Preliminary report on practice-related research survey

The Scottish Institute for Excellence in Social Work Education (SIESWE) is currently working in partnership with the Scottish Executive to produce a Research and Development Strategy (R&D Strategy) for the social services in Scotland. This falls under the Practice Governance Change Programme of Changing Lives Implementation Plan (Scottish Executive, 2006).

In order to help us build a better picture of practice-related research and to identify key people with whom to hold further discussions, we are using a series of questionnaires which will be followed up with interviews to inform the research and development strategy.

We are also analysing and considering Scottish data gathered through a joint consultation exercise with Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) relating to their consultation on social care research capacity and data gathered by the Scottish Executive by way of self-assessment forms linked to the Changing Lives Implementation Plan. Both of these will also inform the development of the strategy.

Objectives

The purpose of these questionnaires is to survey all agencies that provide social care and social education in Scotland to find out what research is presently being carried out. The questionnaire is purposely brief and easily answered to enable people to return it without too much time expenditure. The answers are yes / no with a box for people to expand and give examples. See Appendix One for an example of the questionnaire. The questionnaire was intended as a starting point which could be followed up with more in-depth interviews from a selected sample of respondents. The first group targeted were the thirty two local authorities: in some cases children's services and the community care services were targeted separately. It is this group along with some early respondents from the independent sector that are reported on in this study. There has also been a similar questionnaire sent out to Further Education Colleges which teach social care.

Method

The questionnaires were sent out electronically as an attachment to an email which introduced and contextualised the questionnaire.

Timing

The questionnaires were sent out in the last week of November of 2006. The majority of replies came back before Christmas. A few came back after Christmas and the rest came back after follow-up phone calls or emails sent to the agencies. The initial timing was not good as many people were already stretched to the limit trying to get things finished off before the Christmas break. After Christmas it maybe seemed too late to reply. There are still a number of questionnaires to come back.

Follow up

Those that did not send back a questionnaire were then followed up with at least one phone call or in some cases several where it was difficult to locate the most appropriate person to answer our questions. In most cases the questionnaire was not answered by the person originally contacted from that agency. The fact that many of the local authorities are organised in different ways with many different job titles and responsibilities associated with them meant that it was not always easy to find the appropriate person. This was especially the case as agencies seemed not to have any designated person with responsibility for research. The

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follow-up phone calls were illuminative from this point of view and allowed the questionnaire to be passed around to gain a collaborative insight to what was happening in different sections of any one agency. What became obvious is that in many cases staff are unsure about who should know about such matters.

Responses

At present we have 23 replies out of a total of 32 local Authorities and a scattering of independent sector agencies. The remaining independent sector agencies will also be contacted. The table below gives responses to date. Where more than one person in each authority responded their responses have been amalgamated.

Responses of practice-related questionnaire sent to local authorities	
Number of questionnaires sent out	32
Number of responses received before April	21

Analysis

We will start by looking at the replies in a vertical manner for different agencies to demonstrate some of the differences between local authorities and then undertake horizontal analysis across the different agencies to demonstrate the range of different answers for the various questions. This was only intended to be an initial scoping exercise to get an idea of what is happening across Scotland in the different agencies relating to research activities. In this sense it is very much a preliminary analysis of an initial survey which will be followed up by a selected sample for more in depth interviews.

Groupings of agencies in terms of research activities

Vertical analysis

- First, those that were research-active in many different ways and were able to answer yes to all of our questions and provide a significant number of examples of these activities (group one). There were nine agencies in group one.

- Second, there was a broad category of agencies that were engaged primarily in evaluation-type activities to assess and improve services and new initiatives (group two). Some of these could still answer yes to most of our questions but with a rather more limited set of examples which were primarily about quality assurance issues. There were also nine agencies in group two.

- Third, these were the agencies that answered no to most of the questions and tended to give the reason as that of their size and lack of funding and were not very optimistic about being able to develop research activities due to their limited resources (group three). Some of these expressed a wish to be able to do so but would only be able to do so with considerable support through both financial support and training and development of existing staff. There were three agencies in group three.

Group one

At the one end of the scale were those large and well-resourced local authorities or charities that are actively developing different sorts of research strategies to help inform practice. Sometimes this involved practitioners participating in large-scale research organised in partnership with other organisations. There were several cases of local authorities working in partnership with the NHS or education departments with in their own local authority. Many of these partnerships were actively involving service users or carers in their research though this tended to be as informants rather than in any more influential or empowering ways.

