



Supporting Evidence for Local Delivery
National Research and Evaluation – Key Findings



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Summary and recommendations

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 partnerships¹.

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

¹ 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*.

- 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

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 About SELD: Supporting Evidence for Local Delivery

SELD (Supporting Evidence for Local Delivery) was introduced as a pilot by the Department in 2005 to **promote better use of data, research and evidence in neighbourhood renewal** through technical assistance to local partnerships, with an evolving role in relation to Local Area Agreements (LAAs).

Improved use of evidence has been seen as crucial to bringing about changes in mainstream policies and joined-up working required for achievement of 'closing the gap' outcomes in neighbourhood renewal. National investment in the Neighbourhood Statistics service has improved access to quality data at neighbourhood level, while SELD sought to complement this by providing support in *converting data into evidence*.

Without better data and skills in analysis, interpretation and decision-making, interventions may be poorly targeted and co-ordinated, mistakes may be repeated, and little impact may result. The rationale for SELD rested on successive research and evaluation projects for the Department which highlighted challenges faced by partnerships in making better use of evidence to 'close the gap' on floor targets for deprived communities. The findings highlighted weaknesses in:

- skills in data collection and analysis²
- strategic coherence, with over 30 per cent of Community Strategies failing to present sufficient evidence to justify priorities and plans³
- evaluation, with approaches typically lacking robust baselines, shared theories of change, and effective systems for tracking neighbourhood change and measuring outcomes⁴

SELD involved projects in four regions (North East, North West – Lancashire, South West and West Midlands), testing needs and demand in different settings over 15 months⁵. All regions were provided with information and expert advice, workshops and seminars, and tailored support for Local Strategic Partnerships and neighbourhood renewal partnerships. It was also aimed at supporting neighbourhood renewal staff in Government Offices for the Regions (GOs) and help the Department learn more about critical issues when making good use of evidence in practice.

² European Institute for Urban Affairs & others (2006), *National Evaluation of Local Strategic Partnerships: Formative Evaluation and Action Research Programme 2002–2005 – Final Report*, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. www.communities.gov.uk/localgovernment/localregional/localcommunity/localstrategicpartnerships/

³ Wells & Goudie (2005), *Process Evaluation of Plan Rationalisation – Formative Evaluation of Community Strategies: Review of Community Strategies*, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. www.communities.gov.uk/publications/localgovernment/processevaluation

⁴ Johnstone & others (2005), *Seeking the Lessons: Skills and Knowledge Programme Evaluation (NRU Research Report 19)*, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. www.neighbourhood.gov.uk/publications.asp?did=1679

⁵ RegenWM were contracted by ODPM to provide a continuation service from August 2006 to March 2007. This was not covered by this evaluation. Follow-on activities have also been supported in the North West and South West regions.

Research and evaluation project

The national research and evaluation project was designed to:

- inform how the Department can best work with others in improving the availability and use of evidence
- identify action needed to address supply and demand issues relating to analytical skills
- help maximise the learning from the SELD programme
- make recommendations to further the evidence-related agenda

It ran alongside the pilots and comprised a *formative* element reporting on and informing programme delivery, with a *summative* element assessing the quality and impact of the pilots and the programme as a whole. The research was informed by an evaluation model incorporating a “logic chain” connecting factors affecting whether or not a practitioner would decide to use a SELD service through – directly or indirectly – to organisational changes and improved community outcomes. The model took into account not only service quality factors but also influences on the likelihood of information and learning gained from the SELD service being applied successfully. These included the ability of individuals to absorb new knowledge and whether organisational cultures are conducive to learning and evidence-based practice.

Tasks included an online survey of SELD users⁶, telephone interviews with assignment clients, interviews with regional and national stakeholders, and review of project management information. Learning was captured through a review of materials developed by the pilots and four national workshops⁷.

1.2 Analytical skills for neighbourhood renewal

At the heart of improving use of evidence are issues relating to the adequacy and sufficiency of analytical skills – those skills, knowledge and behaviours which are needed for effective performance, encompassing data gathering and interpretation, qualitative and quantitative research, data analysis, monitoring and evaluation – and the use of evidence in decision-making. In varying combinations and to varying degrees, such skills are relevant to many working in neighbourhood renewal, not just people in research, analysis or performance management roles. These core skills include:

- identifying sources of evidence and understanding their validity, relevance and limitations
- understanding uses and abuses of statistics
- applying evidence in decision making throughout the strategic management cycle, i.e. in reviewing needs and priorities, assessing options, agreeing strategies and actions

⁶ 85 SELD users – response rate 19 per cent

⁷ These brought together experienced practitioners, SELD contractors and external contributors on the topics of Turning Evidence into Strategy; Data Analysis; Target Setting and Trajectory Analysis; and Evidence and Faith Communities.

- using evidence in a partnership setting to challenge performance and seek better ways of delivering services

Building on the pilots' experience, survey work was designed to clarify the existence, nature and extent of analytical **skill shortages** (reflected in recruitment and retention difficulties experienced by local partnerships/organisations) and **skill gaps** (where the type and level of existing skills undermine or constrain performance). This was undertaken through online surveys of partnership chief executives and managers⁸, and through qualitative fieldwork three non-SELD regions⁹.

The research also considered:

- analytical capacity, the capabilities and resources required to support effective use of evidence in the delivery of neighbourhood renewal (people, skills, knowledge base, budgets, systems, processes) and how partners manage these resources
- practitioner needs and preferences for external support (i.e. from consultants and universities) and the quality of this support.¹⁰

⁸ Responses from 73 LSP/NDC/NM chief executives and managers (47 per cent response rate); 211 practitioners (13.5 per cent response rate) drawn from a population of Neighbourhood Statistics and Renewal.net registered users in neighbourhood renewal areas, ie, those eligible for Neighbourhood Renewal Fund and the neighbourhood Renewal Element of the Stronger and Safer Communities Fund. In all, the survey and fieldwork covered 59 per cent of NRF LSPs.

⁹ 28 interviewees across neighbourhood renewal themes and relevant job functions.

¹⁰ 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*.

Chapter 2: Delivering SELD

2.1 SELD services

Each pilot provided a mix of reactive and proactive services, free of charge to users:

- a responsive advice and information service (i.e. on analytical and technical questions; signposting to data sources)
- undertaking tailored assignments
- organising learning events and encouraging the sharing of skills and knowledge about gathering and using evidence
- identifying and disseminating good practice
- building networks with related bodies (such as Neighbourhood Statistics, Regional Observatories and local information systems¹¹)

In offering this package of support, SELD has been innovative, there being few comparable services relating to data/evidence for neighbourhood renewal and regeneration elsewhere¹². The pilots worked in conjunction with other forms of delivery support funded by the Department, including Neighbourhood Renewal Advisers and performance improvement specialists within Government Offices.

2.2 Delivery arrangements and programme management

2.2.1 Project design principles and contractors

Informed by a consultation stage¹³, the Department developed the SELD model based on:

- contracting with 'practice-focused consultants' rather than academic bodies
- team-based delivery, drawing on varied expertise *across* neighbourhood renewal themes within and outside contractor organisations
- regional operation: close to partnerships yet drawing on specialist regional resources, with a key working relationship with Government Offices

¹¹ Regional Observatories have been set up by RDAs and regional partners to enable access to key regional data and intelligence, while 'local information systems' mirror this role at a local or sub-regional level. P Foley et al (2007) *Local Information Systems: A review of their role, characteristics and benefits* Department of Communities and Local Government www.communities.gov.uk/publications/communities/localinformationsystems

¹² The closest parallels – though not dedicated to neighbourhood renewal – within the UK are the Regional Public Health Observatories, the Local Government Data Unit in Wales and the Performance Hub for the voluntary and community sector.

