

CAAB Research Briefing Note: No. 2

Putting Research Evidence to Work:

Key Issues for Research Utilisation in Irish Children's Services

1. What is this study's purpose?

This study was commissioned by the Children Acts Advisory Board (CAAB) with the overall aim of assisting the development of initiatives to make research evidence more accessible to practitioners, managers and policy makers. It was undertaken by Helen Buckley and Sadhbh Whelan from the School of Social Work and Social Policy and the Children's Research Centre, Trinity College Dublin in association with the CAAB. This study was guided by a steering group and the report was independently peer reviewed. The specific objectives were to:

- a. Provide a review of literature on the barriers and facilitators to research use.
- b. Consult with staff employed in children's services to establish the extent of research use in practice, the barriers and facilitators to its use, preferred methods of dissemination and most relevant topics.
- c. Report on knowledge brokering mechanisms used by relevant services internationally.
- d. Draw conclusions from the foregoing and make recommendations to promote greater use of research in practice.

This briefing note summarises the method of research, key findings, conclusions and recommendations of the study. The full report can be downloaded from the CAAB website at www.caab.ie.

2. How was this study undertaken?

The methods employed were designed to achieve these objectives. Firstly, a review of up to 70 reports of international literature on research utilisation and evidence informed practice was undertaken. Secondly, a consultation process was carried out involving staff (managers and practitioners) from four sectors: health, welfare, justice, and community and voluntary organisations. The consultation was carried out by means of a survey and focus groups. A total of 155 staff completed questionnaires at four separate seminars organised by the CAAB, and 122 participated in a total of 13 focus groups at the same events. Thirdly, a review was undertaken of products and services provided by international organisations dedicated to research dissemination and utilisation, and of relevant Irish organisations.

3. What are the key findings?

3.1 Evidence Based/Informed Practice

Evidenced based, or evidence informed, practice is best described as a philosophy and process designed to advance effective use of professional judgement.

Typically, it involves the steps of formulating problems or questions, sourcing the best evidence to answer the question, critically appraising the evidence for validity, integrating the evidence with practice experience and





specific contextual factors, taking action and then evaluating effectiveness. As understanding of the concept has evolved, the term 'evidence based practice' has, in many instances, been replaced by 'evidence informed practice'. The latter is now commonly used in the literature to take account of the myriad of influences on practice operating within an organisational and wider environmental context, including policy, values and ideologies, organisational culture, resources and politics. Nevertheless, to reflect their usage across the literature, both terms are used in this study.

3.2 Extent and Nature of Research Use

While acceptance of the benefits of using **research evidence** to inform and challenge practice and evaluate programmes emerged from the findings of this study, it was also evident that research utilisation is somewhat limited in frequency and nature, and practitioners also expressed caution about the limits of its relevance in sectors that are complex and constantly changing. Factors that both impede and promote research use were reviewed and analysed in terms of those that impacted on individual use, those associated with the nature and presentation of research material, and those that were relevant to service provider organisations. It became clear that if the rate of research utilisation is to improve a number of obstacles need to be addressed.

3.3 Barriers to and Facilitators for Research Use

The literature and consultations both demonstrated **barriers to research use for individuals** as: lack of time, limited access to research materials in some cases, lack of confidence in research findings, practitioners' dislike of the type of jargon used in research reports, a lack of plain English, a sense of being overwhelmed by the volume of material available and lack of critical appraisal skills.

Barriers in respect of the nature of research were also identified in the literature and consultations, which cited the lack of fit between research findings and the reality of practice, the complex presentation of some research materials and the perceived lack of Irish research. **Organisational** barriers that emerged were lack of a research culture, lack of active encouragement to use research and inadequate dissemination strategies.

Factors that appeared to encourage research use by **individuals** were personal interest and motivation, informal sharing in the workplace and the need to prepare annual reports and papers. **Facilitators** relating to the **nature of research** demonstrated in both the literature and the consultations included accessibility, user-friendliness, practical relevance of research and provision of research evidence in different formats. Actions to promote an **organisational culture** supportive of research use included: improving access to research material, setting aside dedicated time for reading and discussion of research, giving a strategic lead by the nomination of certain staff as research champions, providing training in critical thinking, appraisal, self-reflection and evaluation skills, 'embedding' research by using it as a base for protocols, commissioning research use, appointing research officers, incentivising and rewarding research utilisation and adopting the habits of self-challenging and self-evaluation. The creation of linkage and exchange mechanisms featured strongly in both the literature and the consultations, with stakeholders suggesting the establishment of intra- and inter-organisational forums to provide opportunities to share and debate different topics.

3.4 Mechanisms to Promote Research Use

Various **frameworks for understanding** the application of research to practice have been put forward in the literature, including the support of individual practitioner use, organisations basing policies and protocols on research evidence and the creation of partnerships between organisations and research producers. The latter could involve co-location of researchers and practitioners, involvement of practitioners in the conduct of research and the involvement of research staff as advisors to service managers and policy makers. The impact of the contexts in which and for which research is produced was also demonstrated, indicating that a linear relationship between research production and utilisation should not be assumed.

Internationally, **brokering or intermediary organisations** provide a range of products and services to help bridge the gap between research production and the application of research in practice and/or policy. The precise focus of their services varies from organisation to organisation but in general, these organisations overcome a number of impediments to research use by:

- Assisting in the **identification** of relevant material by providing searchable databases and links to other databases, providing summaries of research material and providing guidance and training on how to identify relevant research.
- Supporting **access** to relevant material such as downloadable reports and links, including reference numbers, to other reports that may be purchased. Many of the organisations providing this access also provide library facilities and some also provide guidelines and/or training on effective ways to obtain research literature.
- Facilitating the identification and understanding of **key messages** from research by providing guidance on critical appraisal, by providing summaries of key points from literature and by hosting information and awareness events such as seminars and conferences.
- Providing indicators of **research reliability** through identification of quality checks such as peer review processes and research quality rating systems.
- **Supporting evidence integration** through manuals, training events and facilitating organisations to integrate evidence into specific practices and services.

