



**The Role of Research in Local Authorities
an examination of the role of the
Social Inclusion Analyst**

**A position paper prepared as part of the Formative Evaluation
of the Local Government Social Inclusion Units**

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December 2008**

Table of Contents

1.	The Role of Research	3	
2.	Research in Local Government	3	
3.	Research in Local Government in Ireland	5	
4.	The Role of the Social Inclusion Research in Local Government in Ireland	7	
5.	Conclusions	10	

1. The Role of Research

The role of applied research has been described (Percy-Smith et al 2005¹), in the following terms:

1. The systematic collection, collation, analysis and interpretation of data of relevance to policy or practice,
2. A mechanism to increase understanding about future trends, local needs, and good practice
3. A mechanism to resolve as yet unanswered questions

With an ever increasing emphasis being placed on evidence based policy making, it is important that decision and policy making structures are firmly grounded in the most up to date and accurate research and information available at any given time.

2. Research in Local Government

Local government is a multi-faceted business, which provides a range of different services that impact on the economic, environmental, and social wellbeing of individuals and communities. Research has indeed been a growing activity within larger local authorities in other countries for many years, According to the UK based Local Government Association (LGA)² the Local Authorities Research and Intelligence Association (LARIA)³ and others⁴ research capacity within local government is an essential part of what a modern council should be about. Research can be seen to have a number of very distinct roles and functions within local authorities as follows:

1. Research facilitates the development of a more detailed understanding of the social and economic environment in which a particular local authority is operating through analysis of existing data sources. Percy-Smith and her colleagues in 2005 suggest that there is no limit to the use which Councils could make of Census data in both the operational and strategic management of services
2. It supports the development of a better understanding of the problems and needs of local communities, through profiling and comparisons of different areas and groups within the community

¹ Percy-Smith, J. Burden, T Darlow, A, Dawson L, Hawtin, M and Ladi S (2002) Promoting change through research: The impact of research in local government, Joseph Rowntree Foundation and York Publishing Services.

² LGA (2007) Building Local Government Sector Research and Development Capacity
³ Hall, B. D. (2005) Managing Research in Local Government-A Good Practice Guide.
Local Authorities Research & Intelligence Association

⁴ Percy-Smith, J. (2005) Knowledge is power: the need for effective research in local government.
LGA/LARIA

3. It improves awareness of alternative ways of doing things, as a basis for innovation, policy or service delivery change
4. It provides a better understanding of the views of citizens and other stakeholders about the services and activities of the Council
5. It assists in creating a better understanding of the impact of particular strategies, services, policies and services on the well-being of communities and places
6. It has an increasing role in encouraging policy and practice change in local government

Notwithstanding, the clear and widely accepted recognition that research has an important role to play in local government, a 2002 Joseph Rowntree Foundation Study of research in UK based local authorities⁵ found that

- It was usually the larger local authorities that employed dedicated research staff with appropriate skills. However, in many cases policy officers took on research activities for which they had no specialist skills or training. They found a particular skills gap in relation to the effective interpretation and use of research findings.
- Dissemination of research outputs within local authorities was also often found to be '*patchy*.' Front-line officers in particular did not have ready access to research findings that could help develop their practice.
- Individual officers/officials typically took responsibility for keeping themselves up to date. This was both inefficient and ineffective with insufficient use being made of tools such as digests and email alert systems to sift out relevant research reports and make them more accessible.
- Elected members were found to have made relatively little use of research. Many members believed they had the skills for interpreting and applying research findings to their local context. Officers/officials concurred with this view.
- There was a variation in the effectiveness with which research was conducted and coordinated, and the extent to which a culture existed that positively supported and encouraged research⁶

⁵ Percy-Smith, J. Burden, T Darlow, A, Dawson L, Hawtin, M and Ladi S (2002) Promoting change through research: The impact of research in local government, Joseph Rowntree Foundation and York Publishing Services.

It was interesting but perhaps not surprising to also note that the study found that where research was undertaken in-house or commissioned by a local authority it was more likely to be used than externally generated research. The study concluded that while the impact of research on policy had tended to be relatively small there was considerable scope to increase this impact.