¹³ York Consulting (2004), *Supporting Evidence for Local Delivery: preliminary stage*, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister www.neighbourhood.gov.uk/publications.asp?did=1515

Four slightly different delivery models were commissioned, with each pilot asked to major on a specific aspect of neighbourhood renewal. The Department contracted with:

- ERS (consultants) in the North East – evaluation focus
- CLES (membership organisation/regeneration consultancy) in the North West (Lancashire sub-region)¹⁴ – community cohesion and diversity
- Creating Excellence (Regional Centre for Excellence - RCE) and the South West Regional Observatory – liveability and rural exclusion
- RegenWM (the RCE) and Mott MacDonald (consultants) in the West Midlands – performance analysis

2.2.2 Programme management

The SELD programme was managed by a Senior Research Officer within the the Department's Neighbourhood Intelligence team. A Regional Advisory Group was formed in each region, chaired by the Government Office, to provide support and contacts.

Programme management was relatively demanding of staff time, partly due to ensuring that pilot outputs met Departmental standards. Lower than expected take-up of enquiry and assignment services necessitated more direction from the centre to maximise the value of SELD and contracts were extended three months to the end of July 2006. In January 2006, the Department requested the pilots to focus on several priorities: development of advice notes on LAA indicators, identifying good practice in data sharing and in harnessing neighbourhood level data, and testing out approaches to 'evidence stocktakes' to help partnerships.

The programme budget of £600,000 included the national research and evaluation project as well as the four pilots. Resources allowed for the equivalent of roughly 1.5 members of staff in each pilot to provide the SELD service. The nature of the contract, open-ended with regard to outputs and subject to detailed programme management, caused some tensions and the contractors needed to devote more resources than agreed in their contracts.

2.3 Delivery of SELD services

2.3.1 Enquiries and assignments

Enquiries ran at just under 8 per month and averaged 2.3 per neighbourhood renewal partnership¹⁵ in the pilot areas. Pilots responded to a variety of types of enquiries:

¹⁴ The North West pilot was confined to Lancashire, to test out the relevance of SELD at sub-regional level in an area with both unitary and two-tier local authorities.

¹⁵ ie, NRF LSPs, NDCs and Neighbourhood Management Pathfinders. Community Empowerment Networks were only targeted in the West Midlands initially, and not subsequently pursued given little evidence of interest.

- direct provision of information or advice
- signposting to other contacts at regional or national level, their SELD regional website or other sources on the Internet
- desk and web-based research and follow-up contacts by telephone
- further discussion to scope work for a tailored assignment

Examples of SELD Enquiries

- How should I approach a community survey to explore resident views and perceptions on policing and community safety?
- Where can we find examples of data sharing protocols?
- How are liveability targets measured?
- Can you point us to local data about migrant workers?
- Can you give me advice on calculating trajectories?
- My partnership's area doesn't follow ward boundaries. How can I obtain data specific to my area?
- How can I attribute successes where there are several interventions, each of which may have had a bearing on results?

The pilots carried out 41 assignments, for 21 of the 51 neighbourhood renewal partnerships in the four pilot areas. **Worklessness** and **Health** were the main neighbourhood renewal themes addressed, though nearly half were partnership-wide in scope. Nearly two thirds were for LSPs, and tended to be more concerned with sourcing/interpreting data than applying techniques. Several were similar in content to work that might be undertaken by Neighbourhood Renewal Advisers¹⁶. Most were commissioned by partnership managers, and many involved in some way bringing partner organisations together.

The majority of assignments required the pilots to clarify the precise nature of the user needs and capability, and led to a range of inputs by SELD pilots including:

- identifying and reviewing data sources
- advising on survey and statistical techniques
- describing methods for analysing trends and trajectories
- brokering relationships between analysts, partnership managers and key decision-makers within and across organisations
- facilitating partner sessions to review evidence to identify gaps, clarify interpretations and agree course of actions

The level of demand for enquiries and assignments was not as high as expectations based on the consultation in 2004¹⁷. Overall, the pattern of enquiries and assignments reflected:

¹⁶ Johnstone & others (2005), *Seeking the Lessons: Skills and Knowledge Programme Evaluation (NRU Research Report 19)* Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. www.neighbourhood.gov.uk/publications.asp?did=1679

¹⁷ York Consulting (2004), *Supporting Evidence for Local Delivery: preliminary stage*, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. www.neighbourhood.gov.uk/publications.asp?did=1515

- practical measurement issues facing LSPs/NDCs/NMPs
- pressures on LSPs to demonstrate the use of evidence in their performance management and frustration that they can't (or find it difficult to) access helpful data
- differences in user experience and access to local data/analytical resources

Table 1 Example of SELD Assignments		
Need	SELD support	Benefits/outcomes for the partnership
Neighbourhood Management Pathfinder A		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • inadequate baselines • difficulties in accessing partner data; LSP unable to assist and NMP understaffed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reviewed existing data and data requirements • helped open doors amongst partner organisations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • contributed to building analytical capacity within the NMP
LSP B		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • support for Floor Target Action Planning (FTAP), especially on worklessness data 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • stocktake of evidence, investigating, eg, skills mismatches and Incapacity Benefits • workshops challenged participants to consider how far hunches were backed by evidence • considered trends & plausibility of interventions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • well-facilitated process • partners forthcoming with data which had not previously been used • clarified actions needed • provided contacts & examples of what others have done
LSP C		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • need to strengthen performance management, eg, in setting robust performance targets 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • presentation/Q&A session • advice/examples of trajectory analysis for FTAP • produced sample trajectories and a template for future use 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • more realistic targets • greater awareness of the potential of trajectories
Neighbourhood Management Pathfinder D (for LAA)		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • outline a common, county-wide approach to how the partners should measure and monitor outcomes relating to Stronger and Safer Communities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • advice on how best to build on existing indicators and systems, including the survey scale required for robust findings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • clarification of options • recognition of need for greater voluntary & community sector outcomes across the LAA

2.3.2 Learning events

The SELD pilots organised 26 half or full day events, of which 12 were in the West Midlands. These drew 664 attendances, accounted for by around 500 people from over 250 organisations. Average attendance was 25, although lower in the West Midlands, where many workshops were technical (limited to around 15), and higher in the South West, where seminars averaged 46. Several events explicitly had equality and diversity themes. To varying extents the contractors engaged other bodies with

an interest in promoting better use of evidence, most notably in involving presenters from Regional Observatories, Neighbourhood Statistics and government departments.