Collaboration is a key activity of many of these organisations, and extends along a continuum from selective and informal relationships between public servants and experts in various fields, to intra-organisational partnerships and co-location of practitioners and researchers as well as formal relationships between service provider organisations and research centres. It is noted that the number of such organisations in Ireland is quite limited.

4. What are the study's conclusions?

The study reached three overall conclusions:

1. **A simple linear relationship should not be assumed to exist between the production of research evidence and its use in practice.** This is due in part to the number of barriers to research use identified in this study, but also to the range of different factors that impact on practice in children's services.
2. **The use of research evidence in practice could be better promoted by each of the main stakeholders involved, i.e. research commissioners, service provider organisations and research providers.**

Attention could be paid to the:

- type and nature of research commissioned and undertaken;
- approach and methods used to undertake research;
- way in which research evidence is disseminated, communicated and integrated into practice;
- degree of collaboration and partnership developed between the key stakeholders.

3. **Strategies are required at national level to identify and address gaps in research and to facilitate the dissemination and integration of both Irish and international research that is relevant to children's services.**

Throughout the project, the majority of issues emanating from the literature and the consultations have referred either directly or obliquely to the above issues.

5. What are the study's recommendations?

The report makes four recommendations.

Recommendations 1 to 3 relate to actions that might be undertaken by each of the key stakeholders, i.e. research commissioners, service provider organisations and research providers. Recommendation 4 is relevant to all stakeholders but would require particular support from central government to drive its implementation.

1. **Recommended Actions for Research Commissioners**

In order to promote more extensive use of research evidence, research commissioners should:

- **Ensure that studies are relevant, applicable and capable of filling an existing gap in relation to practice and/or policy.**
- **Require that clear identification of implications for practice is an integral element of completed work.**
- **Ensure that plans for dissemination, using a range of methods, form part of the research process.**
- **Promote the involvement of key stakeholders in the commissioning and conduct of research as this would enhance the potential for ownership and integration of the findings into practice and policy.**

A list of specific recommended actions that research commissioners could take to help achieve the above is presented in the recommendations of the full report.

2. Recommended Actions for Service Provider Organisations

Service provider organisations, while continuing to value professional experience and expertise, should promote an organisational culture that signifies the value of research as a source of innovation, evaluation and challenge to existing policies and practices.

The full report presents a list of specific recommended actions that service provider organisations could take to help achieve the above recommendation.

3. Recommended Actions for Research Providers

In order to promote evidence informed practice, research providers should endeavour to produce research evidence that is accessible and has practical relevance and applicability. They should employ diverse methods of research dissemination, and work collaboratively with staff and organisations to assist in the integration of research evidence into practice and policy.

A list of specific recommended actions that research providers could take to help achieve the above is presented in the recommendations of the full report.

4. Recommendation for the Establishment of a Knowledge Brokering Service

The formal establishment of a knowledge brokering service, either through a designated organisation or a commitment shared by several organisations is recommended. Such a service would:

- Identify and advise on how to address gaps in existing Irish research relevant to practice in children's services.
- Act as a conduit for the dissemination of research, both Irish and international, in a user-friendly format that clarifies and specifies implications for practice in children's services, and help to integrate research evidence into practice.

Ideally, responsibility for the establishment of this *service* would be taken by central government as an indication of the importance of evidence informed practice.

6. What is the benefit of this study?

The benefit of this study arises from its dual purpose:

- To inform the CAAB and other relevant organisations of initiatives that can be taken to help put research evidence to work.
- To provide a basis for other organisations and individuals to take positive action in this area.

The period of time available to the CAAB to work as 'an enhanced enabling organisation' and to help organisations to develop evidence based services was less than originally envisaged. Nevertheless, during a two year period the CAAB:

- assisted in the identification of relevant research material by developing online searchable databases on Irish research on children in detention and out of home care, on inter-agency co-operation in children's services, on Irish child protection literature and by developing links to other resources through our 'online gateway' for Putting Research Evidence to Work;
- facilitated the understanding of key messages from research by providing literature reviews on Irish literature on children in detention and out of home care, and on research on inter-agency co-operation in children's services, and by hosting awareness events, including three Evidence to Practice Seminars on child protection and family support (a differential response model), on 'assessment' and on managing behaviour, repairing harm and restoring relationships (restorative practices);
- produced written guidance and guidelines to support good practice in the areas of service provided by guardians *ad litem*, therapeutic interventions in residential care and inter-agency co-operation;
- helped organisations to integrate evidence into specific practices and services with advice and assistance through evidence integration projects such as 'Case Management' with An Garda Síochána, 'A Different Response Model' with the Health Service Executive, and 'Restorative Practices' with the Health Service Executive and An Garda Síochána.

The power to put research evidence to work in children's services rests with you, the reader. We hope that this report provides individuals and organisations at policy, management and practice level with a better understanding of the issues faced in using research evidence in practice but also with solutions to these issues and actions that can be taken.

For more information:

- ✓ Phone 01-6724100 to speak to Robert Murphy or Marion Martin.
- ✓ Check out www.caab.ie to see this study's Summary Report, Full Report or Web-conference.