



research in practice

Commissioning and managing
external research

a guide for child care agencies
edited by Jo Tunnard

surveys
research

indication
exploration

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research in practice

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about this pamphlet

One of the ambitions of **research in practice** is to make it easier for local authorities and voluntary organisations to access reliable research, distilled and translated with a particular audience in mind. This series of occasional pamphlets covers key practice areas, identified by practitioners, and key research strategy issues, identified by planners and policy makers. The work and methods of **research in practice** chime well with the developing national agenda to build more effective, comparable services for children, in part by creating and using reliable research evidence.

This pamphlet on commissioning research brings together papers from two **research in practice** seminars. Its central message is that research commissioned by child care agencies, including service evaluations, can bring clarity to children and family work provided certain considerations are borne in mind when planning and conducting studies and using the results. They include holding a sharp focus on the questions to be explored, choosing sympathetic, responsive researchers and having the skills to manage the contract (warding off any tendency to be managed by it). These five papers do not provide definitive answers – but they thoroughly explore key issues from sometimes opposing points of view and should therefore inform the continuing debate.

In 2001 the Department of Health issued a formal Research Governance Framework for Health and Social Care, which sets out its intention to work with its various partners, including social care organisations, to develop a coherent system for monitoring research governance and addressing shortcomings. This ought to be seen as a step forward by service organisations who want to ensure that the increasing amount of work they commission meets the highest scientific, ethical and financial standards. Research Governance involves transparent decision making processes, clear allocation of responsibilities and robust monitoring arrangements. Much greater attention will be paid over the next few years to the ethics of social care research: wanting to do good will no longer override the need for a careful examination of the methods or concern for all those involved. Ethical consideration extends to the dignity, rights, safety and well-being of participants and, in particular, to questions of consent, the use and protection of service-users' data and the involvement of service users in the design and conduct of research. Details of the Research Governance Framework can be found at:

www.doh.gov.uk/research/rd3/nhsrandd/researchgovernance.htm

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Roy Parker

Evidence, judgement and values

I take it as axiomatic that readers have a commitment to and an enthusiasm for using relevant and reliable research both in practice and in policy. Thirty years ago the Seebohm¹ report in its chapter on research maintained that:

the personal social services are large scale experiments in ways of helping those in need. It is both wasteful and irresponsible to set experiments in motion and omit to record and analyse what happens. It makes no sense in terms of efficiency and however little intended indicates a careless attitude towards human welfare.

I am delighted to see that what was written then is at last coming to be reflected in the emphasis being placed on the necessity for evidence based social work and, one hopes, also on evidence based policy. It is in the light of this welcome development that it is important to consider certain aspects of evidence, then, more briefly, of judgement and of values and of the relationship between all three.

evidence

the quality of evidence

Let me make three comments about the quality of research evidence. First, how confident should we be in what it has to say? Rather crudely one might begin by identifying three levels: evidence that is conclusive, evidence that is indicative and evidence that is tentative. Of course, all kinds of scales can be used to make such distinctions. Quite simple devices could serve reasonably well. However, the problem is that the evidence is never complete: it is never wholly satisfactory; there are always deficiencies; and there are always gaps. Nonetheless, there is at least one test that can be applied: that of convergence. Do the results in question confirm the conclusions of other similar studies? Indeed, are there comparable studies against which it can be assessed? Furthermore, has this study been designed and reported in such a way that it, in its turn, could be replicated? If one looks back to Bowlby's² influential report to the World Health Organisation on maternal deprivation in the early 1950s one sees that not only was he drawing upon his own research but upon other studies that went back to the 1920s. Most of that research pointed in the same direction as his, and that was partly the reason why his report made such an impact. My early research on foster care provides another example³. One of the most important findings in that study was that foster homes where there were 'own' children of about the same age as the placed child were significantly more likely than others to disrupt. Indeed, that one single factor – the presence of own children around the same age –

accounted for a very large proportion of the total variance between those placements that were successful and those that were not. Somewhat earlier, Trasler⁴ had come to a similar conclusion from his study, and many of those that followed produced the same findings. In looking at a whole range of research into foster care Wolkind and Rushton⁵ have concluded that ‘this finding must be regarded as one of the few items of secure knowledge with clear practice implications’, because study after study has pointed in a similar direction. However, when one discovers an apparent convergence of results there is always the need to check that they are indeed reasonably comparable; for example, with respect to ages, cultures, the nature of the questions at the heart of the studies, or the period that is covered.

Having drawn attention to the usefulness of ‘convergence’ in assessing the confidence that should be placed in research results, it is also important to stress that studies at odds with previous findings should not be dismissed out of hand. They may reflect the consequences of a more sophisticated approach, changes in contexts or the effect of a different disciplinary perspective. They may be significant in raising doubts about hitherto uncritically accepted assumptions.

A second question that arises in considering the quality of research evidence concerns the critical threshold. How critical should one be when it comes to looking at various pieces of research? One of the pitfalls here is that when the results of research reinforce our convictions we all tend to lower our critical threshold and are then unduly willing to accept its conclusions. This is also liable to happen when research appears concerning matters about which practitioners have felt uncertain, undecided or at sea. On the other hand, when the findings are contrary to what we believe, or to our experience, then we are prone to raise our critical threshold and look for what in the results can be explained away. One of the hardest things to do, whether in research or practice, is to maintain a reasonably level critical threshold.

Of course, there is always the possibility that certain research produces good quality evidence but evidence that is not actually relevant to the issue in hand. Attempts to apply it inappropriately will almost certainly be misleading. For example, if you take Knapp’s work on the costing of the personal social service (and children’s services in particular)⁶, one learns that the analysis of unit costs may not be an appropriate basis for drawing conclusions about the economics of policy development in this field. For certain purposes marginal costs provide better guidance. So, although the results of studies of unit costs are correct as far as they go they may not be appropriate indicators for, let us say, decisions about capital versus revenue expenditure.

Finally, in thinking about the quality of research evidence it is important to consider how partial it is. I do not use the term in its pejorative sense but as a way of noting that research is rarely taken

forward equally on all fronts; typically, it makes spearhead advances or conducts exploratory probes. One of the difficulties, therefore, is that there is liable to be better data about some issues or fields than others. Nonetheless, it is frequently necessary for practitioners to make comparisons between options, between residential care and foster care for example; but if we have much more information about the one option than we do about another we may become unduly optimistic or unduly pessimistic about (a) as against (b). This is hard to deal with, but at the very least it is crucial to know that there is an unevenness of evidence when alternative courses of action are being considered, and for that to be taken into account.

categories of evidence

As well as questions about the quality of evidence it is important to consider the categories (or types) that are available as aids to decisions. Let me offer three examples. First, there is evaluative research; that is, research which looks at what works and what does not. Many of you will be familiar with the Barnardo's *What Works?* child care series. Often, however, we have more information about what does not work than about what does. For example, in the study that I conducted with my colleague Elaine Farmer on children returned from care 'home on trial' (in the terminology of the time)⁷, one of the clear results was that if a child had been returned home and it had 'failed' then almost certainly a second or third attempt would be equally unsuccessful unless something significant had changed in the home situation. The danger, of course, is that we have more conclusive evidence of this kind than we do of positive outcomes. Furthermore, if we are armed only with the negative evidence, it is tempting to assume that the positive or 'protective' factors are simply the absence of the negative ones. That may or may not be the case.