3. Research in Local Government in Ireland

Local government in Ireland has gone through a significant period of reform since the publication of Better Local Government in 1996. These reforms have strengthened both the managerial capability within local authorities and the capacity for local public representatives to act as policy makers for the community. Customer services have been significantly enhanced in many areas including the introduction of on-line planning services, on-line motor tax and more flexible opening hours. New arenas of engagement between local authorities and the community have also emerged through an expanded social inclusion role for local government, the greater use of ICT, and changes in consultation practices with the establishment of new structures, such as County/City Developments Boards (CDBs), the Social Inclusion Measures (SIM) Groups and Community and Voluntary Fora. The reform process continues to date with an ongoing commitment to make local government “more transparent and more responsive to its customers”.

There are now over a hundred local authorities in Ireland that constitute our local government system, and between them they spent some €10 billion in 2007. They employ over 30,000 people and deliver a wide range of key services across the country. Close working relationships have also been built up between many Local Authorities and various resident and community groups in the preparation and implementation of various schemes, plans and strategies.

Research has until relatively recently not been an area that Irish local authorities have engaged in to any great extent. Where research has been engaged in, its focus anecdotally at least has tended to be more economic rather than social. As the population and its needs diversify it is clear that research has an important role to

⁶ Percy-Smith, J. Burden, T Darlow, A, Dawson L, Hawtin, M and Ladi S (2002) Promoting change through research: The impact of research in local government, Joseph Rowntree Foundation and York Publishing Services.

play particularly in assisting local authorities better understand the economic and social profile of their areas.

Research Units/research functions have indeed been established in a number of local authorities in many cases linked to/located within the Offices of Community and Enterprise. Examples include the Research and Policy Unit established by Donegal County Council in September 2001. Its purpose is to build up expertise in research, evaluation and policy development within the Council. A County Research & Statistics Office (CRSO) was also established to access data and undertake research in Kildare County Council, while the Research Unit in Clare County Council is working to collate, analyse, interpret and disseminate strategic data to key stakeholders, policy and decision makers and the general public. There is also a research section in South Dublin County Council while a number of Research Units have also been established in Dublin City Council. The presence of a research unit within a local authority is however more the exception than the rule.

A recent Combat Poverty funded study⁷ on mapping social inclusion in local authorities concluded that the establishment of a research function within local authorities has facilitated the gathering of a level of intelligence backed up by evidence in regard to issues of disadvantage within communities which in turn is feeding into policy initiatives such as forward planning and housing'. The study also noted that 'that the research function has also been useful in the creation of a forward planning function within local authorities'..... and has 'underpinned community consultation on policies such as local area planning and contributed to the role of local government in local, rural and community development.' (p 57).⁸

4. The Role of the Social Inclusion Research in Local Government in Ireland

The role of local government in relation to social inclusion has been considerably expanded since the introduction of the local government reform programme in 1999. Its role in the prevention of poverty and social exclusion has been clearly highlighted, initially in the National Anti-Poverty Strategy and now in its successor NAP/inclusion. This role is seen to be particularly important in relation to the development of developing integrated local responses to national policy commitments, the work of

⁷ O'Riordain, S. (2007) Mapping Social Inclusion in Local Authorities. Combat Poverty Agency, Dublin.

⁸ O'Riordain, S. (2007) Mapping Social Inclusion in Local Authorities. Combat Poverty Agency, Dublin.

the County/City Development Boards and the implementation of the RAPID programme.

A number of different supports were put in place to assist local authorities promote and support social inclusion. Key among these was the establishment of the Local Government Anti-Poverty Learning Network and the establishment of seven pilot social inclusion units. These Units were generally made up of an Officer and a Research Analyst. Their role was to support local authorities promote enhanced levels of social inclusion across the range of their activities and to complement the work of the RAPID programme. Under the current national agreement, Towards 2016, the social inclusion units were placed on a permanent footing. 16 city/county councils will have a unit by the end of 2008. The Units is currently 50% funded by the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government and 50% funded by their local authority. It was envisaged that these Units would again be composed of an Officer and a Social Inclusion Analyst, but there has for a number of reasons including the ongoing restrictions on local government recruitment been some local differences in the application of this model, as local authorities have been obliged to recruit internally.

