

SUMMARY REPORT

Putting Research Evidence to Work: Key Issues for Research Utilisation in Irish Children's Services



An Bord Comhairleach um Achtanna na Leanaí
Children Acts Advisory Board

October 2009

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PUTTING RESEARCH EVIDENCE TO WORK: KEY ISSUES FOR RESEARCH UTILISATION IN IRISH CHILDREN'S SERVICES

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CAAB RESEARCH: REPORT NO. 2

OCTOBER 2009



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School
of Social Work
and Social Policy



Table of Contents

Foreword

Research Quality

| | | |
|----------|------------------------------|----------|
| 1 | Introduction | 1 |
| 2 | Key Findings..... | 2 |
| 3 | Conclusions..... | 5 |
| 4 | Recommendations | 5 |

Foreword

Following its establishment in July 2007 the Board of the CAAB identified as a key strategic objective the need to strengthen the knowledge base of children's services. In order to fully meet this objective the Board believes that it is necessary to develop a research capacity that effectively utilises the internal resources of the children's sector and creates strong links with academic and research organisations nationally and internationally.

The Board is very aware of the cost of research, and in particular the cost of the lost opportunity when research is not applied. In developing our research programme the Board believed that it was critical to establish an understanding of the elements necessary to ensure that the research being carried out was the most appropriate and that its findings could be understood and applied across the sector. Our first commission was therefore this study – Putting Research Evidence to Work: Key Issues for Research Utilisation in Irish Children's Services.

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.

In the further development of our research programme we have tried to be faithful to the findings of this study, particularly by:

- ensuring that studies are relevant, applicable and capable of filling an existing gap in relation to policy and/or practice;
- promoting the involvement of key stakeholders in the commissioning and conduct of the research;
- ensuring that plans for dissemination using a range of methods form part of the research process.

I want to indicate my appreciation to the staff of organisations across the sector who participated in our consultation process, through our 2008 Network Seminars, and to Bronagh Gibson who so professionally co-ordinated the seminars. I want to express my sincere thanks to the researchers Helen Buckley and Sadhbh Whelan, and also to Robert Murphy, Ciarán Ó Searcaigh and Marion Martin who managed this project on behalf of the CAAB and who have contributed greatly to its quality.

The power to put research evidence to work in children's services rests with you, the reader. We trust 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. We hope we have also provided solutions to these issues and indicated the actions that can be taken.

Aidan Browne
Chief Executive

Children Acts Advisory Board

Research Quality

Two important elements of the CAAB's research quality assurance are the use of a Steering Committee to 'guide' a project and using an independent peer review process - see below.

Membership of the Steering Committee

Dr Dermot Stokes, National Coordinator, Youthreach and CAAB Board Member.

Aidan Browne, Chief Executive, CAAB.

Robert Murphy, Head of Research and Information, CAAB (Committee Chair).

Marion Martin, Advisory Officer, CAAB.

Gráinne McGill, Advisory Officer, CAAB.

Robert Templeton, Child Care Specialist, CAAB.

Peer Reviewers

Colleen Eccles is Deputy Director for **research in practice**, UK. This project specialises in research utilisation across inter-disciplinary children's services and is the largest research utilisation organisation in the children and family field in the UK. Colleen is passionate about bringing the research and practice worlds together and has previously led a national change project on 'Social Work and the Use of Research Evidence in Court'. Colleen sits on the Association of Directors of Children's Services Workforce Development subgroup and is also a member of the Partnership Board for the Department of Sociological Studies, Centre for the Study of Childhood and Youth, University of Sheffield.

Dr John Canavan is joint founder and Associate Director of the Child and Family Research Centre (CFRC), Ireland. John has extensive experience in researching and evaluating social intervention programmes in the areas of child and family care, educational disadvantage, and community and local development. Currently, he oversees the work programme of the CFRC much of which has a strong policy and practice orientation. Along with colleagues Professor Pat Dolan and Professor John Pinkerton, John supported the Office of the Minister for Children in developing The Agenda for Children's Services: A Policy Handbook (2007). John has a particular interest in and has published on research utilisation issues.

Kerry Lewig is Research Co-ordinator for the Australian Centre for Child Protection, University of South Australia. Kerry has a background in organisational psychology with research experience in work satisfaction, engagement, work stress and burnout in the services sector and the volunteer sector. Her current focus is on research utilisation in the child protection field with a particular interest in organisational factors influencing research use, programme implementation and service delivery. Kerry has published on closing the research to policy and research to practice gaps in child and family services.

Fiona Mitchell is Coordinator for the Scottish Child Care and Protection Network (SCCPN). With its overall aim to promote the use of evidence for best practice in child care and protection in Scotland, SCCPN draws together academics in Scottish Universities and key stakeholders in practice and policy to explore ways to foster collaboration and co-ordination of research production and dissemination.

1 Introduction

This is the summary report of the project 'Putting Research Evidence to Work: Key Issues for Research Utilisation in Irish Children's Services'. The full report and briefing note for this project are available to download from the website www.caab.ie.

This project was commissioned by the Children Acts Advisory Board (CAAB) with the overall aim of assisting the CAAB to develop initiatives to make research evidence more accessible to practitioners. 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.