An example of a local authority (LA) from this category answered yes to all the questions and went into some detail about the range of research activities they are engaged in that involve managers, practitioners and service users and carers. We were told that larger pieces of research are commissioned from specialist providers such as universities but they do have Strategic Development Officers (SDOs) who can have considerable involvement in terms of scoping, preparing specifications, doing initial

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information gathering and monitoring process and progress. Smaller pieces of research, such as investigating effective models of service delivery for example, are also undertaken by SDOs.

This authority also gave an example of involving users in research more fully than simply asking them to evaluate services. They carried out research into effective models of awareness-raising with past and present users of domestic abuse protection services through informal focus groups, which led to service users designing advertising / awareness raising campaign materials.

An LA from this group has also undertaken research in partnership with other organisations e.g. they have used Choose Life funding to develop an action research project in a local secondary school to identify vulnerable children at the transition from primary to secondary school. As part of that project they introduced a peer mentoring scheme and continued to assess vulnerability throughout the school. Their academic partners are extending the project beyond school and into further education. In terms of organisational structures which promote practice-related research activities they mentioned that within Children's Services they had multi-agency strategy groups but that nothing like this existed in Community Care.

A local authority from this group also cited examples of using existing research to inform policy-making. For example they recently developed a Family and Friends Caring for Children policy which takes into account research over the past few years including the recent Aldgate & McIntosh (2006) research into Kinship Care in Scotland.. This authority expressed an interest in developing their research capacity across a variety of different areas. It was noted by some local authorities that certain services were particularly stretched due to provision of statutory services which limited their resources for carrying out research. One local authority would have liked to have a research officer in their Drugs and Alcohol section with a greater emphasis on locally-managed research and evaluation within the remit of strategic development. They wanted the inclusion of qualitative data collection approaches within their performance management systems. It was also considered that services require support to enable them to collect and report on service user outcomes rather than purely output data. They also expressed a desire to develop research methods and service user involvement in their Children's Services. This local authority is obviously working on developing and embedding a research culture in its workforce and has clear ideas about how to go forward.

Group two

In the second category there was still quite a range of different types of activity though not all so large scale or involving partnerships, users etc. The local authorities that could be grouped into this broad category seemed to routinely evaluate services by including service users' views and opinions. The research methods tended to be fairly basic though this needs further investigation to gauge the whole range. It would also be useful to further investigate what was considered productive and useful by different participants in this survey and by users of that research in terms of managers, practitioners and service users and carers. When I say it was fairly basic I am echoing what was said by the respondents to the questionnaire where they were not confident about the research they had done in terms of how it may be judged by any one else including ourselves.

One local authority from this category provides a list of research activities which contains the following: basic research in relation to strategy development, capacity planning, service review; strategic self assessment, service evaluation. They managed to answer yes to all of the questions but with a limited set of examples. Managers, practitioners and service users were involved in some of these activities though we do not know in what capacity or any detail. Some partnership work is done as appropriate but again no details are provided. We were also told that the performance management sections in both community care and children's services were responsible for promoting research activities. Again they were rather vague as to what they would like to develop in the future stating only 'various'. This sort of response could be interpreted as the local authority not doing much other than the basic sort of service review and self-assessment type activities but it could also be that the person who answered the questionnaire did not have the relevant information to fill in with more details. Again it would be interesting and informative to further probe some of the local authorities who fall into this category to ascertain whether the responses on the questionnaire are a good reflection of actual research activities.

An important aspect of the local authority research activities as mentioned in many of the questionnaire responses from this group is that it is done by their practitioners who are undertaking further study and doing a research project as part of their masters or diploma courses. The research carried out by students in this way appears to be valued by other members of the practitioner and management teams. In some cases there was an expressed desire to further develop and extend these research projects if resources were available. In one local authority those who have recently joined the workforce as newly qualified social

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workers are given one day a week for six months to engage in research or other CPD activities as part of a scheme to try and improve retention of the social work workforce.

Group three

In the third category, at the other end of the scale, were those local authorities which are small with relatively few resources. These agencies had a majority of negative answers though some did express a wish to develop research but were concerned about resources. It was also mentioned that where there are relatively few resources in terms of money and personnel then it is important that research is not undertaken by a new category of personnel but rather that provision of training is made to allow those who are already practitioners to develop research techniques as part of their workload. Again in this category those practitioners who were carrying out research for their masters degrees were mentioned. It was also thought that facilitating their staff's participation in any larger research programmes might be a way forward due to limited resources available in the smaller local authorities.

Summary of analysis by categories

The above is a vertical analysis of key findings from the questionnaires as categorised into three groups defined by the extent of their current reported research type activities. From this analysis we can see that there is a considerable range of different research activities being carried out in some of the local authorities and considerably less in others. We can see that some local authorities are doing considerably more and are better resourced than others. Some, also, have more developed organisational structures to promote research activities. There does appear to be a willingness to engage in research at least from the majority of those that responded though there is also some considerable concern about how to go about this using the resources presently available. There does appear to be a tendency to use universities or other consultants to do any large scale research which is then used by the local authority to review or change service provision. There is an abundance of reviewing and evaluating type activities which include a range of participants from managers through to service users. These seem to predominantly involve survey-like techniques. Further investigation is needed to discern how these are viewed by practitioners and service users and what the full range techniques used actually are.

