by individuals rather than longer term inter-organisational arrangements. A number of factors have perhaps made local authorities and universities reluctant to engage with each other. For example, there are underlying concerns within local authorities about the practical relevance of much academic research and its timeliness; while university researchers report frustrations in their dealings with local authorities. Furthermore, university staff may be reluctant to engage in work that does not lead to publication, as this is core to how their performance is assessed. However, as Research Councils are increasingly concerned to establish the impact of what they fund, this may be less of a problem in the future; and there are signs that local authorities are looking to develop greater links with their local universities.⁷⁶

The ESRC, LGA and SOLACE have joined forces to set up the Local Government Navigator Team⁷⁷ to act as an evidence broker and develop opportunities for knowledge exchange and collaboration. Knowledge Navigator should build on the lessons of the Local Authority Research Council Initiative (LARCI)⁷⁸ and existing partnerships between universities and local authorities, such as the Institute for Local Governance in the North East. More can be made of the ESRC Knowledge Exchange Opportunities programme which promotes practical research proposals instigated by local authorities. For example, it has funded action research on 'whole household' interventions in Sheffield.⁷⁹

Universities can also help develop evidence-related skills in local authorities. One current example is UCL's involvement with the Project Oracle initiative on Reverse Placements: 'Putting Commissioners in the high-speed driving seat'.⁸⁰ This aims to turn commissioners into 'Evidence Champions' through a fortnightly seminar programme. Content includes evaluation philosophy and techniques, RCTs and quasi-experimental methods; and issues in implementation. The commissioners are invited to contribute, explaining their work and evidence needs.

Along academic contacts, local authorities can tap into a wealth of analytical expertise within central government. Central government departments are encouraging analysts to become more directly involved as partners at local level, either formally through joint initiatives or informally through employee volunteering. Analysts from local authorities and central government have worked together on the Neighbourhood Community Budget evaluation, the Social Impact Bond on reducing reoffending, and the Greater Manchester model highlighted earlier in this report.

The Government Social Research service has also agreed a protocol with NCVO for volunteering. The NCVO acts as a broker, matching analysts and voluntary organisations. Pro Bono Economics⁸¹ provides a vehicle for economists in government (and other fields) to undertake projects for charities. Many of their projects have focused on assessing the economic value of charities' work. Examples include: calculating the costs of eating disorders for national charity, BEAT; and evaluating pilot projects promoted by Making Every Adult Matter (MEAM), a coalition of charities working with adults with complex needs such as homelessness, substance abuse and mental ill-health.

The search for greater value for money and better commissioning is driving demand for better evidence on what works. Some fields of local government activity are better provided for than others, with health, supported by NICE, clearly best served. The need for action is recognised at national level, with government action to set up a series of 'What Works' centres,⁸² inspired by the Cabinet Secretary's notion of a 'NICE for Social Policy' and supported by Nesta.⁸³ Plans are under development for new centres, initially covering the policy fields of Ageing Well, Crime Reduction,⁸⁴ Local Economic Growth and Reducing Re-offending. Their primary role will be to make more of the existing evidence base and promote methodological developments that will strengthen future evaluation. The Early Intervention Foundation⁸⁵ also forms part of this emerging network.

The development of these centres is welcome. But they are not a panacea. On their own, they will not address all the issues around resources, capacity and skills highlighted in this section. In Scotland, the Improving Evidence and Data Programme,⁸⁶ led by SOLACE and the Improvement Service is pursuing a more concerted approach in support of Community Planning Partnerships, combining strands of work on access to data, evaluation methodologies, use of evidence and analytical capacity building.

4 DRAWING THE THREADS TOGETHER

This paper has illustrated the progress that many local authorities have made in using evidence, with a focus on efforts to tackle difficult social issues and demographic pressures with diminishing resources. In this final section we consider what actions need to be taken to ensure that local authorities have access to good quality evidence; and the ability to use that evidence effectively.

