

Research and Information activity in Scottish Local Authorities

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In October 2006 the Improvement Service distributed a survey to those working in research and information in Scottish local authorities. This survey was conducted to provide a clearer understanding of the type of work undertaken by research and information staff in local government and explore how the Improvement Service can support the research community.

Key Findings

- Those involved in research and information work were involved in a range of activities, with more than half of respondents involved in 14 different activities
- All survey respondents were involved in disseminating information, 88% of respondents were involved in statistical analysis and 79% of respondents were involved in responding to consultations, performance information monitoring, developing information factsheets, and providing ad hoc information or research support
- Performance information monitoring was the most common activity undertaken by research and information staff, one of the three main activities undertaken for just over half of respondents, 51%
- 90.9% of respondent's teams were involved in quantitative data analysis with 78.8% involved in qualitative data analysis
- When asked about current research projects the majority of examples provided were evaluations or research into service user/ customer experiences and satisfaction
- 75% of respondents said their council used citizen or people's panels, though the format, content and approach of the various panels varied widely
- 84.6% of respondents said their team spent under £30k on commissioning research projects in 2005/06, implying that the majority of local authority research is conducted in-house
- Respondents were asked who exerts the most influence on the research agenda; 48.5% identified Council Services, 33.3% the Corporate Centre and 12.1% identified the Scottish Executive
- 44.1% of respondents have never received any form of research training, either from their council or an external body
- Of the 55.9% of respondents who had received some research training, the majority (66.6%) felt that overall the training they received was good or excellent.
- Key areas where further training would be appreciated included; questionnaire / survey design, general research techniques and methods, statistical techniques, evaluation and qualitative research
- 55.9% of respondents indicated that they are currently a member of a research network, either inside or outside their council
- Respondents were members of over 30 different networks, the Local Authorities Research and Intelligence Association (LARIA) was the most common response (mentioned by 7 respondents) and no other network was mentioned by more than 2 respondents

Research Approach and Methods

In October 2006 the Improvement Service distributed a survey to those working in research and information in Scottish local authorities. The survey defined those involved in the following activities as working in research and information:

primary research, secondary research, literature reviews, conducting literature searches, policy reviews, policy evaluation, development of research / analytical tools, consultation exercises, statistical analysis.

This survey was conducted to provide a clearer understanding of the type of work undertaken by research and information staff in local government and explore how the Improvement Service can support the research community.

The survey was distributed to 229 email addresses of those identified as working in research and information. Email addresses were identified by conducting a search of literature, council websites and existing contact lists. When the survey was distributed via email, 40 emails were returned as undeliverable or a response was received informing us that the respondent no longer worked in research or information. Of those who had been correctly identified as working in research or information 35 responses were received, a response rate of 19% (recipients were not asked to forward the survey to an appropriate colleague if it was not relevant to their current role). The response rate was not uniform throughout Scotland, for instance, responses from Dundee represent 14% of all responses and no information was received from 11 Councils.

Council	Responses	Percent
Aberdeen City	3	9%
Aberdeenshire	0	0%
Angus	2	6%
Argyll & Bute	1	3%
Clackmannanshire	1	3%
Comhairle nan Eilean Siar	1	3%
Dumfries and Galloway	1	3%
Dundee City	5	14%
East Ayrshire	0	0%
East Dunbartonshire	0	0%
East Lothian	1	3%
East Renfrewshire	1	3%
Edinburgh City	3	9%
Falkirk	1	3%
Fife	1	3%
Glasgow City	4	11%
Highland	1	3%
Inverclyde	0	0%
Midlothian	0	0%
Moray	3	9%
North Ayrshire	0	0%
North Lanarkshire	0	0%
Orkney Islands	1	3%
Perth & Kinross	2	6%
Renfrewshire	0	0%
Scottish Borders	0	0%
Shetland Islands	0	0%
South Ayrshire	0	0%
South Lanarkshire	1	3%
Stirling	1	3%
West Dunbartonshire	1	3%
West Lothian	0	0%
Total	35	100%

The relatively small response rate means that these results should be treated with some caution, and the results sometimes raise more questions than they answer. However, the results do give enough information to give a flavour of the type of work undertaken by research and information staff throughout Scottish local government, some of the support they could benefit from, and what the Improvement Service's role could be in supporting this community.

