

# Local Government Knowledge Navigator

Case study

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# Local Government Knowledge Navigator

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**Date:** 2013 to April 2016

**Location:** England

**Mission:** To enable 'local government to connect with research and for researchers to connect with local government'<sup>1</sup>

**Methods:** Evidence reviews, events and an online searchable register

**Spend:** Each 'Need to Know' evidence review cost around £6,000 to £7,000 to produce.<sup>2</sup> Phase One of the project cost around £140,000 and Phase Two cost around £75,000.

**Reach:** The Knowledge Navigator website had over 1,290 visitors in the first four months of being operational (having been launched in December 2015)

**Access:** Free

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## Context

The Local Government Knowledge Navigator and follow-up Local Government Research Facilitator was a two-phase programme of work that began in 2013 and ran to April 2016, seeking to bring about better engagement between local government and academic researchers.

The Knowledge Navigator was part of ongoing efforts to better link local government with academic research. This stems from a sense that local government and academics have little engagement with each other, and that increasing their interactions may help local government to draw on greater evidence in their decision making, and build understanding of 'what works'.

The key predecessor to the Knowledge Navigator was the Local Authorities Research Council Initiative (LARCI), which ran between 1996 and 2012. LARCI aimed to align the work of the seven British research councils with the needs of local government. The Local Government Association (LGA), the Department for Communities and Local Government, and the UK research councils led on the initiative; the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers (Solace) and the Audit Commission were also involved. In 2010, following the election of the Coalition Government, debates over the future of LARCI led to it being closed down. However, a 2012 report, which reviewed LARCI, emphasised the need to continue promoting engagement between academics and local government post-LARCI, and made a number of recommendations that ultimately led to the Knowledge Navigator programme. This drew on an existing programme, the Retail Knowledge Navigator, as a model. The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) held an open competition to run the Local Government Knowledge Navigator, which was won by Dr Clive Grace, Dr Tim Allen and Steve Martin (the three 'knowledge navigators').

The Knowledge Navigator programme refers specifically to a programme of work between 2013 and 2015. This programme has continued into 2016 under a different name – the Local Government Research Facilitator – which formed the second phase of the Knowledge Navigator programme.

## Ways of working

### Phase One: Local Government Knowledge Navigator programme

Phase One (2013–2015) focused on conducting work to try to understand why there was little engagement between academics and local government. This work was steered by a committee that included representatives from the ESRC, the LGA and Solace, with funding from the ESRC.

A 2014 survey questioned how local authority managers use evidence and knowledge in their work. The survey report found:

- The extent to which local authorities used evidence and research varied greatly.
- There was a lack of capacity among local authorities to either conduct research in-house or to commission it externally – and respondents believed that their capacity to do this was going to further decline in the future.
- While local government saw the benefits of using evidence and research, they also saw some problems with doing so. These problems included a sense that research was not always relevant or timely and might sometimes yield politically unpalatable results.<sup>3</sup>

The programme also included dissemination of these findings at a range of events and seminars, including an LGA-hosted seminar in October 2013, with panellists from the ESRC and Solace. Additionally, Phase One sought to find existing examples of constructive engagement between academics and local government. A 2014 report offered some examples, and sought to identify ‘the

factors that make for successful collaboration between local government and the research community, offering recommendations for how universities could better engage local areas’.<sup>4</sup>

Work also considered how local government and academia in other countries are brought together, and whether this may provide any models on which Britain could draw. A 2014 seminar brought together practitioners, local authorities and

fundors from around the world, with representatives from Denmark and Norway discussing how local government–academic engagement works in their respective countries.

As well as conducting research into the needs of local government, and highlighting examples to draw on, Phase One also saw the Knowledge Navigator pilot strategies for better linking local government and academics. ‘Need to Know’ evidence reviews were a key part of this.

“The programme was part of ongoing efforts to better link local government with academic research.”

## Need to Know evidence reviews

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Five reviews of existing evidence and academic research on specific topics:

- Local government in the digital age
- Public health
- People with learning disabilities
- Levers of local economic development
- Local government and the demography of ageing.

Within each report, existing research and evidence were summarised, and details of other resources were offered.