There are many positive developments – often, but by no means exclusively, being driven by Community Budget areas. Making further progress on the use of evidence depends on action on several fronts:

- Fostering a culture that promotes effective use of evidence.
- Sourcing and sharing data and 'what works' evidence.
- Developing capacity and skills.

There are implications for many people in local authorities and beyond: decision makers; policy and research staff; those managing and delivering services; and local residents, if they are to play an influential part in shaping future services.

Leadership and culture: raising demand and expectations

SOLACE members have highlighted concerns to LARIA about how well local authorities use evidence. Discussion at the SOLACE Summit⁸⁷ explored these issues and stressed the importance of:

- 'Hard-wiring' organisational culture that values evidence.
- Making the most of available analytical expertise.
- Raising the bar in standards of evidence and evaluation in tackling the big issues.
- Facilitating access to the research and evidence base, with content in digestible and understandable forms.
- Ensuring staff have the skills to develop evidence at a local level.

Participants at the Summit stressed that evidence from data and analysis is only one element of local decision making. They acknowledged the importance of councillors' local knowledge in bridging the gap between data and the day-to-day lives of residents. There were calls for culture change amongst decision makers, politicians and the public around using evidence.

Organisational leaders need to 'craft' the culture around evidence, by insisting that evidence is timely, credible, relevant to the real world and communicated effectively.

This may involve, among other things, protecting R&I staff development budgets and requiring evidence statements in key policy reports.⁸⁸ The SOLACE Summit highlighted the opportunity to take advantage of the injection of public health's evidence culture, to be blended with local authority strengths in knowledge of, and closeness to, local

communities. There is a need, however, to counter fears in the public health community that emotional causes may capture the attention of, and gain great support from, the public and councillors, rather than the most cost-effective and evidence-informed interventions.⁸⁹

Leaders must **create the conditions for effective use of evidence**, setting expectations and promoting action around:

- The use of planning and decision-making methods which prioritise research and analysis inputs.
- Making more of existing data, and ensuring that systems and practices capture data that are most needed, including unit costs in service delivery.
- Using rapid prototyping, with proportionate research and analysis to determine whether and on what scale to invest further.
- Bringing data and analysis to life, with high standards in presentation (through narratives, visualisation, etc.).
- Using cost-effective solutions to improving quality of evidence (RCTs and other experimental methods need not be high cost).
- Drawing on wider evidence of 'what works' from other areas, translated to fit local needs and circumstances; resourcing and embedding evaluation more generally.

Leaders must also remove or reduce constraints for effective use of evidence, particularly where there are partnership dimensions. For example, they need to ensure systems and processes are in place to facilitate local data sharing. LARIA has called for senior managers to give R&I staff the opportunity to learn and collaborate with others, despite pressures on time and budget: *"Many are waiting for permission to broaden their horizons and skills."*

Sourcing data and 'what works' evidence

Experience from the Whole Area Community Budgets shows **there is still much to do to improve data sharing to improve the evidence base**. The direction of travel towards greater data sharing for research and evaluation is strongly supported by the Open Data White Paper. Linked, anonymised datasets are increasingly seen as a prerequisite for innovations such as Social Impact Bonds (SIBs) to work. More can be done within existing legislation, and ICO guidance can help overcome common misconceptions. The development of secure data labs can facilitate data access for research while maintaining confidentiality. National government should also work towards removing barriers to data sharing that emanate from government regulations (e.g. data sharing permissible under specific legislation). Local authorities are particularly concerned about access to DWP data, which is constrained by social security legislation. The Welfare Reform Act 2012 has opened up some possibilities around sharing information on, for example, troubled families or households affected by the 'housing cap'.

Further progress in sharing data from national sources requires strong business cases that quantify savings and benefits and think creatively about how work will be resourced. It may also require changes in legislation, new enabling regulations, or the development of new mechanisms such as the Justice Data Lab. However, such actions may not be a priority for the departments concerned, particularly those under continued pressure to reduce costs.