Respondents were from a range of departments, seven were from Chief Executive's offices, with others from a range of services (Planning and Transport, Corporate Services, Sustainable Communities, Service for Communities, Finance, Social Work, Infrastructure and Development, Cultural and Leisure Services, Economic Development, Policy & Improvement, Corporate & Commercial Services, Policy and Organisational Development Service, Housing, Environment, Strategic Leadership, Education and Children's Services).

Research and Information Staff

The survey results reveal that those involved in research and information work possess a wide range of job titles, illustrated in the table below. This highlights the difficulty involved in identifying all those in research and information activity and suggests that they may have difficulties seeing themselves as a professional group.

The range of job titles also implies that a wide range of research and information activity is conducted in local government. It also suggests that for some people, working in research and information is not their full-time job or main area of responsibility.

Job Titles
Research Officer
Planning Officer
Research & Information Officer
Research/Performance Officer
Research and Policy Officer
Research and Development
Assistant Finance Manager
Corporate Planning Officer
Senior Officer
Information Coordinator
Assistant Policy Development and Performance Officer
Information Officer
Consultant (Performance Issues)
Principal Officer (Monitoring & Development)
Corporate Policy Officer
Service Manager
Planning and Evaluation Officer
Research and Consultation Officer
Strategist Research & Information
Senior Officer (Library/Information)
Performance and Business Intelligence Manager

Research and Information activities

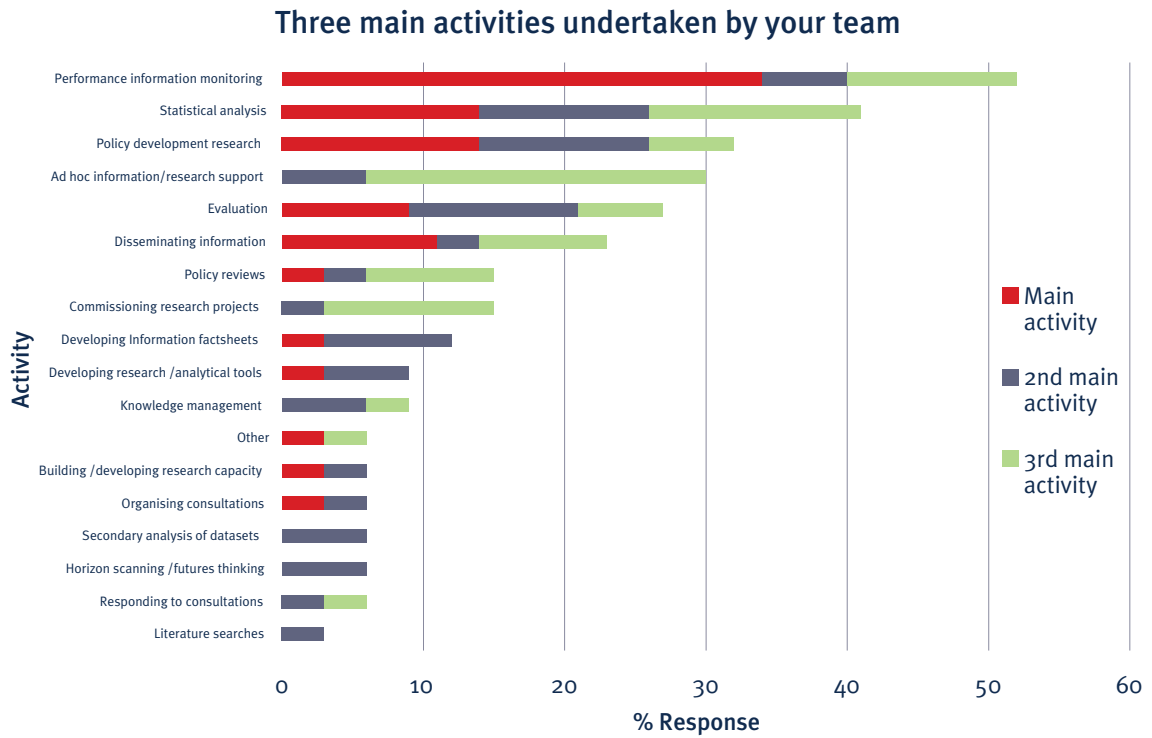
Survey respondents were involved in a wide range of activities, indicated in the table below. The majority of respondents were involved in 14 of the 18 stated activities, with all respondents involved in disseminating information, 88% of respondents involved in statistical analysis and 79% of respondents were involved in responding to consultations, performance information monitoring, developing information factsheets or bulletins, and providing ad hoc information or research support.