Table 2 Examples of SELD Events

Topic	Objective	Content
Evaluation	Improve understanding of evaluation and illustrate best practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> basics of why, what and when to evaluate good practice in commissioning and undertaking evaluation NDC and NM examples
Diversity and employment	Review data and evidence on employment and BME groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> evidence base – national and local key issues related to BME employment and neighbourhood renewal innovative case studies informed by evidence
Liveability: targets, tracking and monitoring	Review how to measure 'liveability', select indicators and set targets	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> policy context & sources of liveability indicators case studies good practice on indicators and targets
Evidence for LEGI bidders	Improve understanding and use of enterprise and employment data sources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> LEGI indicators & target setting sources of evidence lessons from Round 1 LEGI bids
Education and Minority Ethnic Pupils	Source and interpret data/ evidence on education and BME groups, and use this to raise attainment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> case studies, eg, using indicators of pupils' social and economic background; hard and soft evidence of the benefits of partnerships between communities and mainstream schools tour of a City Academy

Participants valued event content, case studies, information sharing and networking opportunities, and the signposting of websites and sources of data. There were a few concerns relating to the pitch of content, the amount of discussion time, and depth on technical topics. SELD contractors found participants to have a wide range of starting points in ability, prior knowledge and current evidence-based practice.

Feedback on the West Midlands events was markedly positive, reflecting the extent to which participants were able to address practical problems around particular neighbourhood renewal themes including hands-on computer-based opportunities to work on practical examples in using data, explore relevant websites like Neighbourhood Statistics, Data4NR and ORRION¹⁸, and play with tools including a trajectories template and a sample size calculator on the web.

¹⁸ Neighbourhood Statistics: www.neighbourhood.gov.uk; data4nr www.data4nr.org – website developed for the NRU to signpost useful datasets for neighbourhood renewal purposes; ORRION (Online Race Resource for Improving Outcomes in Neighbourhoods) www.renewal.net/toolkits/OrrionToolkit/

2.3.3 Case studies and briefing materials

The SELD pilots produced 11 case studies and 36 evidence-related materials, a mix of briefings, FAQs and web-based signposts¹⁹. Examples of case studies include:

- Newcastle Neighbourhood Renewal Information Service – support for performance management and a cross-theme Vitality Index for tracking neighbourhood change
- Targeting Education Resources in Hartlepool – analysis to determine a formula for allocating Neighbourhood Renewal Fund
- Bristol – ‘State of the Neighbourhoods’ database and household survey
- Birmingham Small Area Data Working Group – cross-partner access to data for LAA performance management
- Blackburn with Darwen – reducing smoking amongst teenage mothers

FAQs produced by SELD West Midlands tackled issues known to be thorny problems for partnerships, such as non-coterminous boundaries, attributing success to particular interventions, and replicating case study ‘good practice’. The other pilots produced online briefings on topics such as evaluation, local data systems and data sharing, targets and trajectories, and presenting evidence, in several cases drawing directly on assignments they had carried out.

2.4 User satisfaction and future interest in SELD services

The SELD user survey²⁰ found reasonable levels of satisfaction:

- nearly half rated SELD services towards the top of a five point scale: 5 per cent users ranked SELD at 5 (excellent), and 44 per cent gave a score of 4²¹
- 39 per cent were ‘confident’ or ‘very confident’ that SELD in their region would be able to meet their needs in seeking to make better use of evidence, and 54 per cent were ‘hopeful’
- 58 per cent users had recommended SELD to others²²

The response rate for the survey reflected a bias towards users who had taken part in SELD events, with 73 per cent respondents having attended SELD events. Of these, two thirds had attended one event only. Therefore, many users had had limited *experience* of SELD. This survey work was, however, complemented by telephone interviews with 14 assignment ‘clients’ which found mixed levels of satisfaction which ranged from “*SELD saved me*” (in the case of one Neighbourhood Manager)

¹⁹ Each pilot developed its own web presence for the duration of SELD

²⁰ There were 85 replies to the survey, a response rate of 19 per cent. 41 (48 per cent) were from the South West

²¹ The nearest equivalent comparative figures are 34 per cent and 47 per cent respectively for NRA assignments (assignments graded 4 or 5) and 9 per cent and 56 per cent for the Neighbourhood Renewal Delivery Skills (NRDS) programme (courses assessed as ‘excellent’ or ‘good’ in a post-course follow-up survey). This research was undertaken in 2004 for the NRU Skills and Knowledge Programme evaluation. It should be noted, however, that the NRA service had been running for two years and NRA assignments were typically longer, 5 days rather than 3 on average. The NRDS programme, while also a pilot, involved more intensive courses over three days.

²² Compared to 73 per cent for Renewal.net

to disappointment over the extent and timing of support (a case of mismatched expectations).

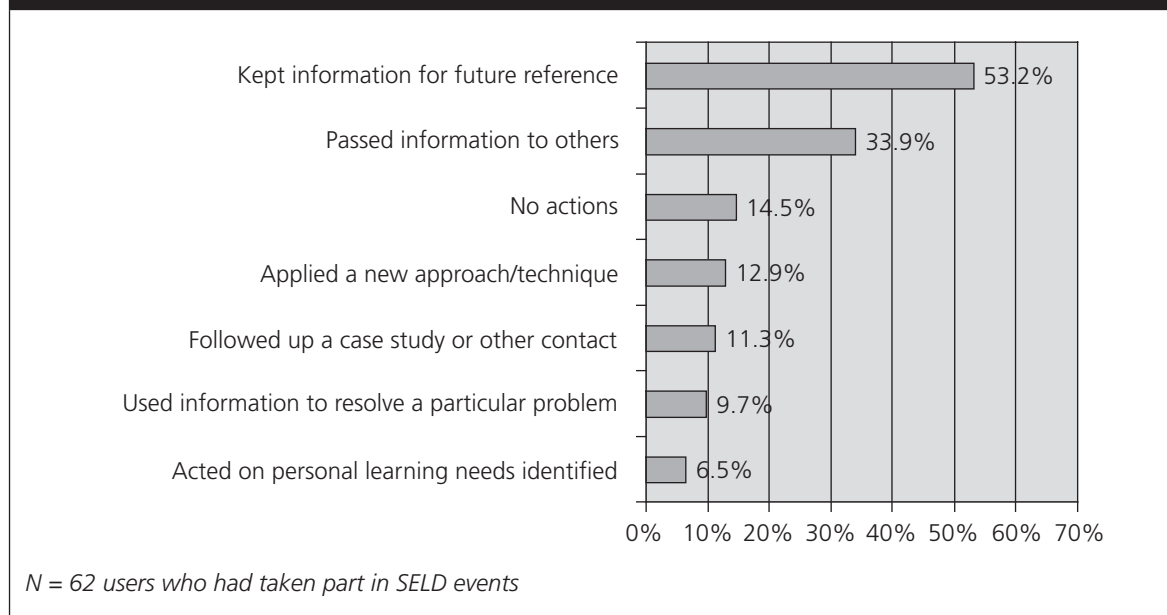
SELD users expressed interest in taking advantage of SELD-type services in the future. Preferences were for events (65 per cent), e-mail updates on data and research developments relevant to neighbourhood renewal (57 per cent), and web-based 'how-to' materials (45 per cent). There was lower interest in technical assignments, enquiry services and face-to-face advice.

2.5 Actions, benefits and impact

2.5.1 Actions taken by SELD users

The User Survey asked respondents to indicate the actions they had taken as a result of using SELD services and the benefits and results to which they could point (Figure 1). The most likely actions were to pass information on to others or to retain it for future use. Three in ten of the assignment clients had implemented SELD advice and a similar proportion of website users had followed links provided on the regional site. However, very few SELD users had followed up a case study or other contact, the highest proportion being amongst users who had attended events.