The role of the Officer is to act as a point of contact and advice on social inclusion issues and to work with local authority staff and other local stakeholders to help them embed social inclusion in their plans and activities. The Analyst's role compliments that of the Officer by analysing data and undertaking research and analysis that will provide the local authority and others with the necessary information and evidence to enable them to make informed decisions about the resources to be directed to different areas of work.

The Social Inclusion Analysts appointed under the Pilot Programme and more recently in the expanded programme are working on a number of key research tasks. These include:

- Secondary data collection and analysis
- Primary Research within the Local Authority and within the County or City area
- The development of local poverty profiles, which are key elements in the development of a county/city wide Local Anti-Poverty and Social Inclusion Strategy (LAPSIS). The development of a LAPSIS is important as it provides one of the key mechanisms for rolling out the National Action Plan for Social Inclusion (NAP inclusion) at a local level
- Contribute to the development, implementation and monitoring of internal Local Authority Strategies/Policies from a social inclusion perspective
- Contribute to the development, implementation and monitoring of County Level Strategies/Policies from a social inclusion perspective

See Table 1 for a breakdown of the types of tasks currently being undertaken by the Analysts under these different headings. This information is drawn from an analysis of the thirteen Units that submitted final work programmes for 2009, undertaken as part of the formative evaluation of the Units.

Table 1. Tasks being undertaken by the Social Inclusion Unit Analysts (Dec 2008)

<p>Secondary Data Collection and Analysis</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Collation and analysis of Baseline Census Data on particular geographical areas and target groups ▪ Collation and analysis of <u>internal</u> local authority data, e.g. accommodation and housing data ▪ Develop and update poverty profiles, socio-economic profiles and profiles of Vulnerable Groups in the county city up to date ▪ Develop mini-reports on issues of relevance to the county/city arising from ongoing data analysis work and circulate and present to the Senior Management Team and CDB members ▪ Provide data support to the Rapid Coordinator ▪ Support the development of an internal Data Sharing Protocol
<p>Undertake Primary Research within the Local Authority</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Carry out a Social Inclusion Audit of activities undertaken by the local authority and develop an internal Social Inclusion Strategy/ anti-poverty strategies for the Council ▪ Develop and disseminate a survey to staff, which will identify levels of staff awareness of social inclusion and poverty ▪ Examine the impact of the waste waiver ▪ Conduct an audit of Social Inclusion Spend in each LA Department ▪ Develop a Profile of Households Accommodated by the local authority ▪ Implement a customer satisfaction survey
<p>Undertake Primary Research within the County/City</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Assist in carrying out an audit of Community Facilities ▪ Undertake Disability Service Mapping ▪ Audit and assess the impact of social inclusion related training provided within or by the Council Audit supports provided to migrants and ethnic minorities in the local authority area
<p>Contribute to internal Local Authority Strategies/Policies</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Support the development, implementation and monitoring of an internal local authority Social Inclusion Strategy ▪ Work with other local authority staff to undertake Poverty Impact Assessments of policies and programmes at design, implementation and review stages to assess their likely impact on poverty and inequalities likely to lead to poverty
<p>Contribute to County Level Strategies/Policies</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Support the development, implementation and monitoring of Local County/City Level Anti-Poverty and social inclusion strategies on behalf of the Social Inclusion Measures group ▪ This support could specifically take the form of research and analysis of local issues and setting indicators by which the progress of the plan can be monitored and evaluated

Examples of the types of work already undertaken by the Units involved in the Pilot Programme are listed below:

- The Unit in Limerick City conducted a review of the Council's differential rent scheme. The purpose of this review was to assess whether or not the scheme contributed to the creation of poverty traps. The review was the first of its kind in the country. It found that for some tenants, a small increase in their income resulted in an increase in their rent. In some cases the review found that the rent increase was larger than the income increase with the result that some households despite an increase in their income, found themselves worse off. The findings of the review resulted in the Council abandoning the banded rent scheme and introducing of a fixed percentage rent scheme. The new scheme ensured that only a percentage of increase in income goes toward rent, thus ensuring that increases in income, benefit rather than penalise tenants.
- The Unit in South Dublin also reviewed the operation of their Council's Differential Rent Scheme particularly in relation to the National Guidelines on Differential Rent Schemes. In this case, the researchers found that the Council's Rent Scheme was basically sound but did make some recommendations in relation to the content of the scheme, collection of rent and arrears and the provision of information about the scheme
- The Unit in Dublin City undertook research to update the Council's Tenant Profile providing a valuable aid to the various sections of the Council to support and inform decision making
- Other types of research undertaken by the Pilot Units included a review by the Waterford City Unit of the amount and nature of funding coming to the City to support social inclusion and local development activities
- The Social Inclusion Unit in Louth undertook a community needs analysis which identified the existence of a demand for additional education and training opportunities for disadvantaged groups and communities in the Dundalk area. The Unit subsequently worked with the County Library and the IT Section of the County Council to establish a Learning Centre within the County Library which specifically targets supports at disadvantaged groups including people with disabilities and those with literacy difficulties
- The Unit in Wicklow worked with the Arts section of the Council to target supports at disadvantaged areas and to ensure all the various arts, heritage and culture schemes operated by the Council consider the needs of those experiencing exclusion as part of their criteria. This has resulted in the Artist in Residence scheme being targeted at disadvantaged communities/groups.

- The Unit in Cork City undertook a Social Inclusion Audit of the Council. As part of this process, they met with their colleagues in other sections of the Council to discuss what each section was doing to promote social inclusion. They then worked with the various different sections to assist the sections identify a number of actions to be undertaken. As part of this Audit, the Unit met with the IT section of the council who identified that the Council web-site www.corkcity.ie needed to be revised and improved to ensure it was made more accessible to people with visibility/dexterity issues, people with limited literacy skills and those for whom English is not their first language. The site was redeveloped in 2004 and only one month into operation was short listed for the 2005 Best Accessible Website Award.

5. Conclusions

The research capacity of Irish local authorities has clearly improved, particularly over the last 5-6 years from a very low base. Notwithstanding this general improvement of the research capability in local authorities, the appointment of a Social Inclusion Analyst across 50% of City and County Councils can be seen to generated benefits in terms of how social research is being used by the local authorities that have a Unit.

In the first instance, the availability of 50% funding from the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government has provided the local authorities with the additional resources, necessary to enable them to employ a dedicated analyst.

The fact that multi-dimensional nature of social inclusion requires the analyst to work across disciplines and across local authority functional areas supports and facilitates cross-disciplinary applications of information and the adoption of both thematic and area based analysis of issues and needs.

The presence of a specialist analyst means that research can be now either be undertaken in house or alternatively commissioned and managed in house. It is interesting in this context to note that the Joseph Rowntree funded study on the role of research in UK based local authorities found that where research is facilitated within local authorities, it increases the likelihood of it being used by the local authority.

To be useful data and profiles need to be regularly updated. Having an in house research specialist ensures that this can be done and that the data remains relevant to decision makers into the future.

Ensuring the impact of the Analysts is maximized requires an ongoing emphasis to be placed on ensuring that:

1. the research being undertaken is useful and relevant and
2. that that research outputs reach the right people, in an accessible form, at the right time
3. that those people have the necessary skills and motivation to interpret and apply the findings of research to the local context
4. In the current economic climate consideration may also need to be given to the potential for collaboration between local authorities while research quality must remain an ongoing consideration.

Social Inclusion Analysts have a role in ensuring that their research has an impact. They can facilitate this in a number of ways:

1. They can involve the potential users of research earlier in the process.
2. They need to be very clear about the needs of the target audiences and the processes through which research and policy interact in their particular local authority.
3. The Analysts also need to give detailed consideration as to how the research results they produces are made accessible with consideration given to the use of summaries, checklists, action points, recommendations, and indeed other innovative communication mechanisms including focused email alerts to staff and elected members who may have an interest in particular areas or groups.

It is in this way that the Social Inclusion Analysts currently operating in local authorities will ensure that they are valuable resource for local authority officials, elected members and other key stakeholders operating in the local authority area.