Less than half of respondents were involved in building or developing research capacity, literature reviews, knowledge management or horizon scanning/futures thinking.

Activities	Response	Percentage
Disseminating information	34	100%
Statistical analysis	30	88%
Responding to consultations	27	79%
Performance information monitoring	27	79%
Developing Information factsheets / bulletins	27	79%
Ad hoc information/research support	27	79%
Developing research / analytical tools	26	77%
Evaluation (policy/services/initiatives)	25	74%
Policy development research	23	68%
Secondary analysis of datasets	22	65%
Organising consultations	21	62%
Policy reviews	20	59%
Literature searches	18	53%
Commissioning research projects	18	53%
Building / developing research capacity	15	44%
Literature reviews	14	41%
Knowledge management	12	35%
Horizon scanning / futures thinking	11	32%
Other	4	12%

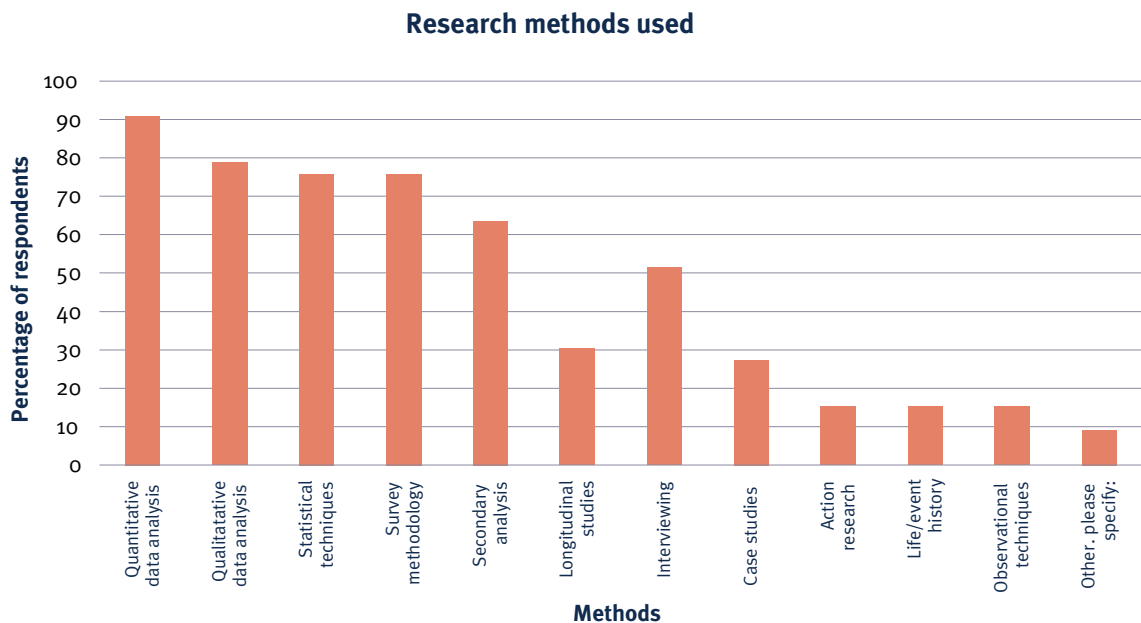
Main activities

Survey respondents were asked about the three main research and information activities undertaken by their team. Performance information monitoring was one of the three main activities undertaken for just over half of respondents, 51%.