A second category of research conclusions are those concerned with distribution or allocation. A study in which I have been involved is concerned with children with disabilities and is based upon the data obtained by the Office for Population and Census Surveys (OPCS) in its surveys of the late 1980s⁸. One of the results that emerged during our detailed analysis of these data was that certain services for families with disabled children were being received disproportionately by those households which comprised two parents and the single child. By contrast, one-parent families and large families received significantly less. Irrespective of the nature and severity of the disability this seemed to fly in the face of what one might reasonably have expected had the services been distributed in a way that reflected the social as well as the disability needs of the family. Likewise, many services were received significantly less by the poorest fifth of the families by comparison with the other four-fifths. Such 'distributive' evidence is clearly relevant to service planning and to day-to-day practice.

There is a third type of evidence (and there are many examples) derived from research that deals specifically with needs. Much of this quantifies, identifies, or redefines a 'problem'; and sometimes it highlights new or unacknowledged problems. One aspect of this is its value in revealing the existence of change from some previously determined state of affairs. Another example, taken from our research on children with disabilities⁸, will serve to illustrate the point. We found that, at the end of the 1980s, only 5% of the families looking after disabled children were receiving any kind of respite care. Furthermore, when the OPCS had asked families what additional help they wanted only 1% had mentioned respite care. This was, of course, before the *Children Act* 1989. Subsequent research from the Norah Fry Centre at Bristol makes it clear that there is now a much greater demand for this service⁹. If one took the late 1980s data as an index of the expressed 'need' for respite care today it would no longer be an accurate reflection of demand. Knowledge of the service has widened, the services on offer have changed, and attitudes too may have altered. The point is that if you ask the same questions five or ten years later you may obtain a very different set of answers.

interpretation and explanation

The third issue that needs to be taken into account when considering the contribution of research evidence to practice and policy is the distinction between results and their interpretation, something that I have touched upon already in warning about the danger of explaining away uncongenial or unexpected results. However, there is frequently a legitimate need for certain findings to be interpreted, for their meaning to be discerned. Sometimes researchers explore these matters and offer interpretations of their own. At other times they do not venture beyond a broad description of what they have discovered, leaving it to others to reach conclusions about meaning and explanation. Of course, some evidence is useful and useable in the absence of a proper understanding of exactly what it is that has made it significant. The knowledge that the presence of 'own' children in a foster home is often prejudicial to a satisfactory placement provides helpful guidance even though we may not understand precisely the processes involved.

It is important to keep in mind the distinction between evidence and explanation. Sometimes we are offered evidence without explanation; sometimes (more worryingly) explanation without evidence. However, the relationship between evidence and explanatory interpretation is mediated by theory. A good theory should be a concise and elegant way of summarising observations in an endeavour to provide explanation. Nevertheless, it should always be regarded as provisional and, in principle, capable of being refuted by new or better evidence.

judgement probabilities

It should be noted that many of the results of research are actually (or implicitly) expressed in terms of probabilities; probabilities such as that for this group of children, or these types of families in these situations, there is, let us say, a 75% chance that this will happen. Of course, that means that in 25% of the cases something else will happen; a minority will not conform to the most likely outcome. Unfortunately, because probabilities are statements about aggregate categories, they do not indicate which particular case will conform to the general pattern and which will not. That being so, an important role is left for the exercise of judgement – however good the basic evidence.

It is interesting to see how much attention is now being paid to research on ‘protective’ factors which, in a way, is an attempt to obtain better evidence about what characterises the minorities that deviate from the social regularity defined by the majority. However good the evidence from research is it will rarely, if ever, be conclusive. It cannot and should not replace judgement; but evidence and judgement have to be better combined if the best possible decisions are to be reached. Furthermore, we need good judgement about evidence and good evidence about judgement.

professionalism

Informed judgement is the hallmark of professionalism. The professional is expected to exercise judgement. This calls for the assembly of relevant evidence of many kinds and for the ability to select, weigh and apply it. However, one of the interesting and unresolved questions concerns the nature of this judgement. How is good and bad judgement in a professional setting to be distinguished, and how best is good judgement to be nurtured? Experience is clearly an important factor; but it has to be experience that is cumulative, organised, assessed critically and therefore progressive. One way of ensuring that experience does not become stultified is by its exposure to evidence that is derived from other sources as well: from colleagues, from clients, from research and from adjacent disciplines. For experience to bolster good judgement it has to be set within a framework of critical thoughtful learning.

conventional wisdom

There is, of course, a fair sprinkling of poor judgement in all professional fields. All kinds of decisions can masquerade as good judgement but, in reality, be little more than a reflection of fashion, prejudice, predilection or outdatedness. It is always worth asking what is it that is generally taken for granted, not questioned or not even seen as a matter for debate. One of the values of research is that it can

challenge such prevailing wisdom. An example from the history of child placement will serve to illustrate the point. One of the supposedly common sense assumptions to be found in much of the placement literature before the 1950s was that homes should be found that provided ‘playmates’, either for the fostered child, for children already in the family, or for both. As I have pointed out, by the 1960s the risks of such placements had begun to be exposed by research; common sense had to be reconsidered. Or, to take another example, look at the assumption that still prevails that there are generational continuities in child abuse; that is, that the abused child becomes the abusive parent. Although many parents who abuse their children have also been abused by their parents, not all children who are abused go on to be abusing parents. In fact several pieces of research now indicate that it is a minority¹⁰. The statement that abusive parents are highly likely to have been abused as children is not the same as that which says that abused children go on to become abusive parents.

values means and ends

One of the reasons for gathering evidence from research, whether it be in our field, in physics, in engineering, in medicine or whatever, is in order to reach certain objectives more successfully. However, questions then arise as to whether these ends are generally approved (and by whom), or are morally justified. Although such questions have not always loomed as large in social work as they have, say, in the fields of genetic engineering, chemical warfare or the exploitation of natural resources, they do exist and should not be ignored. For example, the ability to tap childhood memories about sexual abuse may be powerfully and appropriately applied, but the process may also encourage damaging false memories. The fact that we become better able to achieve certain ends with the aid of better evidence does not relieve us of the responsibility for checking that these ends are indeed justified.

threatened values

As I have said, we should not ignore the possibility that values and the evidence obtained from research may collide. Deeply held values, whether they be political, religious or moral, may be at odds with what research has to tell us, not least about the deficiencies of policies and practices that have been guided by strong convictions. Indeed, there is a long history in child welfare of values driving action, a good example being the child rescue of the nineteenth century that was often based upon the belief that the welfare of certain children could be best safeguarded by their complete severance from their families.

One of the best illustrations of the moral dilemmas that could be created by the results of research was offered in 1963 by Wilkins (then

head of the Home Office Research Unit) in his book *Social Deviance*¹¹. He wrote:

It may be believed that it is wrong to flog offenders, but it is difficult to make such a claim unless it is known whether or not those flogged tend afterwards to commit more or fewer offences than those not flogged. It could be that flogging resulted in fewer reconvictions by offenders so dealt with, and yet it may still be held that it would be wrong to flog. But suppose that all those flogged subsequently lived good lives and all those not flogged returned to a life of crime. Could flogging then be considered to be unethical? It might be so argued if other aspects of flogging could be found which were relevant to the issue, but these other factors would need similar assessments. Some would argue that flogging in itself is ethical. The offender, they believe, should be given a taste of his own medicine, but if all those flogged return to crime and all those not flogged lived good lives it would be difficult to sustain the view that flogging was right. The extreme views on either side of the controversy regard the outcome of flogging as irrelevant.