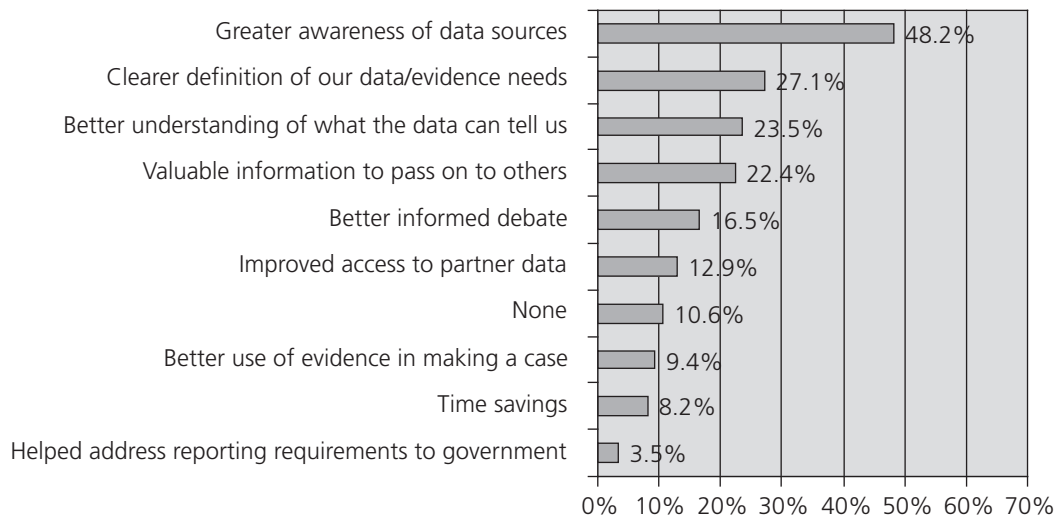
Figure 1 Actions taken by SELD event participants



2.5.2 Benefits and impact

The most frequently cited organisational or partnership benefit (Figure 2) was 'greater awareness of data sources' at 48 per cent. It was followed by 'clearer definition of our data/evidence needs' and 'better understanding of what the data can tell us'.

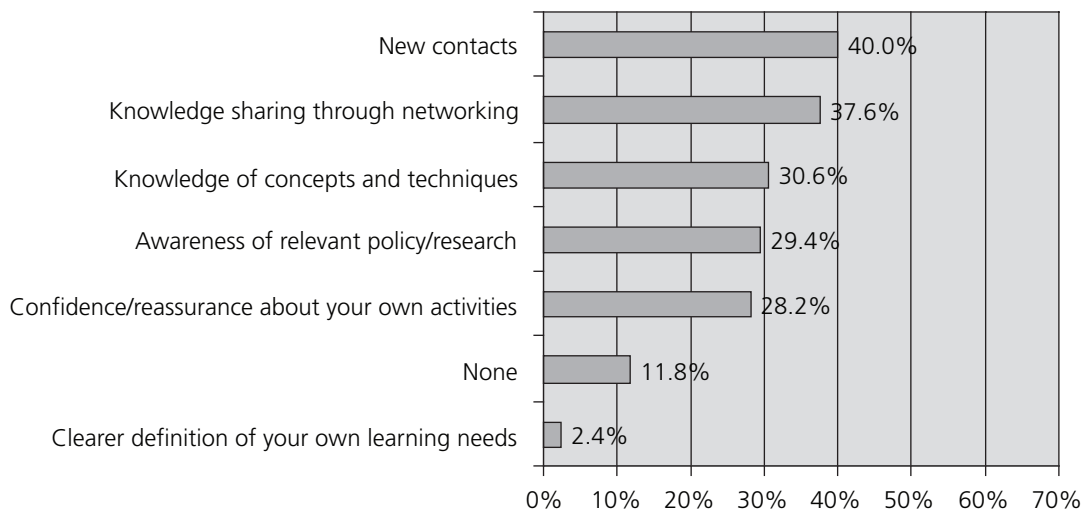
Figure 2 Main partnership/organisational benefits



N = 85 users. Respondents were asked to identify up to four main partnership/organisational benefits of their use of SELD

Reflecting the proportion of respondents who had attended events, personal benefits tended to be of a networking type, with new contacts and knowledge sharing through networking cited most frequently. West Midlands respondents were more likely to report improved knowledge of concepts and techniques (60 per cent), greater awareness of relevant policy/research (50 per cent); and enhanced 'confidence/reassurance about your own activities' (40 per cent), reflecting the emphasis of SELD West Midlands on techniques and problem solving.

Figure 3 Main personal benefits



N = 85. Respondents were asked to identify up to four main personal benefits of their use of SELD

Just under 25 per cent respondents thought that they could identify specific improvements in their organisation/partnership as a direct or indirect consequence of SELD, and more than half of these considered that SELD had helped them make more strategic use of evidence. Relatively small numbers reported 'more robust plans', 'solution to a particular problem' and better performance management' (8 per cent each), and only 2 per cent cited 'improved service delivery'. The few respondents to give examples of improvements mentioned improved access to funding or better geographical targeting of resources. Overall, 58 per cent thought use of SELD was likely to help them achieve better outcomes for deprived communities, with a further 4 per cent thinking this 'very likely'.

Regarding the additionality of SELD, 29 per cent considered that they would have spent longer to obtain the same or poorer information, 21 per cent would have tried other routes without much confidence, 22 per cent would have proceeded with less evidence, while 26 per cent thought they would have found the same elsewhere²³.

2.6 SELD marketing

2.6.1 Approaches to SELD promotion

The pilots adopted a mix of approaches to promoting their services, typically with use of launch events, face-to-face meetings, telephone contacts, and attending regional and sub-regional meetings of potential users. SELD West Midland started with e-mails and cold calling to generate awareness, and followed by a consultative launch event.

Most notably, SELD West Midland recognised the need for 'market making' to generate demand for services. They stressed "*the need to identify both the evidence problem and the evidence solution*", and a need to avoid their services being too closely associated with performance reporting pressures on partnerships. The West Midlands approach benefited from RegenWM having an established reputation (being the longest running RCE), the SELD service being a natural extension of its activities, and from their partnership with consultants, Mott Macdonald, who brought additional expertise in data analysis grounded in previous neighbourhood renewal projects for the Government Office.

2.6.2 Obstacles to adopting SELD

The biggest obstacle to adopting SELD services amongst users was time, cited by just under half of respondents. Nearly a third felt that they had limited awareness of SELD services, with smaller proportions doubting the quality of service on offer or preferring other sources²⁴.

