

Local Authority Research Systems: Developing Doncaster Council's road map to building greater organisational research capacity

Introduction

The 20/30 PHR call recognised that investment is needed to support the development of research capacity within local government. Doncaster Council was well placed to be the lead organisation for this study. This was largely because of our existing research active staff within the public health team; our previous involvement within the Collaboration for Leadership in Applied Health Research and Care (CLAHRC) (2008-2019) and current connections to the Practice and Research Collaborative (<https://www.parc-hub.co.uk/>) and the Local Authority Research LinK (LARK). This history meant we were able to successfully develop a competitive bid and navigate some unfamiliar NIHR systems. We were also able to assess that our current research activity consisted of pockets of high quality research but that this was insufficient to help routinely bridge the gap between what is known and what is done (Graham, 2006).

Doncaster is the largest geographical metropolitan borough in the UK, with a population of around 305,000. Doncaster has an industrial past and this presents a significant challenge in connecting people, places and businesses to economic and social opportunities. Despite being relatively flat with many easily accessible green and blue spaces, the borough has high levels of inactivity, low levels of participation in physical activity and high levels of deprivation.

This study set out to identify what steps are needed to move from our existing ad hoc research projects to a research system designed to inform and support decision-making at Doncaster council. Our aims were to:

- establish what appetite exists amongst officers and elected members across the local authority to increase our organisational capacity to undertake research
- understand what types of people would be needed, in the local authority and elsewhere, to enable the authority to access research funding and successfully undertake high quality research

- identify what resources are needed to create a sustainable research system at Doncaster Council

Additionally, the funder was interested in specific insight on 3 areas and this report is structured using these questions as section headers within the findings:

1. What is the current research environment like in Doncaster Council?
2. What are the current strengths and weaknesses/barriers to undertaking research/using research findings?
3. What would be needed in place for Doncaster Council to further develop its research culture?

This report is one of several products¹ and further analysis will occur.

Methodology

It is important to note that as an authority we were well positioned to rapidly establish this project once funded. Our local research ambition, existing trusted relationships meant we were able to rapidly deploy two embedded researchers into our current virtual working. The embedded researcher model (Cheetham et al, 2018, 2019) to facilitate our understanding of the barriers to integrating research into decision-making processes. One of the researchers had existing knowledge of the setting (local government) and specific knowledge of Doncaster Council.

Data collection:

Doncaster Council comprises four directorates (Adults, Health and Well Being; Corporate Resources; Economic and Environment; and Learning and Opportunities – Children and Young People). Public Health is a team within the Adults, Health and Well Being directorate, led by the Director of Public Health. The study population represented three of the directorates, no one was interviewed from the Economic and Environment Directorate. The study has however captured the diversity of local government and public health work as we observed decision-making fora within this fourth directorate.

Video interviews were conducted by the embedded researchers and recorded using the Microsoft Teams platform with key informants comprising Senior Local Government Officers and Elected Members. This was a purposive sample, based on nominations from Heads of Service and those who had received an email and expressed an interest in participating in the research. Non participant observations of key meetings were also undertaken.

Ethics and governance approvals were obtained via The University of Sheffield and Doncaster Council. It should be noted that that formal research projects need to navigate significant decision-making processes within local government.

Data analysis

The interview schedule was constructed using the mechanisms identified by Cooke et al (2018) and the principles of the research capacity framework (Cooke, 2020).

¹ Slide set for NIHR, council facing report, visual guide to findings, peer reviewed publication; shared learning workshop.

The interviews were transcribed and analysed using framework analysis (Ritchie, Spencer & O'Connor, 2003). Data extracted from the meeting observation notes were also integrated into the analysis.

Results

Semi structured interviews

Sixteen video interviews were conducted with 14 Senior Local Government Officers (LGO) and two Elected Members (EM).

Observations of key meetings

We observed eight meetings between 22 October and 26 November: three Overview & Scrutiny Committees; Planning Committee; Health & Wellbeing Board; Cabinet; full Council meeting; and an internal meeting of staff involved in strategic commissioning (Contracts & Finance Group).

Data Analysis

Data analysis was framed around three questions that were of particular interest to the NIHR. These are outlined below. Subthemes were structured from the interview transcripts based on the programme theories identified by Cooke et al. (2018) and the principles of the research capacity framework (Cooke, 2020).

