Embedded researchers in public health:
A research briefing for Local Authorities

Why consider hosting an embedded researcher?

- The COVID-19 pandemic and cost-of-living crisis changed patterns of population health, magnified health inequalities, and firmly put public health in the spotlight.
- Local Authority (LA) public health teams are at the forefront of local responses to improving population health and ameliorating inequalities. However, LA public health teams operate with lower levels of funding in real terms since public health transitioned to local government. Broader real-term cuts in LA budgets since 2010/11 also have an impact on the social determinants of health such as housing, transport and leisure that impact on population health.
- In a challenging funding climate, using research evidence to inform decision-making becomes all the more important. Research evidence can illuminate public health needs, elucidate mechanisms of how inequalities develop, and give greater certainty around which policies and interventions might be most impactful in addressing inequalities. Moreover, research evidence can inform decisions on how to allocate resources in an efficient and transparent way when resources are scarce.

> **"[The] really difficult context [provides] even more reason why we need to make sure that we prioritise what we're doing based on the best available evidence"**

- However, research often doesn't influence LA public health decisions as much as it could, mainly due to a disconnect between LAs and Universities. Embedded researchers are a way of working that can bridge this gap, ensuring research evidence directly addresses LA's needs and helping to facilitate the flow of research evidence to inform decision-making.

What are embedded researchers?

- Embedded Researchers work with dual affiliations: a research organisation (most often a university) and a policy/practice organisation. They aim to enhance research capacity within policy/practice organisations to enable these organisations to become more involved in research either as consumers, generators, commissioners, influencers, stakeholders or a mixture of these roles.
- '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 (e.g. how much time they might spend in an LA), and the activities they undertake (e.g. whether they focus on supporting research through training or on conducting research).
- Embedded researchers represent a new collaborative approach for Local Authorities and universities/research organisations. Rather than dictate how teams should use or conduct research, they work with LAs to identify how they can become more research active and implement actions together and as integral public health team members.

What value can embedded researchers bring to public health teams?

- In our research, embedded researchers were found to be successful in building LA capacity for research activity and helping LA public health teams think differently about research through:

  (i) facilitating research connections and opportunities;
  (ii) advising and supporting colleagues on research;
  (iii) conducting relevant research from within LAs;
  (v) providing training for colleagues;
  (vi) creating networks within LAs and beyond that can help public health teams stay connected with the latest developments and opportunities; and

(iv)	helping LAs to apply for funded research opportunities;	(vii)	helping to improve the flow of research evidence to decision-making

- Embedded researchers help public health teams become more motivated and supported in applying evidence, skilled in interpreting and sourcing evidence, and more able to gain value from using research evidence to inform decision-making.
- In some cases, we also document examples where embedded researchers helped public health teams to become more connected with research systems, after which they were successful in obtaining funding to conduct further research to understand public health issues and improve service provision.

> *"I think we have put research on the table for lots of staff who didn't really think about it before"*

How can you make embedded researchers work best in your Local Authority public health team?

- To get the most out of embedded researchers, our research suggests:
  - **Set Clear Aims:** Define expectations. A strategy for how the researcher will foster a research-active culture is pivotal. Our research offers a logic model adaptable by LA public health teams as a practical aid to theorising how the embedded researcher is expected to enact change.
  - **Co-design the role and iterate:** Embedded researcher roles represent a way for LAs and universities/research organisations to collaborate as active and equal partners. LAs should collaborate with partner organisations and individual embedded researchers to design, monitor, adapt and evaluate the embedded researcher intervention dynamically and innovatively.
  - **Ensure that the embedded researcher is supported:** Peer support provides embedded researchers with an opportunity to share learnings, collaborate, and share the joys and frustrations of the roles. Support from senior colleagues is also critical to success in the roles, as articulated by a participant in our research.

> *"...the culture within the Council is really top down. So, if the managers think doing research is expensive and time consuming, ultimately the people the manager is managing will think the same"*

Are there any challenges to hosting an embedded researcher?

- The main challenge is to be realistic about what an individual Embedded Researcher can achieve. Re-orientating team cultures takes time; changes can be subtle, incremental, and be hard to measure.
- Increased research activity can lead to better decision-making but may also impact on workloads without prior consideration and mitigation.
- Embedded researchers are intended to be integral members of the team – this means addressing their logistical needs (e.g. providing a desk), and being open to constructive feedback. This requires mutually trusting relationships that can take time to build.

Are there any future opportunities for hosting an embedded researcher?

- At the time of publication (October 2023), some of the ways in which LAs can be supported to host an embedded researcher include:
  - (indirectly) NIHR-funded [Health Determinants Research Collaborations](#) which support LAs to work with partners in creative ways (including through embedded researchers) to address health inequalities.
  - (directly) the NIHR runs a number of schemes that support existing staff within LAs to become more engaged – these include the [Doctoral Local Authority Fellowships](#) (DLAFs) and [Local Authority Academic Fellowship](#) (LAAFs).
  - (directly) The NIHR is planning to fund >120 Local Authority Research Practitioners (LARPs) by 2028 that mirror the scheme under consideration in our research (see link [here](#)).
  - (directly) the [Applied Research Collaborations](#) (ARCs) supported nationally are also intended to enable greater space for working at the research-policy interface and have supported a number of embedded researchers.
  - Individual schemes run by universities can include provision for embedded research and working with universities and individual researchers can help to secure funding for future embedded researchers.

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 Local Authorities.

Further resources

- You can read our research report in full [here](#)
- [Follow us](#) on X
- Join the FUSE Embedded Research in Council Network ([contact page here](#))
- 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](#)

Funding & funder involvement

Conflicts of interest and contributions

There were no conflicts of interest among the research team in the writing of this report. Nevertheless, the authors acknowledge that the funders of this research also funded a scheme of embedded research that was a focus of this research. The research team were supported by an Advisory Group that included some of those who commissioned or designed the scheme under consideration in this report. However, the findings and recommendations reflect the views of the authors, and the opinions expressed in this publication are not necessarily those of the EPPI Centre or the funders or the Advisory Group that supported this research. Responsibility for the views expressed remains solely with the authors.