Later in the book he gives another example: ‘if it was self-evident from research that capital punishment did prevent murder, would we feel the same about our ethical stand on attitudes towards capital punishment?’ Well, would we? These are, of course, hypothetical questions but nonetheless questions of a kind that sound research findings could generate.

final words

Some of what I have been saying may appear to raise more problems than solutions; perhaps that is because I am anxious that, in appreciating the enormous potentialities of research evidence for the improvement of practice and policy, we do not lose sight of its limitations. I have tried to draw attention to both aspects in my work over the last 40 years. It has sometimes been difficult to persuade practitioners that measurement, research and sound evidence were crucial. The typical objection was that social work could not be ‘mechanised’. Now, by contrast, one seems to be pushing at an open door, and that is extremely good news. Even so, we need to approach the development of evidence based work conceptually as well as practically and consider the complicated nature of evidence, judgement and values, as well as the relationship between them.

points raised in discussion

Is it true that only 20% of medical interventions are based on evidence, and 80% on judgement?

The balance between the two varies but has generally moved towards a greater component of evidence, albeit mediated by judgements. Medical literature has referred to ‘the leap in the dark’ with respect to certain treatments. This emphasises the problem of how best to deal

with uncertainty in the absence of sufficient evidence. If social work is to reduce the amount of uncertainty with which it currently has to grapple it has to mobilise whatever sound evidence is available.

What about the neutrality of research?

There are many issues around the politics of research. It is not politically neutral. It may be (and we hope it is) neutral with respect to how it is done; but it is not necessarily neutral in how it is used. It can be used for political justification or for political attack. One example of research being ignored for political reasons is to be found in the history of detention centres. By the time they were re-introduced as an important part of juvenile penal policy, research had already demonstrated conclusively that they were unsuccessful in reducing subsequent criminality. But the need for a response to fears about rising rates of juvenile delinquency overrode the lesson from research.

Do we need social workers who are research-literate, or research-competent, or both?

Their role is not that of researchers; but research-literacy (in the sense of being able to tap and use research) is crucial. As for competence in research that would be a bonus; but I do not consider it essential. What is necessary is for social workers to have the capacity to formulate their demands for research. I would like to see moves made to this end so that the questions that researchers look at are more often those that practitioners consider to be the most pressing. At the moment most of the subjects with which researchers deal seem to be shaped either from within the research community itself or by local or central 'management'. Perhaps the professional organisations should assume a greater responsibility for articulating practitioner demand for research.

The competence that especially needs to be nurtured is the ability to formulate the key questions. The severest challenge in research is to ask simple but telling questions. Almost anybody can ask complicated questions that are frequently impossible to address through research. The skill in formulating a good research question lies in choosing that which, once explored, casts light on issues in a way that takes us forward to new levels of understanding.

Carol Tozer

Framing questions and seeking proposals

research and the policy-making process

The political arena in which social workers and managers operate is increasingly characterised by three elements: performance management initiatives designed to ensure clarity of objectives, transparency of decision making based on clearly understood standards, and routine monitoring of progress towards specific goals. Within this framework, social workers are expected to offer interventions that are most likely to promote positive outcomes for children in need and their families. In order to do this, social workers must be clear about the evidence they use to underpin their decisions.

The words of Thomas Gradgrind come to mind here:

Now what I want is Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will be of any service to them. In this life we want nothing but Facts, sir; nothing but Facts! – Charles Dickens, *Hard Times*

This passage is relevant today for two reasons: Government's clear and proper emphasis upon improving outcomes for children in need as measured by the attainment of national priorities and accompanying performance indicators; and the growing desire, shared by social work professionals, to move towards evidence based practice. Both reasons ensure that research and research-related activities in the management of children's services are accorded a high profile.

Research can be defined as a 'systematic search for reliable knowledge'¹². That knowledge is crucial to the development of both social work policy and practice. For me, research can be characterised as the systematic search for reliable knowledge, and it is patently crucial to the development of both social work policy and practice. Research is essential not only for ensuring that social work intervention is predicated upon 'what works' in promoting the well-being of children and their families but also for the survival of the social work profession. It is no longer good enough to say that something works – the evidence must support such an assertion. And research is a vital component of this welcome move to more evidence based practice.

Of course, the business of helping people with complex problems is itself a complicated matter and not one that lends itself well to a strictly technical or rational approach to decision making. There are many variables, and the balance of these may change for individual children over time as their personal and social circumstances also change.

Decisions made by social workers about their professional intervention should be based on sound knowledge and well-reasoned arguments about the particular needs of children and families and the best available evidence of what is likely to be effective for them. This evidence based approach to social work practice implies a willingness to draw on research at three stages – conducting assessments, planning interventions and evaluating results. It calls for the use of interventions that have been proved to be effective, which in turn requires practitioners to be familiar with studies that have been conducted.

However, just as social work practice cannot be explained in technical-rational terms only, so research has its own brand of politics, characterised by a distinct set of rules of engagement. These rules are about who chooses the ‘problem’ to be researched, where the research is sited, who owns the project, the style and methods to be used, accessing the data, and how findings are disseminated. Each of these factors has the potential to create dissent between the different people or groups ‘participating’ in the research commissioning process. So, too, might the motive behind commissioning a particular piece of research, such as the wish to delay making a decision, or to reflect political in-fighting, or comply with a grant requirement, or promote some aspect of departmental policy or practice.

But, to focus on research commissioned solely to improve social work with children and their families, what should be borne in mind?

A good starting point for establishing rules of engagement is the Rothschild principle which established the notion of a customer-contractor relationship in research commissioned by Government:

Departments, as customers, define their requirements; contractors advise on the feasibility of meeting them and undertaking the work; and the arrangements between them must ensure that the objectives remain attainable within the reasonable costs.¹²

In other words, customers say what they want, contractors do it if they can, and the customer pays. It is a philosophy that has long determined how the Department of Health commissions research. It holds good for social care statutory and voluntary agencies also.

More than ever, the orthodoxy among social care agency directors is that their agencies cannot afford to spend money on research which does not provide evidence that can be applied to local policy or practice. Nor do they tend to commission research for long-term information requirements. The focus is invariably on current needs.

The key task of officers charged with commissioning research is obvious: to secure the maximum amount of useful information with the money available to them. Effective research commissioning strategies and activities call for the clear identification of policy or practice problems or issues which, in turn, determine the key research questions to be answered. These questions should suggest appropriate methodologies and, if all goes according to plan, the results produced

will provide clear evidence about what should be changed, adapted, retained or abandoned in order to achieve desired outcomes.

If only it were so easy! The above words represent a grossly oversimplified and exaggerated description of the relationship between research, policy and practice. The paragraph implies both a clearer process and a greater impact for research than is generally the case. Although there are examples of research informing legislation (as with the *Children Act 1989*), and of research helping to frame local discussion (as with the *Blue and Green Books*^{13,14} and subsequent debates about refocusing services), it is often very difficult to identify precisely how research is absorbed into social work practice.