Q1 Findings. What is the current research environment like in Doncaster Council?

Participants were asked to define what 'research' meant to them, whether they had any personal experience of conducting research/using research findings in their current role and if they were aware of any research being undertaken within the council.

What does research mean to you? How would you define research?

Some used the academic definition with a focus on hypotheses testing, rigour, applying theory, using qualitative and quantitative methodologies, whilst others provided a more 'everyday' explanation, for example a way of finding out about things, being curious, providing the opportunity to answer key questions to help in their role and to provide evidence to support decision making:

"How we describe it is research with a little r and research with a big R. So the research with the little r is more your internal activity within the organisation where teams might be doing a one off piece or something that they do on an annual basis. For example, it could be a staff satisfaction piece. And then the big R stuff is more your students, universities where there's funding attached. More of the external activity" (LGO P13)

Do you have any personal experience of undertaking research or using research findings?

A number had formal research qualifications such as an undergraduate degree with a research component or a Master's degree and some had supported externally funded research projects. Many talked about 'community engagement' as the way they viewed the research they were undertaking. They used a variety of methods including surveys, interviews with service users, focus groups, case studies, engagement

sessions and consultation exercises as a way of ensuring that services met the needs of the people, they work with provided an in depth understanding of the issues that really mattered to people:

“I think the most important thing is making sure that what we’re doing as a service is meeting the needs of the young people and the communities we work with in Doncaster” (LGO P4)

In addition to undertaking research related activity, participants also reported utilising evidence from research papers, policy documents, service evaluations and reviewing the findings of similar work undertaken elsewhere. This evidence was used to aid report writing, developing strategies or to reflect on their processes to better understand the needs of the community and improve the services they delivered for the local population:

“Continual improvement is what you do when you come into work. The way you improve to understand what people are doing, what passes for evidence. Triangulate and make a plan to take forwards. The lay-person's approach is what drives me professionally. Research is associated with something academic and distant, but it has to be more practical and clearer than that” (LGO, P16)

Are you aware of any research being undertaken in your organisation?

There was a mixed response to this question, but there was generally a patchy awareness of internal research projects. Public Health was viewed as ‘the expert’ and research such as ‘Well Doncaster’, and work undertaken within the Policy Insight and Change team was mentioned as areas of activity. There was a feeling that research was not well showcased or given a platform and a more coordinated approach was required:

“If someone is fortunate enough to be able to do some research in their particular area, that is actually showcased among colleagues to help them understand. So, within various Boards or meetings and so on and so forth. Even, you know, to promote that this has been done internally, externally” (LGO, P1)

Some mentioned how knowledge of research activity happening in the organisation was opportunistic in nature (people ‘finding out about it’ in an ad hoc way). Participants thought it would be useful if there was access to a central repository that provided detail on ongoing work to identify potential linkages and synergies across different areas. It should be noted that this area of work was in progress prior to the current pandemic as the Council are working towards a research governance refreshed approach:

“I would say there is a few people that know a lot but there is not one place where it all is” (LGO, P8)

“You tend sometimes to trip over things by accident. You know you might be in a meeting and somebody will go, ‘oh Sheffield Hallam University have done something on that’ you know” (LGO, P9)

“So that people could have it at their fingertips, that type of knowledge about what’s going on. Because I think people are aware of what’s going on sort of in their bit, in their bubble. But then obviously you know, and why would they know about everything. It’s huge but it would be nice if then they could see areas where things could be joined up” (EM, P12)

Among the meetings that we observed, only the Health & Wellbeing Board featured formal presentation and discussion of academic research (evaluation of a dance-based physical activity programme and planned research on the impact of parental alcohol abuse and how services respond to this). ‘Research’ and ‘evidence’ were mentioned in other meetings in a variety of contexts (for example, ‘evidence-based flood prevention’ and ‘research’ on the regional division of funding for flood prevention work). There were also frequent references to local collection and/or use of what might be termed ‘little r’ data, intelligence and best practice, especially by Council staff.

Q2. What are the current strengths and weaknesses/barriers to undertaking research/using research findings?