Methods Used

Respondents were asked about the research methods their team makes use of. Nearly all respondent’s teams were involved in quantitative data analysis, 90.9%, and most respondent’s teams used qualitative data analysis, survey methodology, statistical techniques, secondary analysis and interviewing.



Research Projects

Respondents were asked to send copies of their service or council wide research programme, or if these were unavailable they were asked to provide three examples of research and information projects they, or others in their council, were currently involved in. The intention of this question was to get an idea about subject areas in which research and information activity is being undertaken. As expected, much of the research activity is in key areas of local government responsibility such as:

- Environment *e.g. State of the environment review*
- Employment *e.g. Migrant Labour study*
- Education *e.g. Analysis of attainment information to inform School Improvement agenda*
- Housing *e.g. Temporary accommodation survey*
- Childcare *e.g. Mapping supply and demand of childcare services*
- Justice *e.g. Probation breach/review monitoring*
- Corporate *e.g. Analysis of Council staffing information*

Several cross-cutting issues were also mentioned, including migration, multiple deprivation, best value and governance. Although not necessarily reflective of research programmes, the majority of examples of research projects given were evaluations (of services, initiatives, policies, pilots, strategies and programmes) or research into user or customer experiences and satisfaction levels. Research projects were often centred around:

- Performance management monitoring, analysis, development and reporting
- Customer/user journeys and experiences
- Identifying good/best practice
- Identifying current and future needs
- Evaluations and impact assessments
- Mapping service supply and demand
- Public perceptions and attitudes

Respondents were also specifically asked whether their council uses citizen or people's panels and 75% of respondents said they did. As indicated below the format, content and approach of the various panels varied widely.

Citizen Panel Examples

Angus Council

The Angus Citizen panel is open to all, meaning that participants are not representative of the wider population. In addition there is a Young Angus Citizens' Panel, for 12 to 16 year olds. Participants contribute through surveys, and recent surveys have been based on the following issues:

- Alcohol misuse survey
- Museums survey
- Physical activity survey

For further information please see

http://www.angus.gov.uk/services/view_service_detail.cfm?serviceid=1181

Moray Council

The Moray Citizen Panel consists of a representative sample of over 1200 people who provide their opinions mainly through questionnaires. Surveys have been conducted on the following issues:

- Getting in touch with local agencies
- Travel and Transport
- Community Safety
- Involving and Consulting the public

For further information please see <http://www.yourmoray.org.uk/CitizensPanel.htm>

Stirling Council

In 2000 Stirling Council, in partnership with Scottish Enterprise Forth Valley established a citizens' panel, the Stirling Sounding Board. The panel consists of 1300 residents and is representative of the wider community in terms of age, gender, working status, tenure, urban/rural etc. The Council conducts a number of surveys through the Sounding Board, including the residents survey every 2 years, which asks about satisfaction with council services, communication, information and other issues of interest at the time of the survey. Members are also sometimes asked to contribute views through interviews or focus groups.

For further information please see

http://www.stirling.gov.uk/index/council_homepage/getinvolved/soundingboard.htm

Aberdeen City Voice

Around 1000 people are part of City Voice and they make up a representative sample of Aberdeen's population. Each year, City Voice participants receive three questionnaires, which are broadly based on a number of themes from the Community Plan aberdeenfutures. Aberdeen City Voice is an initiative by Aberdeen's Community Planning Partnership, including:

- Aberdeen City Council
- Aberdeen Council of Voluntary Organisations
- Communities Scotland
- Grampian Fire and Rescue Service
- NHS Grampian
- Grampian Police
- Scottish Enterprise Grampian
- Grampian Police

For further information please see

http://www.aberdeencity.gov.uk/ACCI/web/site/Consultations/SL/cst_CityVoiceHome.asp