There is a thriving policy science literature on the relationship between research and policy and on different models of the research-policy-practice relationship conundrum.

Under the banner of rational models there is the assumption that policy making is a rational process which uses scientifically rigorous research and other data to provide the evidence needed to make decisions. Inherent in this model is the assumption that researchers produce ‘facts’ – value free, objective evidence.

The trouble is that policy is not created in a sterile environment. The real world of national and local policy making is messy, circuitous and often adversarial. Public opinion can ride roughshod over the evidence produced by the most rigorous randomised controlled trial. So, too, can the views of influential individuals. And there may well be truth in the oft-quoted comment that policy makers use research as a drinker uses a lamp post – for support rather than illumination. One suspects that those responsible for policy making:

have great difficulty disentangling the lessons they have learned from research from their whole configuration of knowledge. They do not catalogue research separately; they do not remember sources and citations. With the best will in the world all they can usually say is that in the course of their work they hear about a great deal of research and they are sure it affects what they think and do.³¹

Suspensions aside, however, the Department of Health is increasingly explicit in its determination to base policy on research findings and to fund policy-relevant research. Indeed, the way in which it operates its Research Liaison Groups suggests that it gives great care to the way it facilitates the development of its research agenda.

In contrast to the rational model of policy making, the enlightenment model of the research-policy process suggests that the theories, concepts and findings of research filter into policy in a diffuse way, over a period of time, and through a complex web of different research and policy groups.

Common to both these models is the assumption that research is a force for change. Another common thread in the policy science literature, therefore, is that the closer the researcher is to the policy

maker, the more influential the research will be. Patricia Thomas, former Assistant Director of the Nuffield Foundation, has identified three strategies that researchers adopt when trying to influence the policy agenda: the insider model, in which the researcher knows and works with the organisational system or government machine; the gadfly model, in which the researcher seeks to challenge the organisation or government machine; and the limestone model, where research results are simply left to find their own way through the fissures in the system¹⁵. These models apply equally to the use of research at the local agency level.

research issues for social care agencies

Ideally, research findings will help social care agencies decide about the continuation of a programme or practice; how it can be improved; the feasibility of introducing a programme or practice elsewhere; and the allocation of resources between competing alternatives. In reality, however, social research is used alongside other contributions to the policy-making process such as budget limits, legal requirements and political preference. In other words, research is but one of many influences shaping policy and practice.

The fundamental role of research in a social care agency is to provide high quality, relevant, accessible and timely information to bear upon policy and programme decisions. The agency must be able to use the results of its research. This means that the researcher must seek answers to questions posed by decision makers rather than pursue their own interpretation of the research agenda. Although the researcher may have freedom in how the study is designed, the scope of the research is set by policy makers and programme managers.

The highly applied nature of local social services research requires researchers to develop good working relationships with their policy customers. This can be difficult at times, as, for instance, when the evaluation of a unit or programme is imposed by senior management and is viewed by the programme manager and staff as a way of justifying cuts in resources. Relationships between researchers and policy customers may be soured also by the different time scales they are operating: research takes time, but politicians and senior managers invariably require a fast response to newly emerging policy or practice dilemmas.

Support for research should be evident at each level in the agency, with elected members or trustees, the director and other senior managers giving a clear lead. Their explanations of how they have based decisions on a careful consideration of available evidence will help promote a culture of exploring the effectiveness of interventions and improving the evidence base of social work practice.

There are several ways in which social care agencies can organise research. The main options are these:

- to carry out their own research, using researchers employed or engaged by the agency
- to commission research from independent researchers or from a research or educational institution (either as a single agency or in partnership with other sections or departments interested in exploring the same questions)
- to conduct research as a joint venture between agency staff and the external researchers mentioned above
- to fund research that will be both conducted and published by an independent researcher
- to core fund a research unit and negotiate for individual pieces of work within the limits of that core funding (as in the Social Services Research and Information Unit funded by Hampshire and Portsmouth SSDs).

There are fundamental differences between academic and in-house researchers, and these differences tend to emerge at the end of a project. For instance, academic researchers may equate dissemination with a publication; their research becomes part of a wider and growing body of knowledge which, in turn, enhances their reputation for expertise in a particular area. Indeed, it is on the basis of that expertise that they are invited to do work for agencies, and that expertise might cover a narrow specialism, such as children with disabilities or children looked after in residential homes.

In contrast, in-house researchers tend to be commissioned on the basis of technical know-how and methodological expertise. This statement is evidenced in **research in practice's** survey of SSD research posts¹⁶, which revealed that only eleven of the 43 researchers in the 25 member agencies worked solely in children and family services, with the remaining 32 researchers covering the full range of service areas.

Whether commissioning an external academic or an in-house researcher, the process is the same and should be applied rigorously. The steps in the research commissioning process are as follows:

- establish the research agenda
- determine the key research priorities within that agenda
- frame the key research questions for each priority
- develop the research commissioning documentation
- issue the invitation to tender
- evaluate the respective merits of each application and make a choice
- determine the research management protocols and procedures (such as pay, quality assurance of the process, dissemination mechanisms including publication rights, any necessary disclaimers, and future access to any databases that might be created as a result of the research)

- draw up the contract
- clarify who will monitor progress, and how
- determine arrangements for editorial oversight of draft reports
- accept the final report
- disseminate findings.

establishing the research agenda

Seebohm was one of the most influential advocates of the role of research in the social work profession. He called it ‘an insurance against complacency and stagnation’¹.

How should it be organised? Whitaker and Archer write that:

formulating research purposes is done step by step, starting from an interest in some practice issue; restating the interest in the form of a question which represents one’s overall purpose; judging whether the practice interest is a researchable issue and, if it is not, abandoning or restating it; making existing practice wisdom explicit and examining the relevant literature; and ‘unpacking’ the generally stated overall research purpose by specifying the sub-purposes contained within it.¹⁷

In a later article, they describe six different practice-related types of research¹⁸. These are about:

- understanding better a particular client population
- understanding better a particular situation or context affecting clients
- understanding the process of a service system or helping network
- evaluating the impact and outcomes of a particular practice procedure or care system
- comparing the outcomes of different practices
- evaluating the impact of local or national policy or legislation on either a caseload or the way social workers approach their task.

The policy science literature suggests seven different types of social research that might be useful to a social care agency:

Policy content research seeks to explain the genesis and development of a particular policy, focusing on how it emerged, how it was implemented, and with what results.

Policy process research is concerned with the stages through which programmes pass. It attempts to assess the influence of different events and actors on the development of the issue, looking in particular at the way in which a policy or programme is implemented.

Policy output research addresses the end results of programmes, looking at levels of expenditure or emerging services and seeking to explain why provision may vary between different areas or for different groups of people.

Evaluation research is outcome oriented. It sets out to measure the effects of a programme against the goals it set out to achieve, and can be helpful in informing subsequent decision making about the programme.

Baseline data is marshalled (as in the *Matching Needs and Services*¹⁹ audit methodology) in order to enable policy makers and programme managers make informed decisions.