The reviews were designed to be packaged in a way that was accessible to local authorities, and to contain the information most relevant to them.

Reports ran to around 30-40 pages.

Reports were freely accessible online, and were also shared through the LGA, Solace and the Guardian's Public Services Network.

Each review cost around £6,000 to £7,000 to complete.<sup>5</sup>

The reviews were themselves experiments to test various approaches to see what worked.

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### **Phase Two: Local Government Research Facilitator**

Phase Two of the programme, now named the Local Government Research Facilitator, was launched in 2015. The three knowledge navigators of the first phase were replaced by one 'placement fellow', who aims to work as part of a 'long-term agenda to build effective research and development capacity' in local government.<sup>6</sup> In this phase of work, most funding is provided by the ESRC, with Solace also contributing.

Phase Two has taken the insights gained from Phase One work on the research needs of local government, and used these to develop ways of connecting academic research with local authorities. A major part of this activity is the Knowledge Navigator website. This allows interactive exchange between researchers and local authority officials. The website was soft-launched in December 2015, and will continue to develop. Its two main aims are:

- to help local authority officials to find and connect with academics working in relevant areas
- to collate examples of current good practice.

The website surveys local authority officials, allowing them to register their specific interests, so that the programme can 'identify areas of commonality for future networking opportunities'.<sup>7</sup>

Phase Two has also included a number of events, at which academics and local government officials are brought together, and research is shared.

## Impact

There is no evidence yet of the impact the Knowledge Navigator programme has had on improving the use of evidence in public services. A final report on Phase One by the three knowledge navigators was published in May 2015, which stated that Phase One had 'mapped out the steps needed to create a productive relationship between councils and researchers' and 'demonstrated what can be achieved by piloting approaches to engagement'.<sup>8</sup> The report further argued that Phase One had helped to create 'momentum for change' in relationships between academics and local authorities, although it noted that this had increased from a low base.

The report did not assess the extent to which local authorities had used evidence or academic research to develop public services, or how the Knowledge Navigator programme had supported them in this task. However, it did suggest that work post-Phase One would need to be longer term, and on a greater scale, as the changes needed to achieve greater links between academics and local government are inherently long term.<sup>9</sup> The impact of the programme is therefore dependent on sustained development and momentum over a longer time span.

## Insights

### **Academics and universities are an important source for evidence, but this needs to be relevant and timely**

Academics and local universities can be a useful way for local places to get easy access to evidence, build contacts, and learn more about how other areas are approaching services. Making the most of local assets, including universities, can provide additional support and capacity for research as well as practical hands on help that benefits both partners as academics can gain insight and build relationships too. However, there are currently challenges around the use of academic research and evidence in local government, including a lack of capacity, and a sense that research is not always relevant or timely.

## Further resources

Local Government Knowledge Navigator website: [www.lgkn.org/](http://www.lgkn.org/)

Allen, T., Grace, C. and Martin, S., *Making the Most of Research: Final report of the ESRC Local Government Knowledge Navigator to the Economic and Social Research Council, Local Government Association, and Society of Local Authority Chief Executives*, Local Government Knowledge Navigator, Birmingham, 2015.

