

Local Government Knowledge Navigator - Update

Purpose of report

This report is to provide information to the Improvement and Innovation Board about the appointment of an ESRC-funded Local Government Knowledge Navigator.

Summary

The LGA has been working with the ESRC to find a way to ensure that local government both inputs into and benefits from publically funded research programmes commissioned by that research council and, where possible, the other UK research councils. The new Local Government Knowledge Navigator programme, and the management of this by the LGA, is the method by which we plan to deliver this.

Recommendation

That the Improvement and Innovation Board note the forthcoming appointment of the Local Government Knowledge Navigator and the planned programme of work, and comment where appropriate.

Action

The LGA will steer and develop the programme in the light of the Board's views. The Board is invited to nominate a councillor for membership of the steering group.

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Background

1. The Local Government Association (LGA) has been working with the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE) to develop an approach to ensure that local government both inputs to and benefits from publically funded research programmes commissioned under the auspices of the UK Research Councils. A new approach is required because the Local Authority Research Council Initiative (LARCI) that had been tasked with developing linkage between local government and work funded by the UK's research councils (RCUK) was disbanded in March 2011.
2. LARCI was co-funded by the LGA, the research councils and the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) for around 10 years. Its objective was to facilitate collaboration between local government and research councils. Broadly, the aims were:
 - 2.1 to ensure the research councils delivered research that was relevant to local authorities, in a form that could be used by them;
 - 2.2 to ensure that the research councils were directing their funding to identify and tackle the complex problems that local government faces; and
 - 2.3 to ensure that researchers fully understood practitioners/policy makers' needs, and the issues in hand, and the practitioners/policy makers understood what's possible.
3. The general view was that:
 - 3.1 it was instrumental in the delivery of a relatively small number of successful projects; but
 - 3.2 for the resources put in, the successes were considered to be too few.
4. Once LARCI closed in March 2011, the principal funders commissioned a review by Dr Clive Grace of the Centre for Local and Regional Governance Research, Cardiff Business School, to examine its successes and the challenges it faced, from the perspectives of both local government and the research councils. The review report is available at <http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/media/news/2012news/Pages/120702.aspx>.

5. This review concluded that:
 - 5.1 local government and the research councils have very different 'research' priorities – the one principally in harvesting existing knowledge and applied research to solve problems, the other in the production of new knowledge;
 - 5.2 a major change was needed in culture and understanding – the 'public' (i.e. not-for-profit) market between local government and the research community is not working; and
 - 5.3 local government needs to be an effective and assertive client in claiming a share of the national research asset to support community well-being and better public services.

Developments since LARCI closure

6. LGA has continued to work closely with the LARCI funders to consider ways forward by which the original aims of LARCI could be achieved through a different approach. The LGA learnt that, independent of these discussions, ESRC were planning to appoint a one-year fixed-term 'Local Government Knowledge Navigator' post, whose role was to bring together ESRC funded research that might be of benefit to the local government sector. Following discussions with the ESRC in the summer of 2012, LGA and SOLACE reached agreement with ESRC that:
 - 6.1 The navigator post would be extended to two years, with an increase in ESRC funding for this post from £100,000 to £170,000, to make it more likely to deliver outputs and outcomes of value. More specifically it was agreed that the navigator would be tasked with:
 - 6.1.1 influencing the strategic research agenda within ESRC and, where appropriate, other research councils – raising common council concerns to a higher level, either to secure research council funding or influence research programmes, to ensure research on and about local government as organisations and institutions in/about key service areas and community needs;
 - 6.1.2 working closely with existing networks, boards and events within and outwith the sponsoring organisations to scope out the evidence needs of the local government sector in both the short and longer-term;
 - 6.1.3 maximising the impact of research through producing a series of 12 to 15 rapid evidence reviews on priority areas identified by the sector;
 - 6.1.4 filling gaps in evidence and brokering specific links with academic experts around key issues of concern;

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- 6.1.5 stimulating researcher/policy/practitioner networks; and
- 6.1.6 ensuring appropriate dissemination of research.
- 6.2 LGA and SOLACE would be lead partners in appointing the Navigator in November 2012, and in shaping and signing off the work programme.
- 6.3 The Navigator will be answerable to a steering group composed of an elected member and senior officer from LGA as well as representation from SOLACE and ESRC.
- 6.4 The LGA would manage the programme with funds for this (around £80,000) coming from unspent LARCI budgets currently being held by ESRC on behalf of the LARCI funders.

Benefits of agreed approach

- 7. The agreed approach has a range of benefits for the LGA, in particular, and the sector more generally. These are that:
 - 7.1 There will be a Local Government Knowledge Navigator, fully-funded by ESRC and appointed by LGA, SOLACE and ESRC, who will enable councils to get the best from publically funded research and to input to these research programmes. This appointment will be at a minimal cost to LGA.
 - 7.2 LGA will be part of the steering group and provide the programme management. This will ensure we are able to direct the work to maximise the benefit to the sector.
 - 7.3 Via our boards, the LGA and the sector will be able to influence the priorities for the work of the Navigator and all associated programme outputs.

Conclusion and next steps

- 8. The Local Government Knowledge Navigator will be appointed in November 2012, and the programme of work will last for two years.
- 9. The steering group will also be appointed in November, and the Improvement and Innovation Board is invited to nominate a councillor to that.
- 10. LGA officers will provide regular updates to the Improvement and Innovation Board and, once in post, the Navigator will attend all LGA Boards and provide a short presentation on their plans for the following three month period. This will also allow the Navigator the opportunity to hear directly about the issues facing local government in those areas.

Financial implications

11. The costs to the LGA are small, as the post is funded by ESRC and the programme manager by the remaining unspent LARCI money. The only cost will be the overheads of the Navigator when they are working from Local Government House.