Process advocacy attempts to improve decision making via the development of planning systems and new approaches to option appraisal.

Policy advocacy describes the activity of a social researcher, either alone or through a pressure group, pressing for the adoption of specific options or ideas in the policy process.

In other words, research can be commissioned at any stage of the policy-making process, for a number of different purposes. Those responsible for commissioning research must be clear about what research will achieve and where it fits into the decision-making matrix.

framing the questions

There is a simple checklist of key questions to explore before deciding whether or not to commission a piece of research.

- What are the key research questions and how can I break them down? Clarity at this stage will save time later on and ensure that you are more likely to get the information you need. Grandiose areas of enquiry such as ‘what works for looked after children?’ need to be disaggregated into discrete questions.
- Can I get any of this information from existing sources and, if so, will this information provide all I need?
- If I do commission the research, what policies, procedures and practice do I intend the results to inform?
- Is the agency able and willing to implement any changes as a result of the research?
- What is my time frame for policy or practice changes, and can the research deliver to this timetable?

Bob Broad and Colin Fletcher provide a useful aide-memoire of pertinent questions that might help practitioners determine the scope of a research project they are planning²⁰. The following adaptation of their list offers a suggested set of questions for those commissioning research from within a social care agency.

what are the questions for me

- as a person with values
- as a professional with responsibilities
- as a post-holder with specific lack of information
- as someone influenced by both the national and local political climate?

what methodological approaches

- are not possible – because of time or other constraints
- are not ethical – because they might be deemed too intrusive into people’s lives
- might be preferred by colleagues—because, for instance, they seem to pose less of an inspection of their practice
- might be preferred by users
- can I find out about

(Applied research can take many forms: it might be experimental, archival, observational or based on surveys. It might be descriptive or evaluative. It might take months or years. It might aim to solve immediate problems or increase long-term understanding. Take time to check different options and to see which have been applied to the issues you want to explore.)

- can I afford – given my funding limit, time available, the scope of the research and my preferred methodology?

what will the likely experiences be of

- getting started
- getting staff involved
- getting service users involved
- upsets and delays?

You need to prepare people for what is likely to happen and how that will impact on their life and work. Consider, too, whether you should build in additional time to cope with the emergencies that might occur because of individual circumstances or the demands of unforeseen national or local policy performance requirements.

in making sense of the data

- Will I need any particular skills to decipher the data? You will want your researchers to provide information that is accessible to colleagues and users as well as yourself.
- How should I liaise with the researcher so as to be alerted to any surprises? You want to know about those as they occur rather than wasting time discovering at the end some practice issue that could have been addressed much earlier.
- What if I disagree with the researcher’s interpretation of the findings? Or I don’t like what is emerging? Or I realise that senior managers might be uncomfortable with the findings?
- How can the results best be communicated to staff and to service users?

what difficulties might arise if

- the research is overtaken by events
- the results are contrary to political preferences
- poor practice is revealed—and needs to be fed back to staff
- the research provides no clear answers to the questions posed?

seeking proposals

When developing tender documentation, those commissioning research must ensure that the scope and content of the research will fall within the agency's expressed objectives, offers an effective means of carrying out those objectives, and falls within funding limits. They should also bear in mind that the greater the information provided to researchers, the better their proposals should be. It will help, therefore, to set out for researchers:

- the background to the research
- the aims and objectives of the practice or policy area
- an overview of the services provided to users
- a list of the key research or evaluation questions
- a deadline for completing the research
- an overview of the research management arrangements
- expectations about dissemination
- requirements about ethical clearance (especially in relation to access to service users), safeguards for participants, ownership of the data.

Such guidelines for research specifications are equally applicable to research being commissioned internally: in-house researchers will find it just as difficult as external researchers to design robust research studies without such information.

Managers should evaluate the research proposals received against the following criteria:

- the academic qualifications or standing, and qualities and abilities, of the individuals or institution to be doing the research
- the quality of the research proposals and their likelihood of leading to results which will improve knowledge or understanding
- the suitability and practicality of the proposed methodology
- whether the cost involved represents good value, taking into account the likelihood of the research achieving the desired outcome and the potential value of that outcome to the agency.

Consider, too, whether basic scientific criteria are being met. Is the logic of the enquiry sound? Are the aims clear, and the methodology appropriate? What evidence is there that the researchers have the capacity and resources to complete the research successfully? Are results sufficiently controlled for results to have general application? Have the ethical considerations of service user involvement been attended to?

External advice and recommendations on the proposals from suitably qualified persons can be helpful here. These peer reviews should be sought from people who are independent of both the researcher and, ideally, the research institution in which the researcher is based.

commissioning research: some simple rules

To sum up, and without wishing to ‘dumb down’ the research commissioning process, here are some guidelines.

know your questions

Having a clear idea of the questions you want researched will help you define the remit and focus of activity. It will also ensure that you are not left with a mass of data that leaves you looking for the questions it seems capable of answering.

falsification is better than verification

This is a relevant consideration if the research is testing a specific hypothesis. The preferred standard is falsification. This means looking for an instance counter to the hypothesis. If one is found, the hypothesis is not supported; if one is not found, the hypothesis is supported. It is a more rigorous standard than verification, where you ‘prove’ a hypothesis by finding one single example of what you are seeking.

define your terms

Just as people’s views vary, so does the way in which they use words and classify events. Children’s Services Plans differ in their descriptions of children in need. Local authorities differ in the way they describe user groups and practice areas. To avoid confusion, take care to clarify your terms and to agree them with the researcher.

be clear about the practical applications of the research

Identify the area of social work practice or organisational policy or strategy the research is intended to improve. Keep that in mind when proceeding through the research commissioning and management process.

Academic criticism might be the stuff of progress and development – but there is little point in research that only a few people can draw on, or that takes so long that it has passed its useful time limit. And, as ever, fiscal constraints play their part. My previous small authority faced a cut of £337,000 in Family and Children’s Services as a result of changes to the Standard Spending Assessment. Agencies are unlikely to be interested in commissioning research that fails to offer practical and early solutions.

disseminate, disseminate, disseminate!

If the management of research and the subsequent dissemination of findings is thought of as a purely technical task, the full benefits of the exercise will be lost. Dissemination should be a vital part of organisational learning. It is particularly helpful if the local practice implications of research findings are stated clearly in any final and

summary report. If any complicated statistical procedures have been used, make sure the researcher explains what they mean in clear, uncomplicated language. And, since social work has a predominantly oral culture, the importance of oral communication should not be overlooked.

Peter Marsh

A researcher's perspective

The fact that **research in practice** has set aside time to consider the commissioning of research is a significant step for the research community. It represents the new level of dialogue that is occurring between researchers, policy makers and practitioners. At Government level there has been a significant link for many years, but beyond this there have been too few opportunities to make sure that policy makers and practitioners get the best out of researchers. Good evaluation work requires close working relationships between researchers and policy makers. The following reflections on the world of the applied researcher take a journey through the different stages of a research programme, asking at each stage 'what is most likely to help researchers produce high-quality relevant research?'

what is a 'good' research funder?