Commissioning Research

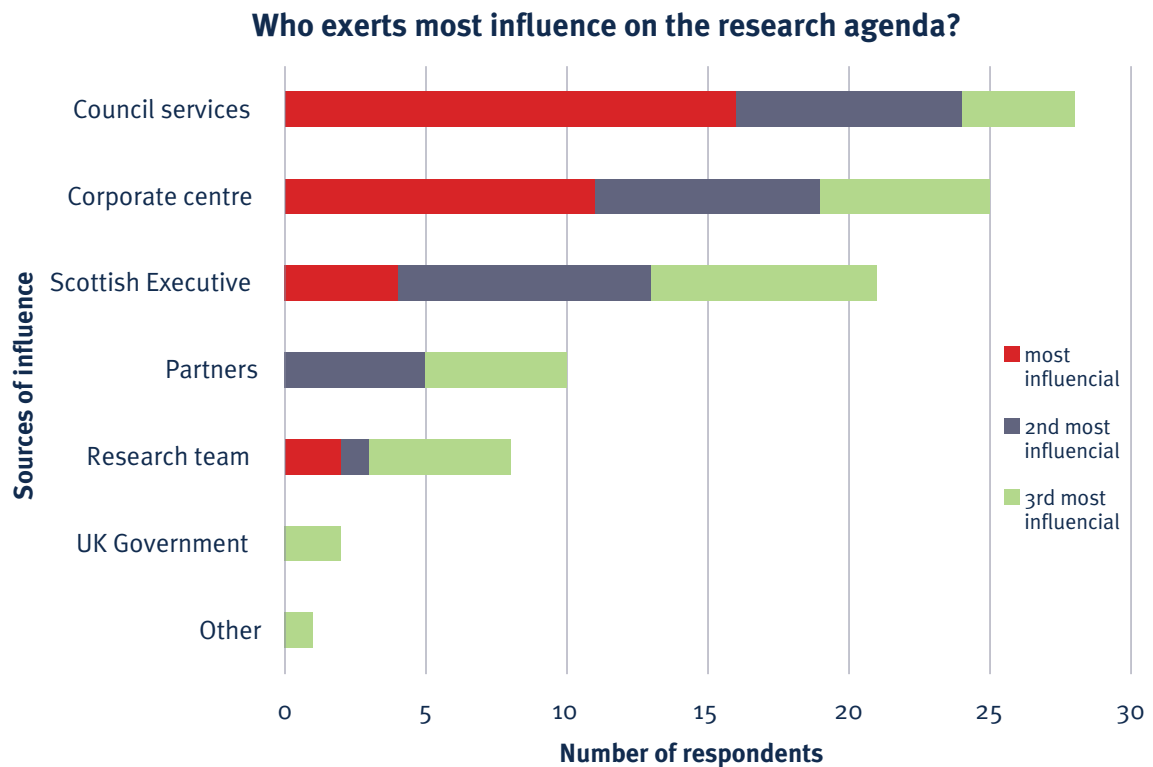
Respondents were asked to indicate roughly how much money was spent commissioning research projects by, or to be managed by, their team. The most frequent response was under £1000, 38.5%. 84.6% of respondents spent under £30k on commissioning research projects. This implies that in local authorities the majority of research activity is conducted in-house.

Money spent on research projects commissioned or managed by your team in 2005/06



Influences on the Research Agenda

Respondents were asked to identify the three sources exerting most influence on the research agenda. As the majority of survey respondents were from Council Services it is perhaps not surprising that respondents felt that Council Services had the most influence on the research agenda. 48.5% of respondents identified the Council Services as exerting most influence and 84.8% of respondents identified Council Services as either the first, second or third most influential; closely followed by the Corporate Centre, identified by 33.3% of respondents as the most influential source, and by 75.8% as either first, second or third most influential. Whilst a much smaller percentage of respondents, 12.1%, identified the Scottish Executive as having the most influence on the research agenda, 63.6% of respondents felt that the Scottish Executive was one of the three greatest influences on the research agenda.



Training and Development

Whilst the majority of respondents indicated that they had received some form of research training, either from their council or an external body, 55.9%, a sizeable percentage of respondents have never received any research training, 44.1%.

