Embedded researchers in public health:
A research briefing for funding organisations

Why consider funding embedded researcher placements?

- Research Funders increasingly want to understand the impact of the research they fund. In the case of public health research, impact means providing those working in public health with the evidence they need to improve the health of the public and ameliorate inequalities. Public health research needs to be [practically and meaningfully embedded](#) into the policies and services that seek to support population health, and research evidence needs to be ['woven'](#) into the daily practice of public health professionals.
- Previous studies have shown that research doesn't influence public health decision-making as much as it could. Much of this decision-making takes place at a Local Authority (LA) level, and the underutilisation of research evidence in public health speaks to a disconnect between universities who generate research and LAs who need to use research.
- Embedded researchers are a transformative way of working that can bridge the gap between research and policy/practice, ensuring research evidence directly addresses policy/practice needs and helping to facilitate the flow of research evidence to inform decision-making.
- Embedded researcher interventions entail a degree of co-operation between those who generate research and those who use research that goes beyond 'involvement' towards co-creation. Not only do embedded researcher interventions help LAs and other policy/practice organisations to become more research active, but they also help to disrupt siloes between academia and policy/practice and help universities to co-create more socially impactful research.
- Embedded researchers can therefore disrupt historical power relations between producers of research – who have historically determined the priorities and focus of research - and consumers and beneficiaries of research.

What are embedded researchers?

- Embedded Researchers work with dual affiliations: a university (or other research organisation) and a policy/practice organisation.
- In our research, we have adopted a deliberately broad definition of an embedded researcher which includes professionals becoming embedded with the primary aim of developing more research-active cultures within policy and practice organisations. Through working at the research and policy/practice interface, embedded researchers also help universities and research organisations forge stronger links with the beneficiaries of research to create more relevant research.
- 'Embedded researcher' is a term that describes a wide variety of models. Embedded researcher positions differ across several dimensions including who becomes embedded, how they become embedded, and the activities they undertake.
- This variety is important to retain when funding future embedded researcher schemes and individual placements. Flexibility in the design of embedded researcher placements allows both LAs and universities to co-create an embedded researcher 'intervention' that best reflects the needs of the LA, the culture of the university/research organisation, and the career stage and preferences of the embedded researcher.

What value can embedded researchers bring?

- The primary benefit of funding embedded researcher posts is that they can ultimately maximise the impact of research through:
  a) **Moving cultures of decision-making towards being more routinely informed by research:** Embedded researchers help public health teams become more interested in applying evidence, skilled in interpreting and sourcing evidence, and more able to gain value from using research evidence to inform decision-making.

b) **Ensuring that research is created in a way that maximises its value to decision makers:** Embedded researchers help to co-create research which helps to ensure research meets the needs of consumers of research; facilitates the uptake of research; and ensures that research incorporates multiple perspectives which leads to better quality research.

- As an intervention therefore, embedded researchers have the potential to influence both the 'demand' for evidence within LA public health teams as well as the 'supply' from universities.
- Embedded researchers within public health settings may be particularly impactful given that (i) evidence is not the only driver of decision-making within LA public health teams and has a competing role alongside other considerations including political drivers; and (ii) LA public health teams are generally composed of practitioners with pre-existing research skills but low capacity to exercise these. A scheme that was a primary focus of this research saw researchers taking on a facilitating role in many settings, in addition to some generating research in-situ.
- An additional benefit of embedded researcher interventions for funders is that they allow funders to gain a more holistic understanding of the research ecosystem and the interactions between LAs and universities.

> *"a lot of the time that [local authority research] goes under our radar, we don't know it's happening. So, this is all part of what we need to learn. What are they doing? How are they doing it? How can we support them in doing that? And how can we then grow that?"785604*

What should research funders consider when funding embedded researcher schemes?

- Embedded researchers can be viewed as a form of intervention where the development of trusting relationships at an individual and organisational level is both an outcome in and of itself, and a key mediator in enhancing research active cultures. Forming trusting relationships can take time and changes may be detectable after years not months or weeks. Short-term contracts provide little security for individual researchers, and ultimately undermine the development of trusting relationships.
- When funding a programme of embedded researchers, funders should consider each a distinct form of 'intervention'. Most embedded researcher roles are exploratory or pilot initiatives. They require an understanding of the organisation's research context before identifying potential changes. This has implications for the way in which embedded researcher interventions are evaluated and makes having standardised goals or benchmarks for change inappropriate. Two recommended elements are to ensure appropriate baseline measures are collected in order to understand change, and for evaluations to draw on multiple and mixed methods.

> *"....it's about showing how you can develop those roles to engage a wider remit of people to do research and be interested in research. It's not necessarily a statistical thing that they've got to have done a research study at the end of it."*

- We developed a [logic model](#) that outlines stages where embedded researchers activate changes. Two key stages of significance when designing future schemes are:
  - **Co-creation between universities and policy/practice organisations**. This requires relationship-building investment before an embedded researcher joins an organisation.
  - **The 'embeddedness' stage**, where tangible changes are challenging to quantify. The focus here is on needs assessment, securing local influence and increasing role visibility.

- In a scheme that was a core focus in our own research, those managing the scheme were successful in facilitating the development of a nationwide community of practice, that was important in providing a forum for embedded researchers to gain practical advice and support to help carry out their roles.
- Our research identified different typologies of embedded researcher, and there exist further opportunities for considering how different types of embedded researcher intervention may lead to greater or different benefits. For example, there may be further learning around schemes such as [Doctoral Local Authority Fellowships](#) (DLAFs) and [Local Authority Academic Fellowship](#) (LAAFs), as well as more clinically focussed schemes such as [Integrated Clinical Academic Programme](#) (ICAP) fellowships.
- A challenge for large research funders is how to ensure that embedded research schemes do not lead to further disparities in the research infrastructure between those LAs that obtain funding for embedded researchers, and those that do not.
- Embedded researchers can be influential in connecting LAs to broader research ecosystems and help them to become more research active. However, research and academia do not always enjoy a positive reputation among policy/practice organisations. Other activities that connect policy/practice organisations and universities may be required as pre-requisites before organisations are ready to start to co-create embedded research positions.

About this briefing: To investigate how embedded researcher roles manifest in public health settings, we undertook a mixed methods programme of research which involved examining published literature and investigating a case study in which researchers were placed into Local Authority public health teams across England. This briefing presents a summary of our findings tailored to research funding organisations.

Further resources

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- Read about embedded researchers in the NHS: [Embedded Researcher Project](#)
- Read firsthand experiences of two embedded researchers in local government: [Dr. Alessia Rose](#) and [Dr. Sharea Ijaz](#)

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Conflicts of interest and contributions

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