A good funder will have a clear idea about what they want to support, but will recognise the value of dialogue with researchers and be clear about the different roles of each party. It is helpful if funders have some experience or appreciation of the constraints of the applied researcher's world. If this is not available in-house a consultant from the research world could be employed to advise on both the process of producing a tender and the relevant templates for the final product. From a researcher's perspective it is also important to provide sensible budgets. This is not just a plea for more money, but a plea for realism, which again should be based on a good understanding of the research world. There is still a view that academics, unlike others, are able to do work without fees, and that somehow, uniquely, research projects should not be subject to overheads. If very small sums are available it may be best to engage research consultancy rather than try to carry out the full project on a budget that is unrealistically low.

developing applied research

How might you judge if a researcher is responding sensibly to a tender or some other commissioning document? Good researchers will check that they fully understand what is being requested. What the customer wants is of prime importance. But debate and negotiation can be helpful, to clarify objectives and to ensure that these can be achieved. Failure to do this tends to show in the final product. So creating opportunities for dialogue will be an important element of a good tendering process.

Good researchers and good tender documents will be conscious of credibility and so will promote a research design that will be appropriate to its audience as well as its subject matter. A practitioner

team, for example, might welcome a report that incorporates case studies and other qualitative data. A planning section might prefer a more quantitative, number-based approach, and directors and local politicians might be more interested in comparisons within and between different localities. Understanding the audience for the research is very important.

research time and development work

Good preparation is crucial, but it can amount to a considerable investment before a project gets funded (or rejected!). It is likely to impose a strain on applied researchers, certainly those based in the old universities where there are no internally-funded dedicated research posts and people will be juggling research development with substantial teaching, management and administrative duties. It is different for some of the new universities, where research development posts have been created from the recently-acquired income from their new money from the Research Assessment Exercise.

In the end, of course, researchers have to make a judgement on the cost effectiveness of early design work. Decisions will be influenced by various factors, including relationships with potential funders, the importance they attach to the project, and personal interest and commitment.

The nature of the tendering process may also be relevant. Open tenders, encouraging substantial numbers of proposals, will be eschewed by many on the grounds that it is wasteful of everyone's time for so many people to work up a considered proposal with relatively low chance of success. And there are disadvantages in being asked to engage in substantial re-drafts of proposals, especially if others are being asked to do the same and your proposal is being circulated to them. The intellectual copyright in a proposal should be respected.

the reasons for doing applied research

Understanding why researchers engage in research may be helpful to attracting the best proposals. Three significant elements of researcher motivation are intellectual interest, the desire to have some impact on the world, and the pressure to research and publish for career advancement. So, emphasising some aspects of the intellectual puzzle involved in the study, noting its proposed impact on the policies of the organisation, and providing possibilities for publishing will all help make tendering more attractive to researchers.

For the old universities the research enterprise is a major part of their work. As Sheffield's Vice-Chancellor has often said, the University's external research income is equal to that generated by all 60 of the new universities. Publications generated from research are the lifeblood of the old universities, as their quality directly affects the amount of funding via the Research Assessment Exercise, and this re-emphasises

the need, at least for these old universities, to provide ways to encourage publication as part of research. It is also, of course, an excellent way of promoting evidence based practice, although it may require some courage for agencies to open their services to external scrutiny in this way.

access and support: getting the job done

Most research projects struggle with questions of access: to data, to professionals, to service users. Access is crucial for completion on time, and for quality of work. Good researchers will have sound mechanisms in place to ensure confidentiality and to minimise the calls on people's time. Unfortunately, they often struggle with the fact that access is given too little attention at a management level but allowed too much discretion at an individual level. For example, research use of records that is agreed with managers comes up against practitioners who do not want to allow it, resulting in time-wasting discussions with different members of staff. One solution is to make sure that a relatively senior manager, with good understanding of research, is accessible to the research team and happy to accept the job of 'troubleshooting' problems that might arise.

Many projects have advisory or steering groups that can also help keep the research on track. But, in common with everything else, these take time and money and their brief, membership and frequency of meeting should be considered carefully. In particular, it is worth remembering that reports to them also cost time and money, some of which might be better spent on the research itself.

feedback and dissemination

It is important at the start to clarify the framework for feedback and dissemination. This too costs time and money but, as one of the most important elements of the work, it merits serious thought. Dissemination is not development, and linking dissemination with a specific development programme will often be useful. The skills involved in dissemination may be different from those held by the researcher (for example, a training element may be needed) and advance planning to make sure that relevant staff are available at the appropriate points in the timetable may be useful. If research is intended to be used as development material, the early design work needs to take account of this. For example, a project that hopes to promote a training programme as a means of exploring the findings might want to include some case studies as part of the research design, so that trainers can make good use of the material that is produced.

Finally, it is important to note that providing feedback via workshops, seminars and meetings is an additional task for the researcher that will, inevitably, only be a limited part of their job. It will

probably not help their own career very much, and it will often be done because of their commitment to producing better services. Researchers will be encouraged in their feedback work if they can see the agency taking serious note of the work that has been done (even if the 'serious note' that they are taking is to reject some of the implications!).

the researcher as 'architect'?

Perhaps the good researcher can be thought of as an architect – someone who translates the aims and aspirations of the funder, but at the same time suggests different approaches and uses their professional knowledge to improve and enhance what the funder is searching for. The relationship between researcher and client will play an important role in determining the outcome of the work. It should be close, it may well involve tension, and it is likely to involve compromise by each party. It demands trust, understanding and business efficiency. It takes hard work on both sides to produce research of the highest quality.

Liza Catan

Making the contract and keeping the research on track

Having launched a research project, the last thing the research manager wants is a three-year silence while the research team beavers away and you get on with other things, and then a massive report thumps onto your desk, the original purpose long forgotten and the report written with no particular audience in mind.

How do you avoid such a disaster, so well described here by Carolyn Davies, Senior Research Liaison Officer at the Department of Health? This paper outlines what might be done between the initial phase of the research management process – where the questions the research is to address are framed, the project put out to tender and proposals selected for funding – and the final phase, when the research is disseminated and applied back to the original questions.

protocol development

An early task is to develop the final version of the proposal, including instruments such as questionnaires and interview schedules.

In many Government-based research departments a considerable amount of the final detail of a project is fixed in this way, with the researchers, research manager and policy officers discussing and agreeing the final form. This model of joint working is more typical of research commissioned by policy making or practitioner bodies than of academic research, such as that funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, where the research proposal is rarely negotiated after the commissioning process is complete. Rather, proposals are subject to severe peer review and need to be specified in great detail in order to be funded at all. In this model, the users of research (practitioners or policy makers) tend to be included in more remote ways – sitting on initial Commissioning Panels or Advisory Groups, or brought in at the dissemination phase.

Under both models, the process of joint working can be beneficial or deadening, depending on how it is done. At best, all three parties – users, researchers and the research manager – work well together, respecting the distinct contribution of each. At worst, researchers and users display amazing ignorance of each other's work and of the different constraints under which each operates.