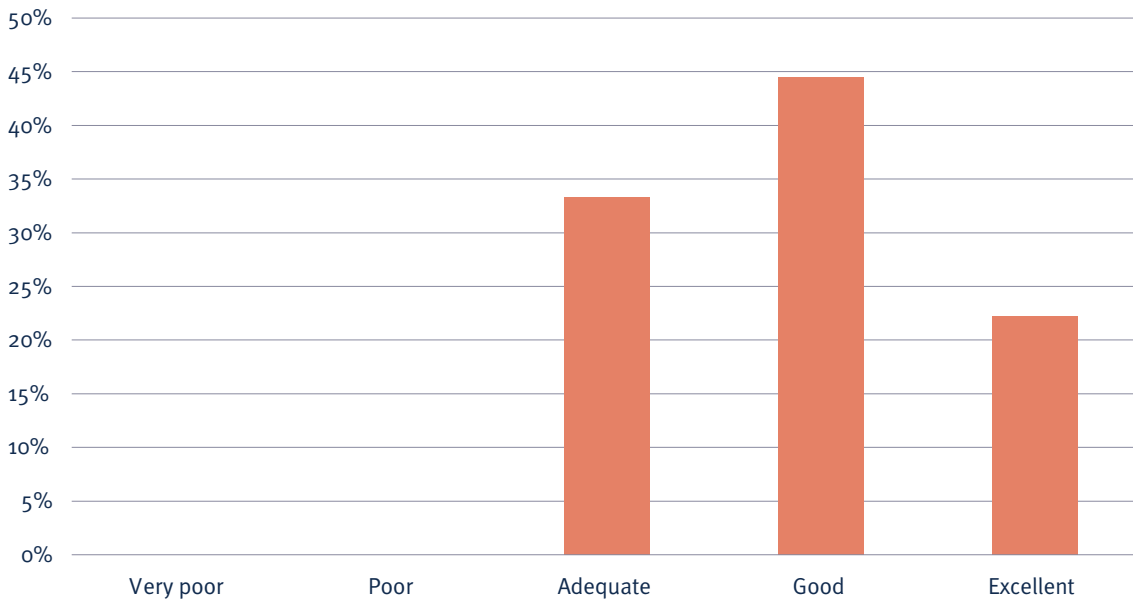
Respondents were asked to give examples of research training events or activities they had undertaken in the past couple of years. Three respondents indicated that they had not received any research training in the last two years. Of those that had done so, it was common for training courses to be accessed through the Social Research Association (SRA) or the Local Authorities Research and Intelligence Association (LARIA). The most common training topics mentioned were SPSS and qualitative research/ conducting interviews (each mentioned by 4 respondents). Other courses included, survey design, e-surveys, consultation techniques, data protection, sampling, GIS / ArcGis, Evaluation, Economic Impact Assessment Training, Participatory Appraisal, Facilitation, Performance management.

Few respondents had received any specific research qualifications, though several had completed some research training as part of their undergraduate or postgraduate degrees. Specific research qualifications received by respondents included:

- Masters in Research
- Postgraduate Diploma in Library and Information Studies
- Information Science BSc (Hons.)
- Applied Social Science & Research Methods (Postgraduate degree)
- Statistical Analysis (6 week University course)
- Certificates using Excel; SPSS; Word; Business Objects; Access; GIS

Of the 55.9% of respondents who have received some research training, the majority felt that overall the training they received was good or excellent, 66.6%.

How would you rate the research training you have received to date



Respondents were asked to identify specific areas where further training would be helpful. The most commonly mentioned topic area where further training would be considered helpful was questionnaire or survey design. The top 5 most common responses are highlighted in the table below.