Strengths

It was a main strength that there was agreement across all participants that doing research and using research findings in a timely manner, brought both personal and organisational benefits. The organisation was seen as one that should be both undertaking research and utilising research findings. All participants strongly agreed this should be a top priority and there was an appetite to invest in research and use research findings to deliver services that shape people’s lives and ensure the best outcomes for the people of Doncaster:

“But I do see it’s important that we do it in Public Health and in the Council as well because it needs to be embedded as a tool. Research shouldn’t just be narrow, it could cut across lots of domains. So personally I would see it’s a way of finding out more about things, and if you can actually do it in a community or a different setting, I think it makes it more real than just an academic literature based study” (LGO, P3)

Although difficult, due to the many competing priorities (see barriers), this was seen as even more important in the current climate, where evidence is required to enable the Council to navigate this uncharted territory to fully understand and monitor the impact of the pandemic.

Participants recognised the importance of harnessing staff with existing research knowledge to support others across the Council, and felt that there should be greater collaboration with external partners to join up and invest in quality research and knowledge sharing across organisations:

“Well I think we should be on the cutting edge of things and we shouldn’t be waiting. How often does NICE guidance get reviewed? (Laughs) Like every ten, fifteen years? Something ridiculous like that. And I just feel like we can’t wait for that to happen. We have to be the evidence base” (LGO, P2)

“We need to look at the evidence base, we don’t want people going off redesigning services on a whim, which is where research is really important” (LGO, P16)

“We need to show how we have done research as a Council and that gives the permission to be able to proceed with what we are going to do” (EM, P12)

Meeting observations confirmed that there was potential for and interest in using research and evidence at different stages of decision-making. Potential research questions were identified at all meetings except for the full Council meeting and these covered a wide range of topics and potential research approaches from local evaluations to secondary analysis of existing data. Examples included questions about appropriate communication strategies (Communities & Environment OSC and Health & Wellbeing Board) and effectiveness of specific service models (Contracts & Finance Group and Cabinet).

Barriers

Although there was an obvious will to undertake and use research and agreement that it was immensely important, barriers included time, funding, confidence and lack of training. Most front-line staff did not have any additional time or capacity, which was in part due to the ‘heads down, industrial approach to getting the job done’:

“It would be great if I could capture that level of what’s happening in our communities. ... If we had the time it’d be great... and resources to do that” (LGO, P7)

Participants believed that lack of confidence to undertake research would be a barrier for some and it was viewed as an elite activity, undertaken by experts in universities. In order to make it less intimidating it would need to be described more in terms of what people do in their everyday jobs:

“An inclusive approach is required, so it is not the preserve of ‘experts’, people need to have a personal stake and rewards if they engage in it, for example job satisfaction and better outcomes” (LGO, P15)

“The language around research needs to change ... quite a lot of the time if you say research to someone it’s kind of either a big research study. ... If you’re finding out about 10 of your users that come and use the mobile library every week it’s still... you’re finding something out and that’s so important to understand” (LGO, P6)

Several participants described how their previous exposure to a research environment, for example, whilst undertaking a Master’s degree, gave them confidence to approach academics and work with universities, which had led to informal partnerships being forged:

“So I guess there is something about almost like a bit of a confidence, or a bit of a cockiness to maybe like approach people in academia. Where if you go to a researcher or somebody in academia. As long as it’s something that remotely falls into their area of interest usually they are really keen to get involved” (LGO, P2)

However, opportunities to become involved in research often happened as a result of knowing someone, or being in the right place at the right time, so therefore not available to all:

“It was really fortuitous that the trainee registrar that was coming through was interested in being part of the research. So they were able to actually contribute to that. Help with the focus groups and help with the write up of it and what not. But I think that is a little bit of who’s around at the time and who is interested” (LGO, P2)

Observation of meetings suggested that while many participants had a broad understanding of research and evidence, issues arising in meetings were not necessarily considered as potential research questions. The discussion suggested that some participants, perhaps unconsciously, perceived ‘research’ as activity conducted by academics and separate from their own work even where this would be generally considered as research. When research was explicitly mentioned, it was generally seen in terms of single study reports or data analyses rather than synthesised evidence (such as systematic reviews or evidence-based guidelines) that could potentially offer a broader view of the question and take account of risks of bias associated with individual studies.