SELD pilots and other stakeholders identified a range of other barriers to the take-up of services:

- users may not recognise that they have needs and/or feel reluctant to admit what they see as a weakness, or fear getting 'a sore head' in dealing with data

²³ These percentages are similar to the Renewal.net survey, with the exception of 'Spent longer to obtain the same or poorer information' (higher at 49 per cent)

²⁴ These proportions are broadly similar to responses to a survey of Renewal.net users in 2004. www.neighbourhood.gov.uk/page.asp?id=7

- ‘gatekeepers’ may not pass on information about SELD to relevant colleagues
- needs are often ad hoc and immediate, accompanied by little time to find answers and a tendency to seek assistance from existing contacts even if they are not experts
- confusion about what SELD could offer that was different to other existing sources of information and advice (i.e. from Regional Observatories)

The experience of SELD marketing²⁵ highlights the importance of:

- establishing user confidence and fostering ‘word of mouth’ recommendations
- offering practical solutions to problems faced
- sourcing advice from individuals with specialist data expertise in particular domains
- providing services which will help practitioners save time
- ensuring that what is offered is compelling for potential users

2.7 SELD programme added value

Our research sought to establish the extent to which the SELD Programme had contributed over and above the work of the individual pilots, through providing a ‘two way loop’ for the Department for publicity, dissemination and learning. The main gains have been:

- better appreciation within the Department of evidence-based practice and of the substantive challenges facing partnerships in:
 - dealing with deficiencies in small area data
 - bringing about the culture changes needed for improved performance through better use of evidence
- generation of useful materials for wider dissemination (through Renewal.net and other routes)
- helping LSPs more widely to access appropriate data sources for LAA target setting
- synergy in involving Neighbourhood Statistics, NOMIS, Regional Observatories and Regional Public Health Observatories in SELD events, helping them promote their services and develop their understanding of practitioner needs in neighbourhood renewal and LAAs

Overall, however, the added value of the programme did not completely achieve Departmental aspirations that “*very large quantities of new evidence will be unearthed on what takes place and methods and techniques*”²⁶. Many partnership needs served by the pilots were relatively mundane, and there were few innovative

²⁵ See also findings of the Skills and Knowledge Programme evaluation www.neighbourhood.gov.uk/page.asp?id=7

²⁶ NRU SELD Research and Evaluation project brief

assignments such as the development of trajectory templates²⁷ for LSPs in the West Midlands.

There were a few cases where issues common to partnerships were followed through at a regional or national level, the best example being when SELD North East led on the production of an advice note on data sources for LEGI (Local Enterprise Growth Initiative) bidders, with an associated regional event followed by others in the North West and South West. However, other critical matters relating to access to partner data or use of national datasets for neighbourhood target setting were not pursued through SELD (and have been taken up by the Department in other ways²⁸).

There was potential to do more in anticipating key issues for policy/practice and helping people consider/act on these, and to provide a platform for innovation. Promising ideas which could have added more value such as the 'evidence stocktake' concept were not followed through systematically.

Other than in the North West, where SELD concentrated on the Lancashire sub-region and worked closely with the Government Office area team, the work of the pilots was not well integrated with the work of GOs, nor were the roles of advisory groups at national and regional levels developed. Further benefits would have been dependent on a higher level of programme management, in excess of the staffing input available.

²⁷ These Excel-based tools allow users to review trends in performance data, with scope for sensitivity analysis, in order to test assumptions and the plausibility of planned interventions and options. This was developed for Floor Target Action Planning and is more widely applicable in LAA delivery planning.

²⁸ *National Indicators for Local Authorities and Local Authority Partnerships: Handbook of Definitions*, (2007), Communities and Local Government. www.communities.gov.uk/documents/localgovernment/pdf/543055

Chapter 3: Researching analytical skills and support

3.1 Approach to researching analytical skills and support

The analytical skills element of the project extended the scope of the research to all areas receiving neighbourhood renewal funding in England. It involved on-line surveys of (a) LSP, NDC and Neighbourhood Management Pathfinder managers and (b) practitioners, along with qualitative fieldwork in six LSP areas²⁹. It sought to give a better understanding of:

- what's driving or holding back partnerships in their use of evidence
- current actions, critical development needs and plans to address these
- the extent and consequences of skill gaps and shortages, and their consequences
- use of external advice and assistance on data and evidence

3.2 Factors affecting how partnerships approach evidence

The main factors driving better use of data and evidence in partnerships were LAA development, operationalising performance management, ascertaining what does work, service improvement priorities, and compliance with government requirements for performance information

The main hindrances were incompatible boundaries and partner methodologies, with associated data sharing obstacles. There were concerns about insufficient data on disadvantaged neighbourhoods and groups: despite improvements over the past five years, there are still persistent issues regarding the timeliness of publication of (some) national statistics and the consistency and availability of ethnicity data. There is a tendency to blame others such as particular agencies, for the barriers to more effective use and sharing of data. However, the constraints identified also point to learning and skills needs in partnerships.

3.3 Significance of analytical skill gaps and shortages

Responses to questions on skill gaps suggest that 40 per cent of partnership managers consider analytical skill gaps or shortages have hampered partnership

²⁹ The LSP areas were Bolsover, Hull, Lambeth, Lincoln, Sheffield and Tower Hamlets – all outside the SELD pilot regions. Registered users of Renewal.net and Neighbourhood Statistics provided the population for the practitioner survey.

performance, especially in relation to ‘closing the gap’. Furthermore, some fieldwork interviewees did not know what effect skill gaps were having and wondering what more might be achieved “*if we knew what could be*”.

Just over a third of partnerships have recruited staff to research, analyse or monitor roles in the past year, and over half now employ staff in such roles (typically either one or two people). The principal drivers for LSPs were performance management and reporting requirements rather than supporting service improvement which tends to remain within local authorities. NDC and NMP managers tend to have a stronger, direct interest, however, in research and analysis for improving delivery and ‘influencing the mainstream’.

Nearly a third of the partnerships which employ staff in these roles had experienced recruitment difficulties, primarily finding few experienced applicants, with some also reporting few applicants with an understanding of neighbourhood renewal and/or few with sufficient analytical/technical skills. Some comments indicated shortages of higher level research and statistical skills – though many recent appointments have been to posts which do not demand these.

3.4 Skill needs for partnerships and practitioners

There were 80 per cent of partnership managers who identified analytical skill needs within their partnership – most frequently, the related skills of challenging and interpreting data.

The practitioner survey revealed skill gaps among analysts and non-analysts relating to the use of statistical techniques with markedly larger skill gaps amongst non-analysts in relation to interpreting and presenting statistics, IT applications, research methods and encouraging others in the use of evidence. Questions exploring the extent of competence in particular skills suggest that expertise in statistical techniques, in IT applications and in selecting indicators and setting targets are in relatively short supply.

The research confirmed a tendency for partnerships to discover their learning and skill needs as they have gone along, most evident as partners prepared and negotiated LAAs.

It also appeared that better resourced, better performing areas want to dig deeper and explore what more advanced forms of analysis can provide, especially in their approach to evaluation and interest in multivariate techniques. LSPs such as Coventry and Tower Hamlets are taking a more systematic approach to analysis for commissioning, assessing ‘what works’, and what is worth mainstreaming. These partnerships see investment in data and analysis as the basis for better informed decisions and ensuring that partners move in the same direction.

This puts into perspective some of the disappointment that the SELD pilots had not been involved in more innovative work: if partnerships were not ready to develop in new analytical directions, then there was a constraint on what SELD was able to achieve.

3.5 Adequacy of sources of external advice and assistance

Over half interviewees consider that they can access the advice and assistance on data and evidence from *within* their partnership/organisation when they need it – though a further third considered that this was only sometimes the case.

Partnership managers were more likely than practitioners to have used external advice or assistance relating to data, research or analysis over the past year, including Neighbourhood Renewal Advisers (mentioned by 43 per cent), consultants (32 per cent), local observatories or similar data services (32 per cent), regional observatories and local universities (each below 20 per cent).

The topics for assistance were similar to those in the SELD pilot areas: **baselines**, indicators and targets, and identifying data sources, trends/trajectories, tracking neighbourhood change and performance evidence to meet government requirements. Few interviewees mentioned building capacity within the partnership as a primary purpose.