Top 5 most mentioned areas where training would be most helpful

Area	Number of Responses
Questionnaire / survey design	5
General Research techniques and methods	3
Statistical techniques	3
Evaluation techniques	2
Qualitative research	2

Other topics for further training, mentioned by one respondent each, include:

- Commissioning research
- Communicating the value of research
- Community engagement
- Consultation with hard to reach groups
- Customer surveys
- Developing information strategies
- Innovation in research / new methods and approaches
- Longitudinal studies


- Managing information
- GIS/Map info
- Performance monitoring
- Principles of research
- Putting over the argument and winning
- SPSS
- Using the internet to gather data and conduct research

Research and Information Networks

55.9% of respondents indicated that they are currently a member of a research network, either inside or outside their council. Respondents were members of a huge range of internal and external networks - over 30 different networks were mentioned. The Local Authorities Research and Intelligence Association (LARIA) was the most common response (mentioned by 7 respondents) and no other network was mentioned by more than 2 respondents. The networks mentioned included:

- Forth Valley Research and Information Network
- Internal Council R&I Networks
- British Urban and Regional Information Systems Association
- Local Authorities Research and Intelligence Association (LARIA)
- The Population and Migration Statistics Committee (PAMS)
- Social Research Association
- Applied Education Research
- Social Science Research Group (SSRG)
- Internal Strategic Information and Monitoring Groups
- Scottish Executive Scotstat groups
- Scottish Evaluation Network

88.2% of respondents indicated that they would be interested in joining a Scottish local government research network. Ideas about the focus of the network varied but included to:

- Promote the value of research and information within Councils
 - Ensure research has an impact on decision making
 - Share data and supporting benchmarking
 - Share best practice and innovation, and provide networking opportunities
 - Connect researchers across local authorities
 - Improve links with academics
 - Encourage standardisation and develop standard measures
 - Conduct research (into areas such as economics, labour markets, community regeneration, social inclusion and migration)
 - Explore experiences of commissioning research and consultancy
 - Raise awareness of the work of working groups and networks
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In addition a number of survey respondents had advice for how such a Scottish research network should be run:

- Resources need to be committed
- Needs to be based on an understanding of research and intelligence in local government
- Needs to be non-demanding in terms of time commitment
- Should not be based on narrow Best Value or economic efficiency parameters
- Needs to be genuinely independent from the Scottish Executive
- Must involve those with a strong interest and expertise in local government research and intelligence
- Work in partnership with existing organisations
- Should provide a Scottish focus

Other forms of support

Respondents were also asked whether they had any other comments about how the Improvement Service could assist research in local government. In addition to the issues raised above, respondents mentioned a range of possible supports, such as:

- Develop a co-ordinated programme of practical research training
- Produce case studies on particular research tools
- Help develop effective qualitative outcome measures for our services
- Provide feedback on this initial survey
- Provide access to research contact names
- Help identify research training needs
- Encourage the sharing of research between central and local government
- Promote the idea of a Scottish consumer survey
- Organise quarterly research network seminar
- Produce frequent research issues bulletins

NEXT STEPS

This initial survey has helped the research team at the Improvement Service get a clearer understanding of the type of work undertaken by researcher and information staff in local government and how the Improvement Service can support the research community. Following this work we intend to meet corporate and service research teams to explore collaboration opportunities and gain a deeper understanding of how best the Improvement Service can support research and information activity. It is important to do this by focussing on the situation within Scotland in the context of the wider landscape of research, for example working with existing UK-wide networks. Through our knowledge sharing workstream we have some resource available at the Improvement Service to support the research and information community.

Our initial thinking, which we are happy to revise depending on your comments, is to help develop and support a research community of practice which meets quarterly. Quarterly meetings can involve an element of training on methodological approaches, opportunities to share good practice and to network. Linked to this community of practice we can develop a community website, linked to the main Improvement Service site, where registered users can upload their research publications, good practice cases can be highlighted, and contact details can be added and searched. This will be similar to other community websites already in existence, such as the Community Planning site see <http://www.improvementservice.org.uk/community-planning>. The research community of practice can also explore specific projects, such as developing effective qualitative outcome measures for services, which can then be supported by the community website.

It is our intention to work with researchers and the various research and information networks already in existence, particularly LARIA in Scotland, to avoid duplication of effort. Depending on feedback on these proposals and discussions with existing networks we hope to establish the Research Community of Practice by Autumn 2007.

If you have any comments about our plans, ideas or suggestions please contact Claire Lightowler, research@improvementservice.org.uk or 01506 775558





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