## Notes

1. Local Government Knowledge Navigator, 'About Us', Local Government Knowledge Navigator, Birmingham, 2016, retrieved 17 May 2016, [www.lgkn.org/about-us/](http://www.lgkn.org/about-us/)
2. Allen, T., Grace, C. and Martin, S., *Making the Most of Research: Final Report of the ESRC Local Government Knowledge Navigator to the Economic and Social Research Council, Local Government Association, and Society of Local Authority Chief Executives*, Local Government Knowledge Navigator, Birmingham, 2015, p. 10, retrieved 28 January 2016, [www.solace.org.uk/knowledge/reports\\_guides/Making%20the%20Most%20of%20Research%2020150531.pdf](http://www.solace.org.uk/knowledge/reports_guides/Making%20the%20Most%20of%20Research%2020150531.pdf)
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.
4. Mortimer, J., *Collaboration in Action: Local authorities that are making the most of research: A Local Government Knowledge Navigator evidence review*, Local Government Knowledge Navigator, Birmingham, 2014, p. 4, retrieved 17 May 2016, [www.solace.org.uk/knowledge/reports\\_guides/LGKN\\_LA\\_research\\_collaboration.pdf](http://www.solace.org.uk/knowledge/reports_guides/LGKN_LA_research_collaboration.pdf)
5. Allen, T., Grace, C. and Martin, S., *Making the Most of Research: Final Report of the ESRC Local Government Knowledge Navigator to the Economic and Social Research Council, Local Government Association, and Society of Local Authority Chief Executives*, Local Government Knowledge Navigator, Birmingham, 2015, retrieved 28 January 2016, [www.solace.org.uk/knowledge/reports\\_guides/Making%20the%20Most%20of%20Research%2020150531.pdf](http://www.solace.org.uk/knowledge/reports_guides/Making%20the%20Most%20of%20Research%2020150531.pdf)
6. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
7. Local Government Knowledge Navigator, 'User Interests Form', Local Government Knowledge Navigator, Birmingham, 2016, retrieved 28 January 2016, [www.lgkn.org/user-interests/](http://www.lgkn.org/user-interests/)
8. Allen, T., Grace, C. and Martin, S., *Making the Most of Research: Final Report of the ESRC Local Government Knowledge Navigator to the Economic and Social Research Council, Local Government Association, and Society of Local Authority Chief Executives*, Local Government Knowledge Navigator, Birmingham, 2015, retrieved 28 January 2016, [www.solace.org.uk/knowledge/reports\\_guides/Making%20the%20Most%20of%20Research%2020150531.pdf](http://www.solace.org.uk/knowledge/reports_guides/Making%20the%20Most%20of%20Research%2020150531.pdf)
9. *Ibid.*

## About the authors

**Sophie Wilson** is a Researcher at the Institute for Government. Since joining the Institute in 2015, she has been involved in its ministerial development programme and work on public service delivery. Prior to this, Sophie was a researcher at the Office for Public Management, working on a range of engagement and evaluation projects across UK public services. She holds an MPhil in International Relations from the University of Cambridge and a BA from King's College London.

**Alice Lilly** is a Researcher at the Institute for Government, having first joined the Institute as an intern in 2015. She is currently finishing her PhD thesis at the University of Nottingham, which explores transatlantic links in anti-poverty policy during the 1990s and early 2000s, under New Labour and the New Democrats. While a PhD student, Alice spent a short time as an intern at the Social Market Foundation. Prior to undertaking her PhD at Nottingham, she completed an MA in American Studies, also at Nottingham, and a BA in History at the University of Cambridge.

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All errors or omissions are the responsibility of the authors.

## About the project

Last year, the Institute for Government began a major research project on public service delivery at a local level in England. This is a vast, complex terrain and there are many important areas that require urgent attention – whether it is how to drive efficiency savings, deliver digital transformation or make effective use of all providers in a local area, including voluntary and private sector organisations. We decided to focus on one aspect that is critical to achieving better public service outcomes for citizens: joining up and integrating public services around local, citizen needs.

Our briefing paper, [Joining Up Public Services around Local, Citizen Needs](#), identified five perennial barriers that repeatedly hinder integration at a local level, as well as several insights on how to tackle them. Limited sharing of what works (and doesn't work) emerged as a critical barrier that needs urgent attention. Although variation is crucial in ensuring that public services meet local needs, not learning from what has been tried before, or elsewhere, is costly, time intensive and risks duplicating the progress made in other parts of the country. At a time when capacity within local government is declining, and less money is available for service delivery, we cannot afford to keep reinventing the wheel.

A set of eight case studies, including this one, provides more detail about the methods and impact of different approaches designed to support learning between areas. Our accompanying paper, [Local Public Service Reform: Supporting learning to integrate services and improve outcomes](#), provides much-needed clarity on what would help people leading integration programmes to share experiences and learn from one another to improve outcomes on the ground.

For more information and resources, visit [www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/local-service-delivery](http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/local-service-delivery)

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Copies of this case study are available at:

[www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/local-service-delivery](http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/local-service-delivery)

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