Ultimately, local authorities need access to robust 'what works' evidence if they are to develop better strategy and better services. This remains an area of weakness: the range and depth varies across social and economic themes, and with the exception of health, is generally underdeveloped. Improvements are imperative if innovations such as SIBs and Payment by Results are to be successful. Universities can play a much greater role in improving the 'what works' evidence base, but this will only be valued if academic contributions are recognised as timely and relevant.

Central government is also seeking to improve the evidence base, not least through the new What Works centres. Other developments, such as the Social Outcomes Fund, Investing in Children from the Social Research Unit, the Education Endowment Fund, and the packaging of evidence on public health for local authorities by NICE are designed explicitly to contribute to the evidence base over time.

Such developments will have limited impact unless a great deal of attention is paid to how the evidence is accessed and key findings are communicated. At an Alliance for Useful Evidence seminar in September 2012, Jenny Dibden, Head of Government Social Research, stressed the importance of:

- A focus on the 'right audience at the right time'.
- Seeking 'robust but realistic evidence', ensuring that what is generated is helpful and raises standards, while avoiding purist research concerns and overly ambivalent conclusions.
- Finding better mechanisms for dissemination, reflecting the interests of different audiences.

Much can be learnt from the 'sustainability and spread' concept promoted in the NHS⁹⁰ – that is, in understanding what makes for sustainable, successful innovations that can be diffused and scaled-up. It is important to counter the 'not invented here' syndrome, which can adversely affect local willingness to act on findings from other areas. As the Birmingham Brighter Futures evaluation has underlined, it is essential to understand why interventions are successful, in order to build the success factors into future delivery.

Commissioners, managers and analysts need **information on emerging as well as proven practice**. This may involve sharing knowledge on tackling hot topics such as:

- The impacts of welfare reform;
- Behaviour change initiatives in big spending areas such as adult social care;
- Modelling demand for services; and
- Using public sector assets to support local economic growth.

Developing capacity and skills

More can be done to harness existing analytical resources within local authorities and their partners, and across local authorities. More value can be gained from better use of scarce skills, higher standards, and prioritising higher impact research activities. Substantial, joint evaluations across several localities can generate more robust evidence on 'what works'. In turn, this can strengthen local authorities' influence with central government, or attract social investors to back local interventions.

Local authorities can forge stronger links with academics. Developments in Greater Manchester point to the potential of strengthening relationships with local universities. The Knowledge Navigator service and ESRC co-funding for knowledge exchange can support local authorities in this.

The search for more robust evidence for decision making places great demands on existing analytical staff and may highlight skill gaps, particularly in:

- Cost-benefit and cost-effectiveness analysis.
- Designing and managing randomised controlled trials and other experimental methods.
- Behavioural science and economics.
- Predictive risk analysis and demand modelling.

However, these gaps may prove persistent and limit the contribution that research and analysis can make. Current activity to address skill needs tends to be ad hoc and linked to specific organisational priorities (e.g., CBA in Greater Manchester; ethnographic research methods in Lambeth). Local authorities' training budgets are typically very constrained, so these critical needs may be left unmet.

Progress on addressing skills needs is hampered by a lack of collaboration at national level. It is not clear where the impetus will come from to identify and address analytical skills gaps. LARIA is seeking to strengthen its role as a professional body, and success will depend on the active backing of other national organisations such as SOLACE. This was recognised as an outcome of the SOLACE Summit, where a commitment was made to *“support workforce development that advances technical skills (quantitative, economic, scientific, etc.)”*.