Access to research training/capacity building

One way of improving staff confidence to undertake/use research would be to provide access to research training, which was viewed as a gap. Staff were unsure if this was because training was unavailable or they were unaware of it. The Human Resources portal or staff intranet were places where training could be advertised. Specific areas of training requested by staff were literature searching, interpreting graphical information and taking informed consent. It was recognised that staff struggled to gain access to published papers, as they were often only available on a licence. There was existing expertise in the organisation, which could be harnessed to support others:

“As a team within the Council we have a lot of research skills but we seem to be quite isolated from the rest of the research that’s being done in the Council so I think we kind of feel as a team that we’re quite underused” (LGO, P4)

“We’ve got a lot to contribute. We’ve got a lot of skilled staff and there are some staff who are really wanting a challenge. And there are some people who probably enjoy research and reading, more than some others. We really have some knowledgeable skilled staff and I think that it would be good to use their knowledge and their skills” (LGO, P11)

Q3. What would need to be in place for Doncaster Council to further develop its research culture?

Doncaster Council has both the leadership and appetite to grow its research culture. In order to achieve this, it needs to develop a connected internal network and move from existing pockets of research to a more joined up, structured approach that is promoted, given a platform and valued:

“At the moment it’s ad hoc. If you’re close to it, you find out it’s going on and if you’re not you don’t” (LGO, P10)

“I don’t think that it is overarching. It is happen chance. Where there is an opportunity, they will take it. It’s not planned” (EM, P14)

Development of a research policy would elevate its status and visibility across the Council. Research should be the golden thread running through the organisation from the top down with senior level buy in, clarity and agreement regarding individuals’ roles with opportunities to be involved available to all:

“Recognising that it is part and parcel of good practice. Giving people the permission to do it. Practically how to carve that time out and ensure people have an equal chance of being involved” (LGO, P5)

The value of research should be promoted by its inclusion in induction packs for new staff and discussed as part of their annual Performance Development Review:

“Part of induction when people join the organisation. Senior Leadership Team to place it central to our decision making and to be given the resource and green light to do this” (LGO, P16)

A forum should be provided for showcasing research findings, such as the development of a research network, research days, having events such as the (very well received) Research Week on an annual basis, giving people the opportunity to come together to discuss ideas and identify areas of overlap and potential synergy:

I think that would be quite nice because I think it could be something that people could be quite proud of. So, like a day where they could present what they’ve found and people could watch them speak about it” (LGO, P4)

“A couple of years ago we had Doncaster’s first research week. We had a week of different research and things like that we should have in hindsight continued. Energy to make that happen. Really important, sets out what the Council and local businesses are about. We should re-do this as it breeds a bit of a cultural thing” (LGO, P8)

The decision-making process of Doncaster Council could incorporate a process of utilising the findings of research in policy decisions and explicitly stating the research that underpinned those decisions when Committee Reports are presented to Cabinet and decisions made based on the research evidence:

“There’s a few paragraphs [in report] where it always says recommendations before you get into the body. So just before the recommendations, you could almost insert something that said that the changes have been made based on this research” (EM, P12)

“One way of doing it is having something on each report that says ‘is there a research base for this or an evidence basis for this’? It might be no, and then that might lead us to a well should we do something around that. Or even if it’s a yes, then what does that tell us?” (LGO, P9)

Forging partnerships with academic organisations, such as researchers working within the Council who are linked to a University, to boundary span across the two organisations and support research development:

“Present back findings on a rolling basis. 3 or 4 [projects] with a rolling programme of research, would attract funding” (LGO, P8)

Discussion and key messages

This section brings together our findings. It sets out the implications arising from this study for three key groups: funders, academia and Doncaster Council in terms of the next steps in our road map to building greater organisational research capacity. It begins with a brief overview of local government and its use of research-derived evidence.

Decision-making in local government is complex; subject to several stages and processes and above all takes place in a political setting. There is disagreement about what constitutes evidence and an acknowledgement that knowledge extends beyond that which is research derived (Pawson, 2003). Lorenc et al's (2015) systematic review of culture of evidence in non-health sectors found 'considerable latitude' as to what was defined as evidence and that academic research is only one information source. They also identified that decision-makers in non-health sectors value evidence close to practice and felt research evidence did not meet their needs. There is also a mixed and complex picture across England on how research and evidence is used within local government decision making (Allen, 2014). Despite initiatives such as the Local Government Knowledge Navigator project which provides examples of relationships between academia and local government there is generally low awareness of knowledge exchange initiatives (Mortimer 2014). More recently, Cheetham et al. (2018, 2019) found that increased understanding of the socio-political realities of public health is necessary to facilitate integration of research with practice and advocate for embedded researcher models.