Horizontal analysis

 The data can also be looked at in a horizontal fashion looking across the individual questions for the range of answers supplied. This gives us a view of the range of different activities mentioned in the questionnaires for each question (please refer to appendix one to see wording of each question).

1. *Research activities presently carried out which relate to practice:* Respondents tended to give a generalised list of the type of activities which spanned from the negative or very little to the long lists supplied by the most active. The largest group were those in the middle who predominantly do service evaluation and self-assessment type activities.

2. *Involvement of managers and practitioners in research activities:* Only one local authority said no, all the others said yes. Some then gave examples. Many of the local authorities involved practitioners and managers in routine evaluations of services. There was a considerable number of local authorities who mentioned that their managers were involved in performance management which included some research activities. Many also mentioned benefiting from the research activities carried out by practitioners who were going through social work training or masters programmes. Most of the replies which were positive for this question reported in general terms trying to involve staff at all levels.

3. *Involvement of service users and carers:* Again only one authority said that they carried out no research activities that involved service users or carers of any kind. The rest said they did. Within the group that said yes the pattern followed that of the groups that were identified in the vertical analysis. Some authorities did many different activities whilst the majority did a limited range of evaluation-type activities. There was only one example of service users being actively involved with the research and in a way other than as informant.

4. *Research activities carried out in partnership with other organisations:* There is an incredibly large range of different organisations which are involved in research through partnerships with the local authorities and charities. Those local

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authorities that were put in the first group all had impressive lists of organisations that they were working in partnership with on a range of different research activities. Again it would need more in-depth research to ascertain the types of research engaged in and the mechanics of these partnerships in more detail. Those local authorities from the second group mainly had one example with limited detail, and those in the third group did not have any. The organisations that were listed were predominantly higher education institutions and the NHS. There were also a range of private and voluntary sector organisations such as Barnados, Children First, Aberlour Childcare Trust, and a number of other organisations. Other specialist organisations such as Alcohol Support, SMART recovery, and the Glasgow Centre for Population Health were mentioned. The Scottish Executive, The Scottish Social Services Council and the Scottish Institute for Excellence in Social Work Education and other organisations supporting or associated with social work and social care also appeared in the responses to this question. It would appear from the data that there is a wide range of organisations who are working together with the local authorities in a wide range of research projects and initiatives which could be further investigated to discern what the mechanics of these partnerships are and how they could be built on for the local authorities that at present are not engaged in partnership research. The local authorities that felt they were too small to be research-active did suggest that one way forward for them would be to engage in partnership research with other local authorities or organisations.

5. The fifth question asked about the existence of **organisational structures which support practice-related research**. Those agencies that were in the first group all provided examples of one or more structures that promoted practice-relevant research. Those in the second and third groupings had rather less in this question or nothing at all. Again there was a wide range of different sorts of structures mentioned. The more specific research structures mentioned were: dedicated research posts in corporate services, corporate research and information officers, research fora and programmes of research seminars and lectures. Other more widely-focused structures included: joint strategic support units, dedicated planning managers, multi-agency strategy groups, practice learning forums and learning networks. Many local authorities saw research into practice as part of their performance and development sections or as part of their Continuing Professional Development structures or part of the personal development plan work those practitioners are engaging in. One local authority has dedicated one day a week for six months to their newly qualified masters students to develop their research and meet with other researchers in a research forum. This is part of their strategy to increase retention of newly qualified social workers and would be interesting to follow up with the participants to see if it is significant in terms of their professional careers.

    It would seem that the type of structures vary hugely in their formality and their focus. It would be interesting to ask about the usefulness of these various structures for the development of practice-related research and do some comparison work to see what works best and why in different authorities.

6. All the authorities that responded to the questionnaire answered positively to the question about **whether they would like to develop their practice-related research**. Some gave particular examples of what they would like to do, others just answered with a general yes. Most of the respondents were happy for SIESWE to contact them about developing practice-related research though a few said not at this moment and a couple said no. A number of the respondents mentioned the importance of embedding a research culture in everyday practice. A few also mentioned the problem with embedding research when it is not valued. Often the pressing priorities of the practitioners' work load make it difficult to make time for research which is not always prioritised in the same way. One suggestion was to provide protected time and value this activity as part of continuing professional development. Another obvious difficulty is lack of confidence; it would seem that practitioners and managers are not confident in the research that they do probably due to lack of training and experience in carrying out different research methods. There is a definite need for training in research methods for those staff already qualified. It does take time and resources to provide even very basic training which some local authorities consider to be a problem or even impossibility.