The methods employed were designed to achieve these objectives. Firstly, a review 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 staff participated in a total of 13 focus groups at the same events. Thirdly, a review was undertaken of products and services provided by Irish and international organisations dedicated to research dissemination and utilisation.

Data from the literature review and the consultations was analysed and presented in a report under the themes of: extent and nature of research use, barriers to research use, factors that facilitate research use, and frameworks and models of research use. Section 2 of this summary report presents the key findings of the report. The conclusions and recommendations from the study are presented in Sections 3 and 4 respectively.



2 Key Findings

2.1 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 influences on practice operating within an organisational and wider environmental context, including policy, values and ideologies, organisational culture, resources and politics, practitioner skill and service user views. Nevertheless, to reflect their usage across the literature, both terms are used in this study.

2.2 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.

2.3 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, 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. Promoting **organisational culture** was defined in terms of various tasks such as 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.

2.4 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 cannot 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.



3 Conclusions

While this study is subject to some limitations its findings are considered sufficiently robust to support 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 promoted by each of the main stakeholders involved, i.e. research commissioners, service provider organisations and research providers.** Attention could be paid to the:
 - a. type and nature of research commissioned and undertaken;
 - b. approach and methods used to undertake research;
 - c. way in which research evidence is disseminated, communicated and integrated into practice;
 - d. 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.

4 Recommendations

This Section presents the recommendations emerging from the study. 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

General Recommendation 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.

Specific Recommended Actions for Research Commissioners

In order to contribute to the integration of research evidence into practice, research commissioners, should:

- a. Ensure that the outcome of research is relevant, applicable and fulfils an existing gap in relation to practice and/or policy. This can be achieved by including the views of researchers, service providers and service user groups when commissioning and undertaking research.
- b. Require researchers to provide dissemination strategies, including presentations and optional formats, such as summaries, briefing papers, CDs and podcasts for accessing research. Commissioners could factor in the cost of these into their budgets and identify them in invitations to tender and contracts.
- c. Operate a partnership approach that keeps all relevant stakeholders involved from the beginning to the end of each research study and ensure the communication of information between them in the interim.
- d. Develop or contribute to an online database or a combination of online databases of Irish research that would provide user-friendly, succinct and easily accessible overviews and briefings.
- e. Enhance confidence in the quality of the research produced by building in benchmarks such as peer reviewing.
- f. Commission overviews, systematic reviews and research summaries on topics identified as having current relevance.



2. Recommended Actions for Service Provider Organisations

General Recommendation 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.

Specific Recommended Actions for Service Provider Organisations

In order to promote evidence informed practice, organisations that provide services, should:

- a. Provide access to research articles and reports via the Internet and print literature such as books, journals and reports.
- b. Appoint, where practicable and relevant, staff who are either full-time researchers, or whose job includes research, who will commission, conduct and disseminate research.
- c. Establish strong links with research centres that can help put research evidence to work.
- d. Implement, in line with the previous recommendation, ongoing programmes dedicated to integrating research into practice, which will allocate specific time, and involve a number of dissemination and training strategies including training in critical thinking, appraisal, self-reflection and evaluation skills.
- e. Involve practitioners in the conduct of research, in collaboration with research staff within or outside organisations.
- f. Support staff (champions) who display particular interest and motivation in the use of research evidence by recognising and/or rewarding effort and/or giving them particular responsibility for the promotion of research use.
- g. Provide feedback to staff regarding how any statistical or other data that they provide will be utilised and where feasible and appropriate feedback the overall results from the analysis of aggregated information.
- h. Promote learning by facilitating staff attendance at seminars and supporting further study that includes a research component.
- i. Promote better collaboration within organisations between personnel involved in research and those in service delivery to ensure research maximises its potential for take-up.
- j. Encourage staff within the organisations to avail of the opportunities presented to them by:
 - accessing research that is available;
 - drawing on research findings when conducting assessments, writing reports, devising intervention plans, evaluating programmes, tendering for funding, making organisational



policy decisions and supervising staff;

- participating in the conduct of research as either an informant or a researcher, thereby adding to the knowledge base of Irish research;
- availing of opportunities to attend or present research at seminars, conferences or other learning events.

3: Recommended Actions for Research Providers

General Recommendation 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.

Specific Recommended Actions for Research Providers

To enable the implementation of the research evidence research providers should aim to:

- a. Collaborate with all relevant stakeholders from the beginning to the end of the research process.
- b. Provide succinct reports that are well written, clearly presented and well-structured and which draw out implications for practice and make relevant recommendations.
- c. Use language that is jargon free and styles of presentation that are engaging.
- d. Provide an optional range of research *outputs* targeted at different audiences, including presentations, reports, summaries and briefing papers.
- e. Provide an optional range of *formats*, such as electronic and print material, podcasts and audio files.
- f. Commit to ongoing participation in interactive dissemination forums, seminars and workshops after research has been completed.
- g. Work with service provider organisations to negotiate the most effective way of disseminating research to their staff once it is completed.
- h. Negotiate with higher education institutions to place a more enhanced value on applied as opposed to highly theoretical research.



4. Recommendation for the Establishment of a Knowledge Brokering Service

The formal establishment of a knowledge brokering service, either through a designated organisation or through 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.