Nearly half of partnership managers had experienced difficulty in sourcing external advice and assistance, mainly in finding technical staff who understand the subject matter, including context across neighbourhood renewal themes. There were also reported difficulties in finding the right specialist sources. Internal factors also constrain the use of outside support, most commonly lack of time and lack of budget.

There is a preference for finding answers locally, though with acknowledgement that some needs are better met regionally or nationally. Many interviewees had made no use of the services of consultants or academics at all in the past year but those who had were reasonably happy with the quality of these services. However, substantial proportions of respondents recorded 'don't know' when asked about gaps in services or learning opportunities, confirming the marketing challenge faced by the SELD pilots.

Respondents showed interest in a range of SELD-type services, especially events, evidence health checks, e-mail up-dates on data and research developments and 'how to' materials/tips/techniques, in particular:

- guidance and tools for complex issues such as developing trajectories and measuring less tangible aspects of neighbourhood renewal i.e. the extent and value of community engagement
- materials which will save them time and avoid duplicating work

3.6 Addressing skill gaps and shortages

3.6.1 Skill gaps and implications

The research provides evidence of appreciable skill gaps which hamper delivery, and some awareness that these may be having more impact than realised. There are marked needs in at least one in three partnerships, and a range of skill gaps amongst practitioners.

Prominent needs identified within LSPs and neighbourhood partnerships included skills in interpreting data: knowing how to 'create a narrative', draw out policy conclusions, assess data and research quality, and use data in problem solving and decision-making.

Partnership managers and partnership members can have a need in *knowing what questions to ask* and what is possible in terms of data analysis (i.e. techniques and solutions to common problems like 'small numbers' which affect data reliability in looking at changes at neighbourhood level or amongst population groups) and ways of anonymising data to overcome confidentiality concerns when sharing data.

Skill gaps in statistical techniques also need to be addressed, as a relatively low proportion of practitioners have advanced skills in these or the ability to coach others. Related dimensions include quantitative and qualitative research methods, more sophisticated use of datasets, assessing policy impact, and the contribution of individual interventions to outcomes.

Responding to skill gaps

Our analysis points to the importance of 'home-grown' solutions within partnerships to feature:

- making better use of local research and analytical resources
- integrating research and analysis into performance management and strategy (as illustrated by the Greater Manchester Against Crime model – GMAC³⁰)
- promoting cross-theme analysis, to develop deeper, shared understanding of neighbourhood renewal processes and outcomes
- developing further the contribution of Local Information Systems³¹, linking on-line access to data with technical support and advice and work priorities
- making the business case in the context of driving performance improvement

There is a lack of common standards relating to analytical skills and practices in neighbourhood renewal³² and thus no accepted benchmarks against which to judge whether organisations or individuals have the right competencies. Standards (such as those developed by SEMTA³³ and Professional Skills for Government – Cabinet

³⁰ www.gmac.org.uk. See also Renewal.net case study on 'Data Sharing and Wigan and Leigh Community Safety Partnership' www.renewal.net

³¹ P Foley et al (2007), *Local Information Systems: A review of their role, characteristics and benefits*, Communities and Local Government www.communities.gov.uk/publications/communities/localinformationsystems

³² Percy-Smith & Darlow (2005), *Knowledge is Power: the need for effective research in local government*, LGA. www.lga.gov.uk/Publication.asp?lsection=0&ccat=28&id=SX8CDD-A782F372

³³ SEMTA, the Sector Skills Council for Science, Engineering and Manufacturing, www.semta.org.uk Professional Skills for Government <http://psg.civilservice.gov.uk/>

Office) can help clarify job requirements when recruiting staff and provide a basis for identifying learning and development needs.

The provision of learning opportunities on analytical skills across the regions is very patchy and not well developed in relation to neighbourhood renewal and LAA needs. Opportunities to address this might involve by developing a regional focus through collaboration between the Regional Improvement and Efficiency Partnerships³⁴, Regional Centres for Excellence, Regional Observatories and Regional Public Health Observatories.

3.6.2 Prospects of external advice and assistance meeting future demand

Nearly 80 per cent of partnerships have no budget for research, monitoring or evaluation although some LSP needs are met by local authorities. Our survey suggests that partnerships have, at best, modest plans to increase resources for data, research and analysis. Partnerships will not commission more external work unless they see strong reasons to do so, emerging from greater appreciation of performance improvement benefits and/or financial incentives.

Should this situation change, there could be concerns about the supply-side response. Expertise on statistical techniques and sophisticated use of datasets tends to reside in universities, and heavy demand for these services, especially combining subject knowledge, would be difficult to satisfy. Furthermore, if a significant increase in demand for consultancy emerges, a likely consequence is 'poaching' analysts currently employed in client organisations, further depleting the skills base of partnerships.

³⁴ REIPs are assuming a significant role in support of LAAs as part of the overall implementation of the Local Government White Paper

Chapter 4: Conclusions and recommendations

4.1 Addressing needs on the ground

The experience of the pilots in delivering SELD and the findings of the research and evaluation project has confirmed the case for SELD-type services while highlighting problems in delivery as originally configured. The SELD pilots had some success in raising awareness and capacity, especially in comparison to non-pilot regions where few similar activities have been pursued in relation to neighbourhood renewal and LAAs. There is limited evidence that SELD met a primary Departmental objective of *“driving up the quality of local evidence work”*³⁵. The evaluation findings and policy developments point to further action in promoting SELD’s agenda but not necessarily to fully replicate the SELD programme.

The picture of needs is intrinsically linked to partnership culture and priorities and to the way that central government has sought to raise performance. Performance improvement culture is not yet the norm despite their emphasis in departmental policy. Further, many LSPs are under-resourced to lead performance improvement through a core ‘delivery driver’ function.

We found that 40 per cent of partnership managers considered that analytical skill gaps or shortages hampered partnership performance. This was backed up by responses to the practitioner survey. *“We don’t know what we don’t know”* was a constant refrain amongst interviewees and survey respondents. There can be a tendency for those not trained as analysts to be hesitant about data and unsure how to transform it into usable evidence. They recognise that local problems and needs are inter-connected but may not be sure about where to start in addressing a particular problem, such as assessing the impact of interventions on floor targets. Practitioners can be consumed with an overwhelming sense of complexity and lack familiarity with the tools to make analysis and decision-making more manageable.

Managers and support staff in LSPs and thematic partnerships work towards complex and rapidly changing agenda which can work against the combination of reflective thought and action, characteristic of an evidence-based culture, and lead to ‘lowest common denominator’ solutions which reduce partnership added value.

The challenge is more vast than can be addressed by one solution. Concerted action is needed at local, regional and national levels through a combination of incentive, service development and better use of existing resources.