A significant number of respondents identified a need to develop a research and development strategy so that research is valued and not seen as an ad hoc activity that only a select few do. It was suggested that it would be useful to develop a system of recording areas that need to be researched and keep a register so that students/staff can access this for a relevant topic to research. There was also a call for better dissemination of the findings from research. This is an area which we did not ask about directly but was picked up by a few respondents and could be further investigated.

The most encouraging message from the responses from this questionnaire was that respondents were aware of a need to develop practice-related research and in general were willing to do so providing there were adequate resources to do so.

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Summary of preliminary findings

From the vertical analysis of the respondents to the questionnaire we can see that there is a considerable difference between the most research-active and the least research-active local authorities. There may well be obvious reasons for this in terms of amount of resources available but there are presumably other reasons which should be looked at more closely. These reasons may be more to do with organisational culture and how research activities are valued by key personnel within the local authority. It may well also be to do with the way the agencies are structured, who has responsibility for research activities and how research fits within the wider structure of the local authority. This can only be better understood through more in-depth research.

From the horizontal analysis we can see that there is a very wide range of research activities carried out which involve a wide range of people and partnerships. It would also appear that those local authorities who do relatively little are keen to do more and can maybe draw on the experience of the local authorities who do engage in a wide range of activities. There does seem to be a lack of clarity about who knows about and who is responsible for organising research in local authorities which would suggest the need for a clarification of roles concerning practice relevant research.

It would appear that there is a desire to develop research capacity within the local authorities and there are also many examples of excellent and innovative research practices which can be drawn upon and disseminated across the local authorities and across the different sectors.

Issues for further investigation

The questionnaire is being followed up by more in-depth interviewing of key personnel who were identified through the process of collecting the questionnaire data. They are selected on the basis of being representative of the different agencies in terms of levels of research activity and range of activities. Interviews are being arranged to further discuss and inform on the following issues and areas:

- What research methods are presently being used?

- What types of research are considered useful and productive from the point of view of managers, practitioners, service users and carers?

- Further investigate some of the rather vague responses to get a more detailed picture of research activities and future expectations.

- Further investigate the ways in which service users and carers are involved in research activities and what roles they play in this respect.

- Further investigate the mechanics of partnership research and its usefulness in developing research-active practitioners.

- Further investigate the type of structures which are most effective in promoting and supporting practice relevant research.

- Explore ways of embedding research in the culture so that research activities are valued and resourced adequately.

- Explore ways of joining-up research initiatives across sectors and within local authorities.

We would welcome any comments on or contributions to this report as these are only preliminary findings and we are still awaiting further responses and discussions.

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References

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Appendix One

Initial survey of practice-relevant research in Scottish social services organisations

- In partnership with the Scottish Executive, the Scottish Institute for Excellence in Social Work Education (SIESWE) is working to develop a Research and Development Strategy as part of implementing the Changing Lives report.

- We are thinking of research in a wide sense as reviewing, inquiring or investigating activities that help to build knowledge and understanding that contribute to the nature, quality and outcomes of social services. These would include activities such as service evaluation.

- We see the strategy as a knowledge transfer issue — that is, concerned both with the development of knowledge for practice and its use by practitioners, managers, service planners and policy makers in service delivery.

- We intend the process to be active and participative, engaging with organisations and individuals who are already thinking about research and finding ways of supporting them to carry out and use research more.

In order to help us form a picture of how things stand at present and to build a network of contacts, we would be grateful if a suitably senior person in your organisation could take a few minutes to answer the following brief questions:

1. Does your organisation carry out any research-like activities at present?
   Yes / No — If yes, what are these?

2. Are practitioners or managers within your organisation involved in any research activities?
   Yes / No — If yes, which?

3. Does your organisation carry out any research activities which involve service users and/or carers?
   Yes / No — If yes, which?

4. Does your organisation carry out any research activities in partnership with any other organisation?
    Yes / No — If yes, with which organisation and what research?

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5. Do you have organisational structures which promote practice-related research activities?
    Yes / No — If yes, what are these?

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6. Are you interested in further developing research activities within your organisation?
    Yes / No — If yes, what would they be?

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Your response is important to us so please send completed questionnaires to:

Dr. Kate Miller
k.h.miller@dundee.ac.uk

If you would like SIESWE to contact you about your existing activities or the development of research activities please tick here: ☐

We look forward to hearing from you in the near future and appreciate the time you have taken to answer these questions.

Kate Miller

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