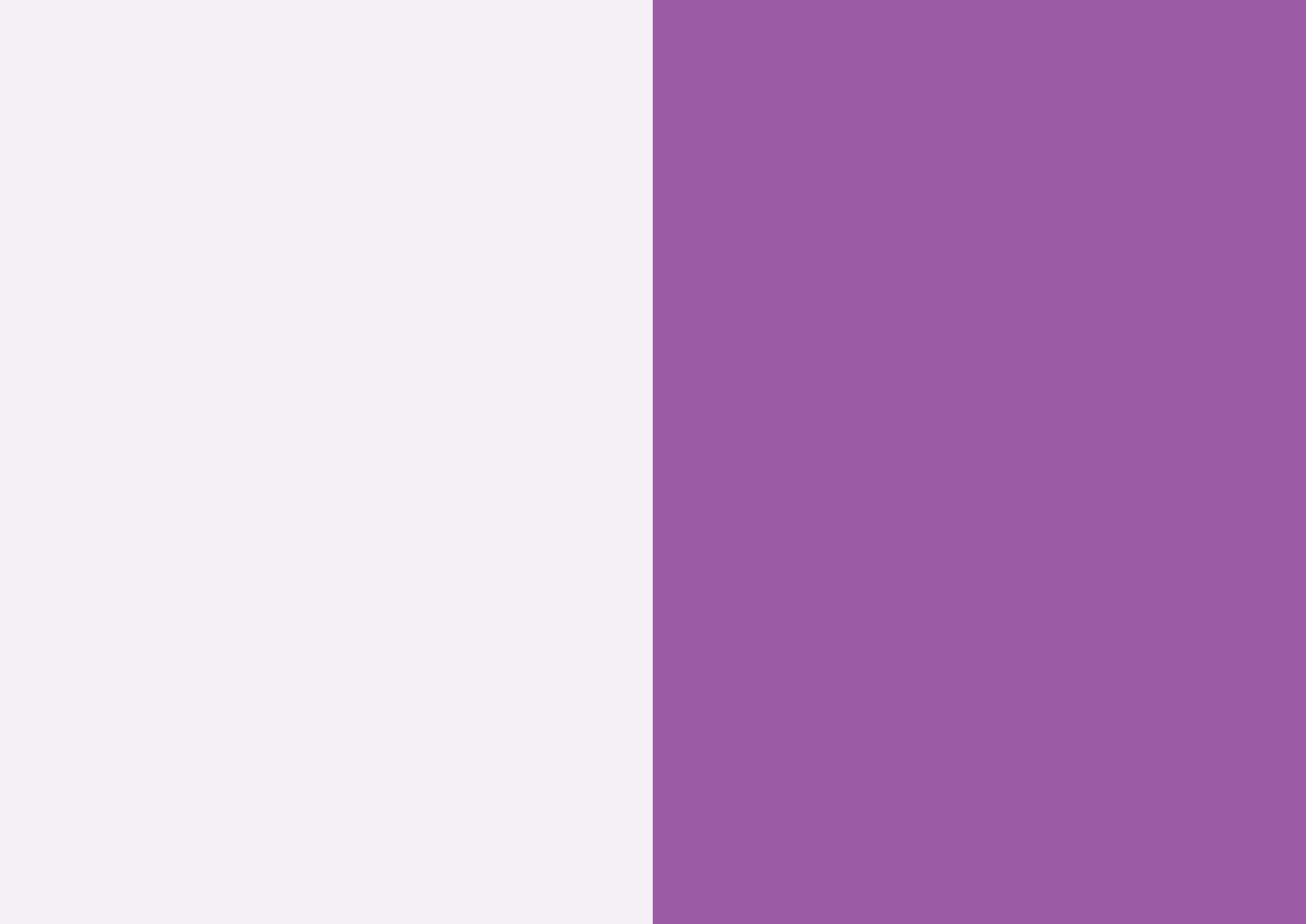
Users of research may well need to develop their evidence-related skills depending on their role, for instance in interpreting and presenting data; challenging evidence; commissioning research; and judging what is likely to work in local circumstances. SOLACE Summit participants recognised the case to build skills and understanding of how to use evidence, including numerical reasoning skills, amongst politicians and staff. Adopting a more evidence-driven approach *“may mean a critical self-appraisal of their own comfort”* for senior managers in engaging with this, and it was suggested that SOLACE should offer training and mentoring for chief executives on analysis and use of evidence.

ENDNOTES

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6. <http://www.lgcpplus.com/briefings/cuts-call-for-total-transformation/5051660.article?blocktitle=Views-from-the-panel&contentID=2341> (subscription access only)
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