³⁵ NRU SELD Research and Evaluation brief

4.2 Developing context for LAA performance management and capacity building

There is a need for a renewed vision of how best to encourage and support the development of evidence-based approaches in LSPs/LAAs and neighbourhood renewal partnerships, in the context of the Local Government White Paper 2006. It stresses that *"the next stage of public service reform has to be driven from below if improvements are to continue and local needs and aspirations are to be met"*, and sets out a number of proposals which will shape future actions:

- a new performance framework (from April 2009), covering all outcomes sought by local authorities working alone or in partnership with others, and backed up by a new inspection regime, Comprehensive Area Assessment, which requires them and their partners to focus more on evidence needed to assess *risks* in achieving outcome targets
- the development of the National Improvement and Efficiency Strategy by the LGA, IDeA and the Department, with Regional Improvement and Efficiency Partnerships filling a key role in determining needs/priorities and allocating resources for improvement support.
- a duty on the local authority and named partners to co-operate with each other to agree targets in the LAA, and ensuring that partner plans have 'due regard' to the Sustainable Community Strategy
- a further emphasis on evidence-based commissioning
- a revised Best Value duty for community participation in improving service delivery, which will require better intelligence and effective communication of data and research findings in ways which engage local people
- an expectation that partners will maximise opportunities for raising efficiency provided by LAAs such as sharing resources and skills, sharing services, capitalising on IT and making use of business improvement techniques
- a Departmental commitment to work with local authorities to encourage 'real time performance information' and proposals for further support for the development of local information systems

The Department intends to ensure that there is capacity for early intervention where LAAs are struggling to deliver agreed outcomes for local people. Government Offices are expected to develop closer relationships with 'priority places', oversee LAA performance, co-ordinate improvement actions and monitor their implementation. Good quality local evidence will be essential in these tasks.

Further impetus to new arrangements for research and analysis may be expected from new duties to prepare strategic assessments for health and care (introduced by the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007) and for economic development (proposed in the Sub-National Economic Development and Regeneration Review³⁶), along with the introduction of Multi-Area Agreements and

³⁶ HM Treasury (2007), *Sub-National Economic Development and Regeneration Review* www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/spending_review/spend_csr07/reviews/subnational_econ_review.cfm

reforms in two tier areas involving new unitary authorities and integrated service delivery and back office functions.

4.3 Action at local, regional and national levels

4.3.1 Local action

Ultimately, what happens at local level counts most – where better use of evidence brings about real improvements in community well-being. The priority is to improve leadership and commitment, systems, skills and structures to ensure better use of evidence. This requires:

- partnership leaders to ensure that the conditions for performance improvement are in place such that –
- the use of evidence is valued
- research, analysis and evaluation are integrated with performance management and strategy work, and are adequately resourced
- the partnership is governed in such way that partners have the space and confidence to challenge evidence in pursuit of better outcomes:
 - leadership at many levels within partnerships: analysts developing information sharing and knowledge management task groups, and working to ensure that what they produce is valued by the decision-makers they serve
- inclusion of analytical skills when reviewing skill needs within partnerships and how best to develop these, especially skills in data interpretation and challenge which lie at the heart of performance improvement
- attention to needs within the voluntary and community sector as well as in partner agencies: confident engagement and willingness to challenge mainstream partners stems from basic understanding, as well as accessing data for bidding purposes

4.3.2 Regional action

Leadership at the regional level is also essential in promoting better use of evidence. Devolved responsibilities for LAA performance management and support place key roles on Regional Improvement and Efficiency Partnerships (RIEPs) and Government Offices (GOs). Together they can influence the extent to which LAA partners are seeking to make better use of evidence, help partners clarify their development needs and signpost good and promising practice within their regions and beyond.

- The Regional Improvement and Efficiency Partnerships will be key in following through the SELD agenda, region by region. It is essential for the Department to engage with RIEPs, discussing the implications of this research in developing their plans for 2008–09 and beyond³⁷. There is a crucial need to consider how best to improve evidence use and the promote the analytical skills critical to successful delivery of the new performance framework and LAAs.

³⁷ Guidance on the Regional Improvement Plans from 2008 onwards is to be produced as part of the implementation plan for the Local Government White Paper.

RIEPs have not yet identified work in this area as a priority, though it is relatively early days in their development and their focus has been more on local authorities than on LSPs and LAAs. While plans are to be 'demand-led', there will continue to be a need to influence and anticipate future requirements for analytical skills, reflecting SELD West Midlands thinking on 'market making' (see 2.6.1 above). 'Tell us what you want' is a slow vehicle for promoting culture change.

Under the new arrangements it is essential to ensure that needs of NDC and Neighbourhood Management Pathfinder partnerships continue to be served.

- Regional Improvement Plans need to consider both user needs and the supply of analytical support (events, networks, information services, etc) within their region. The plans will provide an opportunity to bring LAA partners together with the Regional Centres of Excellence for Sustainable Communities, Regional Observatories and Regional Public Health Observatories which share complementary (and potentially overlapping) roles. Requirements for strategic needs assessments in health and social care and in economic development will strengthen this imperative.
- Collaboration in preparation of regional plans should also prompt joining up of research at regional level. SELD national workshops highlighted significant needs for this, especially on priorities such as faith communities and migrant workers. There is also scope for regional research on trends, trajectories and scenarios to assist LAA partners with forecasting and performance management on areas such as worklessness, to provide common context and comparisons.
- Where there is a need for specific interventions to assist underperforming partnerships or where there is potential for pathbreaking work to push the boundaries of current practice, provision may be supported through peer-based assignments or call-down contracts with consultancies, academic bodies or Neighbourhood Renewal Advisers.
- RIEPs and their regional partners could usefully explore the potential for events on evidence-related topics, given evidence of demand shown by the SELD pilots and the analytical skills surveys. This should include attention to:
 - the particular needs of 'change agents' who are trying to promote better use of evidence and performance improvement cultures within their partnerships
 - the potential benefits of promoting cross-theme and cross-disciplinary learning
 - the desirability of bringing data analysts and managers/practitioners together wherever possible, to improve communications and understanding. The SELD West Midlands approach to evidence problem-solving workshops offers a useful model.
- In some regions there may be interest amongst analysts in networking (as supported for public health analysts by some Regional Public Health Observatories). This is potentially valuable provided these have well-managed agendas, closely linked to policy requirements and seeking not solely to share but also to 'grow' knowledge in priority areas.
- Although from the experience of SELD and the analytical skills survey there is limited evidence of demand for enquiry services, it will still be relevant for

regional plans to consider access to expert information and advice, drawing on regional resources. Having one place to go for such support, where this cannot be met locally, was appreciated by SELD users and fieldwork interviewees. The role needs to be highly user-focused: very practical, reducing complexity and with authoritative answers. The function could be the responsibility of a lead regional body on data/evidence for LAAs, neighbourhood renewal and social exclusion, which might vary by region³⁸.

- Government Offices should consider what more they can do to foster evidence-based cultures and join up regional resources relating to data, evidence, learning and performance improvement. This relates to LAA performance management, including ensuring that systems and capacity are adequate, challenging LAA performance and signposting sources of information, examples of good and promising practice.

GOs have a strong interest in developing their own analytical capacity in relation individual skills and internal knowledge management needed for their revised role in regional governance³⁹. They already have some specialist analytical resources (i.e. on crime reduction) which are part of wider technical support available at regional level. The stationing of ONS staff in regions, a recommendation of the Allsopp Review of Review of Statistics for Economic Policymaking⁴⁰, is a further spur to joining up evidence resources and functions at regional level.

4.3.3 National action

The experience of delivering and evaluating SELD has highlighted the disjointed nature at national level of activities which seek to promote better use of data/evidence for neighbourhood renewal and LAAs⁴¹, reflecting the overlapping interests and priorities of a range of organisations. What is striking is that these developments have largely been about improving access to data, and with the exceptions of SELD and ORRION, less about building capacity in the use of such data.

