



Towards a Research and Development (R&D) Strategy – Executive Summary

Background

Changing Lives (Scottish Executive, 2006) proposed that there should be a R&D Strategy for social services in Scotland. The vision for the Strategy is:

To improve the outcomes for service users in Scotland by basing the design, development and delivery of social services on sound research & strong evidence.

Since October 2006 a national Steering Group has overseen the work on the Strategy and agreed that its purpose is:

To increase the quantity and quality of research activity, and its dissemination and integration into practice, in order to improve and develop social services.

An important aspect of the Strategy is that it should encompass knowledge creation and the use of research in all aspects of social services. Social services is the term used in the Regulation of Care (Scotland) Act (2001) and is used throughout Strategy documents to define scope.

Why do we need a R&D Strategy?

Our history in social services is one of pressure on resources leading to a failure to learn from experience consistently and systematically and an under-use of knowledge that we have gained. We need systems and processes based on continuous learning that give us an accountable workforce where there is a sound evidence base for decisions about service design, development and delivery. Evidence-informed practice can be represented as:

Evidence + Practice Wisdom + Service Users' Needs = Evidence-informed Practice
(Research in Practice, 2006)

The evidence may be drawn from a range of sources but well-conducted research and service review is of vital importance in helping to ensure that users receive services that have been carefully and routinely evaluated to show their efficacy and appropriateness.

The five Change Programmes which have been developed from Changing Lives (Scottish Executive, 2006) all need to be underpinned by relevant evidence as shown below:

- Performance Improvement: we need to research and evaluate in order to know what works and why, and to create knowledge on which to base future decisions

- Service Development: standards and plans need to be based on effective practice and accumulated practice wisdom
- Workforce Development: to be competent, confident and valued staff need to be able to link their practice to theory/research and strategies to develop the workforce need to be based on best practice in learning and development
- Practice Governance: accountable, safe and effective practice need to be based on evidence derived from research and knowledge creation
- Leadership and Management: managers need to be well-informed, research-aware, research-literate and able to instil intellectual curiosity in staff

To achieve this we need a broadly-based robust research infrastructure that supports effective knowledge exchange, good social science, increased research capacity and capability - that is, more people producing more and better quality knowledge – and organisational structures and processes that put evidence at the heart of decision-making.

For this to be realised we need to co-ordinate research activity by developing research policy, generating research priorities, stimulating and supporting researchers, practitioners and managers in better using tacit and explicit knowledge. We need to create a climate where knowledge-building is central to what we do.

Production of the Strategy

Three Working Groups (Appendix 1) comprising stakeholders from a range of settings including voluntary organisations, local authorities, universities, further education colleges, service user and carer groups, professional and regulatory bodies have helped to produce material focused on three main themes:

- Embedding research and evidence into social services organisations
- Increasing research capacity and capability
- Creating an improved infrastructure for social services research

Meetings have also been held with many other groups and individuals who have specific areas of interest or expertise relevant to the Strategy.

The Steering Group agreed at the outset that the Strategy should extend beyond being a paper document and should be brought to life and be informed by learning from a number of demonstration projects. These projects have grown from ideas and initiatives developed in social services agencies. A list of those initiated so far is attached (Appendix 2).

The evidence produced in the Working Groups has been brought together and complemented by evidence from the literature on evidence-based practice and research in practice.

Towards a Research and Development Strategy

This document sets out the argument for having a R&D Strategy, identifies the areas that need to be included and proposes a series of issues that key bodies and groups should consider if such a Strategy is to achieve its purpose. These are set out here

under the main stakeholders in the Strategy, however it is vital to its success that work is undertaken collaboratively, as little will be achieved unless the various constituencies work together to both clarify the agenda and approach the work as a shared enterprise.

In summary the areas identified are as follows:

Universities and Centres of Excellence: These organisations have a key role in improving the evidence base for social services and its use in practice by providing academic leadership for the sector. This means:

- producing high quality and relevant research
- embedding research in university-based programmes for social services staff
- working with others to develop research policy and priorities for the sector
- working with employers to stimulate and support research in practice and its use to inform practice
- building evidence on learning transfer into programme design and delivery

Further Education Colleges: Many social services staff are engaged in learning programmes based in Scotland's colleges. These programmes form critical points for these individuals and can offer opportunities to see the relevance of research for their work and how it can be used to improve outcomes for service users, if it is effectively built into their learning programmes. The issues identified here are:

- basing teaching and learning methods on evidence from research
- introducing students to research
- encouraging students to base their work on best practice
- facilitating the adoption of knowledge creation as a role for all staff in social services

Social Services Employers: A change in culture within social services organisations is required so that design, development and delivery of services are based on sound research and strong evidence. This means building knowledge creation and research into every organisational structure and process. It will also require all staff to be research-literate and able not only to assess research produced elsewhere, but, where appropriate, also to be able to conduct modest pieces of evaluative work as a way of testing their own practice and generating evidence about 'what works and why' in their local environment. Managers also need to know how to contribute to, commission and support research. The issues identified for employers are:

- creating structures and processes based on research evidence
- ensuring that decisions on service design, development and delivery are evidence-based
- building a culture that supports and facilitates research in the workplace

Regulatory Bodies: The increase in public regulation and inspection has generated interest in the collection and provision of data for external bodies. It is crucial that the use of these data is maximised, and that the gathering of self-assessment data, important though these are, does not act as a proxy for research or hamper independent enquiry as a consequence of perceived overload in social services delivery agencies. It is becoming clear that 'what gets measured gets done', which

suggests that if research is to be embedded throughout social services, one important facilitator will be the inclusion of evidence-based practice as a standard against which agencies are inspected and staff are regulated. Areas that would help to integrate R&D into agency practice, policy and service delivery are:

- expectations that staff are research-aware and research-literate
- requirements that service design, development and delivery are based on sound research evidence
- knowledge creation and exchange as routine functions of service delivery organisations

Funding Bodies and Scottish Government: The absence of an explicit social services research policy and strong sustainable investment on a par with that in other disciplines such as health and education has contributed to the present situation. In order to make the significant progress that is needed in social services activity on a number of fronts is necessary. The work achieved so far has identified a need for:

- significantly increased investment by both government and funding bodies (such as the Scottish Funding Council, The Economic and Social Research Council)
- co-ordination and oversight of the implementation of the research strategy through a central grouping comprising relevant research stakeholder interests, including those of service users and carers
- working with others to develop research policy and priorities

Engagement in the Strategy

The distance to be travelled to ensure that social services become a research-led sector is considerable. The process will only be successful if the wide range of organisations and individuals involved work collaboratively to maximise experience and expertise. Some aspects of a research strategy can be implemented straightaway, and some with very little or no cost. However, others will need to be phased in over a period. It is imperative, therefore that all stakeholders in the sector are engaged in the process of contributing to the development and implementation of such a strategy and with greater investment.

This process has started with the production of Towards a Research and Development Strategy through the hard work of many people over many months. This wide-ranging involvement needs to continue with inter- and intra-organisational discussion and engagement so that progress is built on the commitment of all the key players.

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