Implications for funders

This study identifies both appetite for using and undertaking research and considerable assets in the form of staff engaged with 'small r' research as well as considerable subject expertise and the democratic relationship with their citizens. Local government is the steward and shaper of place. Local authorities comprise different professionals. Differing parts of a council may privilege different types of evidence and will hold different views about how answers to research questions are generated. For example, the idea of evidence-based practice may have some currency within public health teams whereas practice-based evidence is more familiar within social work and social care. Organisations, groups and individual knowledge users then have different expectations about: what constitutes knowledge (Pawson, 2003); how useful or not research is to either their working practices or policy making processes; what can and should be considered a research priority and perhaps most importantly views on how research questions should be answered. There is also a need to recognise the role of little r in seeding research work more familiar to funders. For example, data arising from audits, need assessments, contract management and engagement are routine within local government practice. They are designed to inform decision making, commissioning, service improvement yet the underpinning skills and the questions they surface could and should be viewed as laboratory for research in local government.

Projects utilising embedded researchers or researcher in residence can help navigate this complex landscape and tackle both better use of existing evidence and identification of research priorities. The embedded researchers within this project were able to spot opportunities to do just this. Moreover, the embedded researcher model freed up capacity and ensured the completion of the research during the challenges of responding to COVID-19. The use of technology and embedded researchers facilitated a fast pace, innovation and addressed capacity issues which are a barrier to research within local government.

Finally, Phillips and Green (2015) describe local government as a creature of statute and this has implications for decision making processes within local government and consequently decision-making around research governance. Funders needs to be cognisant of these processes and the capacity required to navigate internal processes and funding bodies' systems. For example, local authorities tend not to have study support officers or research management roles akin to NHS colleagues. Research within local government will not grow to its full potential without investment to support capacity building.

Implications for academics

This study affirmed the importance of relationships; our existing relationship meant that we were able to set up and deliver within 4 months. Developing relationships with key organisations is crucial to developing joint work and perhaps requires the development of research networks, knowledge exchange opportunities, seed corn projects and the funding to support these initiatives.

The study took place in the time of COVID-19 and as such used video interviews and observations of virtual meetings. There were considerable advantages in terms of time, travel costs and high levels of access to senior officers. Utilising a digital platform also enabled the CI and project team to keep in touch and this was helpful.

Implications for Doncaster Council in terms of the next steps in our road map to building greater organisational research capacity

The study has reinforced our initial position that we lacked a systematic approach to undertake and use research. Pockets of research were identified. More importantly, the study has uncovered an appetite to do more research within the authority. We have a rich set of data and analysis continues to support the development of additional research capacity and a research policy.

The findings suggest the following early actions:

- Research activity fits our existing organisational focus on learning and there is scope to harness opportunities within job descriptions, PDRs, organisational training plans and within the refresh of the workforce development strategy to encourage research activity;
- Harness opportunities to extend the embedded researcher work to support our COVID-19 response;
- Work to develop a toolkit to support navigation of internal governance and external systems;
- Develop a visual guide to support dissemination of findings.

Finally, undertaking the study has in and of itself accrued benefits which are outlined below. Through the relationships between the Council and The University of Sheffield it has been possible to secure a Masters in Public Health research attachment student to undertake further analyses thus adding to our capacity. The CI has successfully applied to the CRN Yorkshire and Humber for protected research time (one PA for 12 months) which can support the on-going development of this work. The team have also been working closely with the project set in Wakefield Council and have identified shared needs and opportunities to develop research across each place. These networks have also helped us identify other opportunities, for example, preliminary discussions on the extension of the CRN funded Leeds Research Academy to local government. This approach to training would address issues identified by our respondents.

The project has helped further internal knowledge on both relevant internal governance systems (information, research, finance, legal) and external funders' systems which we anticipate will aid future applications/research projects.

Participation and delivery of this project itself has also helped raise the profile of research use and research activity and it is important that we build on this momentum and embed this within the Council's

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