Policy makers may want to impose conditions on the research which demonstrate nothing but their lack of understanding of how research is conducted and what counts as a valid finding. They may have to work to extremely short time scales and expect researchers to do the same, forgetting that good research often needs space for the researchers to do some experimenting and thinking, to try things out,

to digest data, turn it into findings and draw out conclusions. On the other hand, researchers may risk being compared with the Romantic artist, wishing to remain unfettered by the realities of budgets or timetables, or even the original research questions, if something more interesting crops up.

basic principles of research management

Things tend to go wrong when there is insufficient mutual respect at the outset for each other's tasks and for the separate but equal contribution that each brings to the project. The task of the research manager is to liaise between the opposing camps, helping to create a good working relationship. Policy makers need to appreciate that valid evidence on which to base policies cannot be produced in haste or with an ever-fluid methodology. Unreasonable demands need to be held at bay while the researchers get on with the agreed protocol. Equally, the research manager must monitor closely the progress of the work so that information is delivered to the policy makers in the time agreed, and so that researchers are alerted to appropriate opportunities to feed their thinking into policy processes.

Gentle assertion, persistence and a stock of well-rehearsed arguments are the stock-in-trade of a good research manager. Those qualities may help tackle the difficulties that can arise in attempting this sort of mediation. These may stem from the imbalance of power within organisations. Disparities in status are common, with research departments often considered of lower status than policy departments. So, too, are disparities in seniority, with research managers often younger or less senior than the policy colleagues they are advising. The language of the Rothschild principle (the customer/contractor idea) has not been helpful here: while customers are always deemed to be right, policy customers are not inevitably right. Sometimes they need the research manager to help them clarify what they want and how research can help. This is hard to achieve if the research manager is cowed and their professional expertise not valued.

Another essential tool is a solid and well-respected Advisory Group, to provide expertise in areas where the research manager is not an authority, to provide sound, impartial advice, and to be heeded by the policy makers. A good research manager will know who the experts are and have sufficient clout to persuade these high-status people to devote time to advising the project.

monitoring progress

The next task is monitoring progress to ensure that the research runs according to the agreed protocol. Is the timetable being adhered to? Delays occur for a variety of reasons, such as illness, staff disputes, or unexpected difficulties getting the sample together or collecting data.

Ethical snags may crop up even now because, although ethical committee clearance should be agreed before a contract is granted, the process is often so slow that the research has to make some sort of start before it arrives. If objections are raised at this stage the research manager may be able to simply discuss options with both sides and agree a way forward. Or help from the Advisory Group or others may be needed, either to handle the institution with whom access is to be negotiated or to tease out, from their experience, why it may be refusing to co-operate with the research. If this does not resolve the problem the research manager may just have to bow to reality and take the lead in re-structuring the timetable, thinking through the cost implications and then monitoring against the new deadlines.

An example of the need for restructuring is provided by an evaluation of a pioneering treatment programme for sexually abused children. The sample was to comprise 75 cases, accumulated over a six-month period and followed up a year later. During the Cleveland crisis, when there was much publicity about the difficulty of diagnosing child sexual abuse, referrals to the treatment programme dropped. The accumulation of the sample slowed down, requiring an extension to the project. Regular contact with the research team meant that the research manager identified and dealt with the problem as it arose rather than getting an unfinished study at the end of the original funding period.

The second thing to monitor is adherence to the agreed aims of the project. The research may start to drift off course as policy colleagues seek to divert it towards one of the many new issues falling into their in-trays. The research manager has to decide whether new material might distort the original study. For example, could a few questions about HIV prevention be added to an interview survey about general health and health care services for the Bangladeshi community in Tower Hamlets? It was felt inappropriate, for fear that asking such questions in that particular community would seriously affect people's willingness to co-operate with the core of the research.

Researchers' interests, too, develop along the way. This is particularly so with highly qualitative research of the 'grounded theory' sort, where the second and subsequent stages of work are developed on the basis of earlier findings. The researchers may decide, on the basis of preliminary work, that different questions are worth pursuing or, more radically, that the wrong questions were asked in the first place. For instance, the agreed focus of the research might have been outcomes of service provision, with questions exploring whether users have become healthier, or less addicted, or more able to cope with life, or more able to live independently. But the researchers may conclude that whilst these are the concerns of service providers and funders, users talk instead about the quality of life, or feeling supported and secure. The research manager will need to mediate a discussion

between the policy makers who fund the service and commissioned the research and the research team. It may be necessary to involve a new group of stakeholders, such as the staff and service users being researched, to help decide whether the research should be re-focused and, if so, to work out the practical implications.

Sometimes conflicts arise that cannot be reconciled, as when the senior managers of an HIV/AIDS service adamantly refused to be evaluated, with the result that the researchers and research commissioners had to make do with a thorough process description rather than an evaluation of outcomes. Thankfully, such extreme conflicts are unusual. And they tend to happen because at least one party refuses to co-operate, rather than being the result of drift that a research manager should have arrested.

Sometimes people simply lose interest. New issues fill the minds of the policy makers or practitioners on whose behalf the research was commissioned, or people move on and the collective memory fades. There are two strategies to consider here. The first relates to the initial phase – framing the research questions. Policy makers and practitioners often ask for answers to questions that are very much of the moment. If these require research, rather than straightforward information gathering, the work will always involve an element of exploration and is therefore likely to take some time. It is the research manager's task to ensure that the issue is sufficiently important and enduring to justify a research investment.

The second solution is to keep people involved in and informed about progress of the research. A practicable timetable of interim reporting is the key to success. Arranged sensitively, it will benefit everyone. It allows the research manager to take stock at crucial moments. Policy makers and practitioners can be involved in key decisions and so kept interested in the project. Researchers can get on with their work, knowing that there will be opportunities to reflect on developments at agreed intervals and, hopefully, feeling that they can contact the research manager at other times if things start to go wrong.

analysis of data and the final report

The next stage is to organise discussions about the analysis of the data and the final report or reports. For research based in statutory or voluntary sector organisations, as opposed to the more academic type of research funded by the Research Councils, it is often useful to involve the policy makers or practitioners at the point where the researchers are on the brink of making sense of their data and seeing what story it tells. They are unlikely to use all their data in their final report. A meeting at this stage gives a late chance to ensure that relevant questions are addressed as fully as possible and to sharpen up the focus of the final report.

Some of the data may lend itself to be used in policy-relevant ways that were not envisaged at the start of the project. Researchers will generally be happy to do this, and might have spotted it themselves during discussions with policy colleagues. But the research manager should not insist on extra tasks unless there is enough time and money for them to be done well, either within the existing timetable or by agreeing an extension. Policy officers and practitioners might need to be reminded of how long it can take to analyse data and how crucial it is to do this correctly and thoroughly.

And so to the final task – guiding the researchers to produce the sort of report that is wanted. This is the most controversial issue in research management at present. The challenge is to achieve the correct balance between having a report with enough technical detail for it to be evaluated as research, and having a report that can be read quickly and will leave busy policy makers and practitioners clear about the main points relevant to their work. No-one has yet got this right.

Until recent years, final reports to Government departments and Research Councils, and no doubt other funders, looked like PhD theses – massive tomes of loosely-bound, double-spaced, single-sided pages which covered every aspect of the research in grim and enormous detail and chronological order, starting with a massive review of previous literature and ending with a discursive section about the implications for policy. Their advantage was that they could be validated in the classic way that all science is validated, by peer review. This enabled policy makers and practitioners to have confidence that, no matter how they used the findings, they were based on the best possible evidence, or at least on evidence whose limitations were well understood. The disadvantage was that they were too long to read.