These developments have taken place in a context where central government has added to the complexity of local governance and performance management:

- in previous spending rounds, national PSA targets have been negotiated without consideration of how they can be translated into local targets using robust data sources, especially at neighbourhood level
- policy making (i.e. annual LSP performance reviews) has exhorted better use of evidence and made demands on local partnerships – without considering the implications, not least in dealing with inadequacies of existing data sources

³⁸ This recommendation reflects the varying priorities, interests and resources of these bodies, region by region.

³⁹ HM Treasury (2006), *Review of Government Offices*

www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/budget/budget_06/other_documents/bud_bud06_odgovt.cfm

This highlighted the need for enhanced analytical capacity within GOs. Many of the learning needs could be tackled collaboratively with LAA partners and regional bodies, to mutual benefit.

⁴⁰ See www.statistics.gov.uk/about/data/development/allsopp/presence.asp

⁴¹ This is illustrated by the ground covered, eg, by Audit Commission Area Profiles; Community Health Profiles (Association of Public Health Observatories); Neighbourhood Statistics (including the Indicator Development and Analytical Capacity Project); ORRION (Online Race Resource for Improving Outcomes in Neighbourhood Renewal); data4nr; Floor Targets Interactive; and SELD itself.

SELD has shed light on the nature of these issues, and the extent to which behaviour in many partnerships has been driven by compliance with government requirements, rather than wholeheartedly embracing an evidence-based approach to better outcomes. That said, improvements have been made during the lifetime of SELD, with the heavy investment in Neighbourhood Statistics bearing fruit (an increasing range of datasets available, and covering longer periods), the publication of Departmental guidance on small area data for setting worklessness targets at neighbourhood level, and SELD outputs such as the LAA advice notes.

The National Improvement and Efficiency Strategy

- ‘Better use of information’ needs to run through the National Improvement and Efficiency Strategy as a theme, in ways analogous to the ‘Informing Healthier Choices: Information and Intelligence for Healthy Populations’⁴² developed by the Department of Health.

This would involve national partners providing the leadership and co-ordination to ensure better access to information for practitioners and for local communities, *and* to build capacity to make better use of that information. The Strategy offers the opportunity to draw together the range of stakeholders, both users and organisations supporting better access to data and use of evidence. At national level, bodies like the LGA, the Audit Commission⁴³, IDeA and Performance Hub (the national ChangeUp hub on performance improvement in the voluntary sector) are relevant players.

Features of this element of the Strategy must include:

- putting the needs of users at the centre of plans, informed by an understanding of the practical challenges at local level in accessing, gathering and interpreting good quality data
- seeking synergy across:
 - parallel developments (i.e. Neighbourhood Statistics, Audit Commission Area Profiles) through technical developments such as interoperability and tools to help people take full advantage of available data
 - Departments which share an interest in data and analysis for LAAs, including Department of Health and the Home Office which are also developing analytical support measures
- building in incentives for local investment in analytical capacity and culture change
- focus on anticipating needs as well as responding to current, expressed needs, crucially in assessing the requirements of a reduced set of national targets as part of the new performance framework for local authorities/LAAs
- clarity about organisational roles and appropriate spatial levels for action, including the role of the national partners in setting minimum national expectations and requirements, and in equipping partnerships with models

⁴² Department of Health (2006), *Informing Healthier Choices: Information and Intelligence for Healthy Populations* www.dh.gov.uk/en/Policyandguidance/Organisationpolicy/Modernisation/Choosinghealth/DH_075162

⁴³ The Audit Commission’s current interests include the development of arrangements for Comprehensive Area Agreements and a national study on ‘Making better use of information to drive improvement in public services’

and techniques to improve performance, where this adds value over above the role of RIEPs

- In turn, the national strategy should shape the work of organisations supporting better use of evidence, just as the DH's strategy provides the context such as for the work of Public Health Observatories. This will require incentives for regional collaboration and for priority to be given to LAAs and neighbourhood renewal. Currently, regional bodies may be pulled in other directions. For instance, Regional Observatories and RCEs for sustainable communities are funded primarily by RDAs and can therefore be concerned more with other RDA priorities.

Action on skills supply

- There is a need to challenge national bodies with a direct interest in skills and professional training (the Academy for Sustainable Communities⁴⁴, 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
 - assessing the case for promoting appropriate quality standards in the form of occupational standards (i.e. public health and crime analysts) and/or research standards such as those promoted by the Government Social Research Office
 - ensuring that the role of leaders in fostering more effective use of evidence features in national leadership development programmes

Support for local analytical capacity

- National level leadership must consider how best to use policy levers to engender and support evidence-based practice at local level, taking a systems view of the influences (intended and unintended) over the extent to which evidence is developed and used effectively.

Reforms inherent in LAA policy mean that there is no longer scope for earmarked funding for analytical capacity: it is for local partners to determine local priorities and how to use their resources to best effect. The challenge for national and regional partners lies in identifying, developing and spreading effective practices, in ways which (a) encourage pioneering work and (b) help lagging areas to improve their performance significantly.

- Two funding opportunities should be promoted, however:
 - There are potential gains in brokering relationships between LAA partners and universities in ways which promote innovative research and use of analytical techniques. Targeted promotion of LARCI – the Local Authority Research Council Initiative⁴⁵ – in relation to LAAs and neighbourhood renewal provides an opportunity to increase such collaboration. LARCI enables access to academic researchers and to small grants for practice-oriented research.

⁴⁴ At the time of writing ASC are undertaking research into generic skills gaps, promoting academic research collaboration and sponsoring a range of learning programmes

⁴⁵ www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/research/larci/

- White Paper proposals for a shared services pathfinder focusing on research and analysis should be explored. These envisage a small number of collaborative projects to extend and spread best practice, aiming to standardise ‘business case’ evidence, develop benchmarking data, and test the scale and effectiveness of delivery models.

Providing tools and models

- Consideration of SELD dissemination led to action to consolidate SELD materials with related resources from the Neighbourhood Statistics Statistical Toolkit and ORRION through the Renewal.net website. However, to maximise their value, these need further promotion and signposting on-line or through organisations such as Regional Observatories and Government Offices)
- Despite the shift in responsibilities for improvement support towards REIPs, there will remain a need for some further development of materials at national level to fill current and emerging gaps, where there are efficiencies in national action and the potential to highlight nation-wide good practice. The box below sets out suggestions from the research and evaluation project:

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 targets⁴⁶
 - 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 worked 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

- The development of tools and case studies should consider the needs of both analysts/data users 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. Partnership managers in particular need

⁴⁶ *National Indicators for Local Authorities and Local Authority Partnerships: Handbook of Definitions*, (2007), Communities and Local Government. www.communities.gov.uk/documents/localgovernment/pdf/543055

greater awareness of the techniques that can be applied in addressing some of the key challenges to improving data use and analysis (i.e. anonymising data for research purposes, attributing effects of interventions and measuring qualitative impact).

- Our surveys on SELD and on analytical skills showed interest in e-mail updates on relevant research and data developments. There are already several, including those from Neighbourhood Statistics, Floor Targets Interactive and Data4NR which highlight additions and changes to datasets. There may be scope to rationalise these by providing information on developments which support putting evidence into practice: its content could include references to significant evaluations and developments in methods⁴⁷, and serve to publicise relevant policy and funding developments. Core information could be provided on a national basis, possibly distributed through REIPs with regionally-specific information added.

⁴⁷ Eg, as featuring in the ESRC Research Methods Programme www.ccsr.ac.uk/methods/