Things improved when researchers, encouraged by research managers, began to produce excellent executive summaries, no longer than four sides of A4. The trail-blazer here was the Joseph Rowntree Foundation whose *Findings* reached parts most other research reports had failed to reach. Most research bodies now publish complete short reports, in user-friendly language and format, and distribute them widely. There is no reason to doubt that such publications are read by busy people and do have some influence on policy and practice. But a note of caution is perhaps needed, lest the final reports now required (and which are often copy edited heavily before they are published) concentrate too exclusively on ‘telling the story’ of the research and omit too much detail for the research to be evaluated properly.

The dilemma is how to check on findings that run counter to practice experience and earlier published studies when details about the sample, interview schedule and data analysis are tucked away in appendices and lacking the detail of a report submitted to a peer-reviewed journal. A common response is for funders and researchers

to adopt a dual approach, producing an accessible report and also submitting papers to peer-reviewed journals so that the research is evaluated at some future point. The worry here is that policy recommendations are made and adopted long before the research is published in journals, irrespective of possible inefficiency or damage stemming from invalid research findings.

Research managers may have to work with researchers to produce a document that complies with the organisation's policy on the sort of report it wants to receive. It will be important to try and ensure that the report includes sufficient technical detail to allow for independent evaluation, and perhaps to press for the organisation to adopt a policy of having studies read by independent reviewers before publication. In addition, press for a slice of the budget to be used to produce a variety of short, punchy publications that will appeal to the different audiences for the research, and to others who might be interested in the findings.

Hugh McLaughlin

Using the findings: tips for better outcomes

A dip into some commentary on the different worlds of research and practice might provide a good backdrop to the search for better outcomes. It is some years since Stuart pointed to the

stark gap that exists between the dominant providers of research – academics – and the intended users – managers. However good the research in academic terms, it does not appear to be a product which meets the demands of the client.²¹

Why is it that researchers so often claim – even now – that their research has not had its intended impact on practice whilst managers and practitioners bemoan the lack of research that is relevant and applicable to their work? The different approaches of each group (summarised in the box below, and then explained) might provide some useful clues to why it is so difficult for managers and researchers to close the gap.

issue	researchers	managers
questions	why	how
decision making	complex	simple
concepts	develop	use
time scales	short	long
outcomes	substantial report written	executive briefing oral
audience	academic	practice
politics	unaware	very aware

questions

As Stuart notes, academics are inclined towards the ideal world and managers towards the real one. The work of academics emphasises dispassionate precision and ‘why’ questions whilst managers work in a world of feelings, messiness and questions that start with ‘how’.

decision making

It is, of course, a truism to say that management and research have different objectives. Research tends to complicate issues by drawing out complexities, whilst managers want things simplified to the point that action becomes possible.

(A manager’s need is) for prescriptive statements and clear actionable advice rather than probing analysis and commentaries. Indeed, researchers who are retained by practitioners to be ‘problem solvers’ often turn out to be ‘problem finders’. Rather than give prescriptive solutions they reveal the full extent and complexity of the situation.²²

concepts

Gopineth and Hoffman²³ suggest that managers are more interested in the use of concepts whereas researchers are more interested in developing them.

time scales

Time scales are different, with researchers under pressure from short and demanding deadlines and, as a consequence, from more frequent changes in employment.

outcomes

There are also different expectations of research outcomes, with researchers favouring a substantial report that does justice to their hard work, and managers preferring an executive summary that highlights the key issues and points for action. Social work is a practice-based activity with a strong oral tradition, whereas research is a written activity with success measured by the number and quality of publications produced.

audience

Ackroyd suggests that researchers prefer writing for academic rather than practitioner audiences²⁴. This has probably become more pronounced since the introduction of the Research Assessment Exercise.

politics

And, last on the list, researchers are likely to be unaware of the organisation's internal politics whilst managers will be only too aware of the climate that envelops them.

The above summary is intended to highlight the different priorities of practice managers and researchers that need to be acknowledged and addressed in any collaborative piece of work. Fortunately, there are plenty of successful joint ventures that show that this is possible.

tips for better outcomes**be sure the problem justifies research**

What is known already about the problem that concerns you? Has it been researched before? Is new research likely to be of benefit? If so, how and why? Reflect before you commission. Remind yourself that high expectations can be dashed, often for no discernible reason.

Sometimes the best executed research changes nothing, is misrepresented or ignored. Other times a small study can have an effect on policy that few would have thought possible.²⁵

be clear why you are commissioning research

Think about how you will use the research findings. Do this before commissioning the research, not after the work is complete. It may be that research is wanted to help pave the way for the introduction of a new policy or structure. If so, the research user will probably have decided what they want confirmed and how the information will be used. If the research is more open ended, the findings may get lost if no-one has a view about how they might be used to improve practice.

think about the type and method of research and demands on staff time

What type of study will be best – research about theory, action or policy? *Theoretical research* tends to be used for reporting statistically significant results and to produce knowledge to advance understanding, usually within a single social science discipline²⁶. *Action research* has two main features: first, a belief that the best way of learning about an organisation is through attempting to change it, and second, a belief that the people most likely to be affected by, or involved in, implementing change should be involved as much as possible in the research process²⁷. *Policy research* is concerned primarily with knowledge for action. It includes theoretical considerations, and it describes and reviews how well existing policy is working²⁶.

Action research or policy research are likely to be of most use to social services departments and voluntary organisations.

Different research methods produce different types of data, and they require different sorts of relationships between researcher and researched. Questionnaires can be fast and economical, getting to a large number of respondents and providing data that can be aggregated for policy discussions. Interview methods offer greater flexibility in the range and quality of response elicited and are particularly helpful in understanding processes or the meanings and significance people attach to actions²⁷. Another option is to extract information from case files or reports. Staff interest and availability might be other factors to bear in mind when deciding which method to use.

consider equal opportunity issues

Research is not a neutral activity. Be alert to equal opportunity considerations. It is not for nothing that disabled people have suggested not co-operating with any research that does not fall within the social model of disability²⁸.

different groups will need different information

Think about who needs information and how best to make it accessible. What suits elected members may not be right for managers or practitioners. Promote the messages from research widely, but in different ways, and include all who have contributed to the data, including service users as well as staff²⁵.

Be adventurous about inspiring change and plan your dissemination as early as possible – through reports, workshops, major launches, training exercises, short articles, video and CD ROM.

make good use of a reference group

Be wary of leaving the researchers ‘to get on with it’. A reference or research group can help monitor the project, solve the inevitable practical problems that will crop up, act as a ‘reality check’ for initial findings, and promote discussion about the potential implications of findings.

decide a publication strategy at the outset

Who will decide whether the results get published? What medium should you aim for – a ‘good news’ item in the local press, a short article in a popular social work magazine, an academic article in a refereed journal? Will the agency be named? And who has final editorial authority over what is written? Mistakes can have long-term negative consequences for research participants²⁹.

don’t expect research to answer all your problems

Theory is never certain. It only provides ‘good enough’ explanation and understanding until something better comes along.³⁰

Research findings will not tell you what to do next. The final report is not the end of the matter, rather another step along the way. The use you make of the results will depend on your start questions – about what you wanted to change, and why, and how, and for whose benefit.

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