

**A report of the LARCI (Local Authority Research Council Initiative) conference
Putting Research into Policy: Implications for Local Government
Local Government Association, Smith Square, London
7th December 2004**

Local government staff need information in order to make informed decisions about an array of issues affecting what they do now, and most importantly, in the future. This information (call it evidence, research, survey information, data, technology development) needs to be accessed from the most up-to-date, accurate and reliable sources. The Rt Hon Nick Raynsford MP, Minister of State for Local Government and the Regions, keynote speaker at the recent LARCI conference, urged local authorities to look to the Research Councils for such information. He emphasised that the government is committed to using evidence to inform the policy making process, and that the Research Councils are a key part of this. Not only is the research accurate and impartial – it's also freely available.

Purpose

The purpose of the LARCI conference was: to demonstrate how Research Council-funded research can be of practical use to local government; to provide a forum for the exchange of ideas between local government and the Research Councils; and to provide a networking opportunity for policy, planning and research staff.

LARCI operates through a steering group which consists of members from 5 of the Research Councils, and local government organisations (www.larci.org.uk/steering.html for steering group details), so is well placed to represent a range of interests and influence research programme development. Our purpose is to facilitate communication between local authorities and the Research Councils at a strategic and operational level, leading to better informed research and better informed policy.

The conference

The conference got off to a cracking start with an informed and thought provoking presentation from Councillor Dr Peter Hedges. Peter is both a local councillor and a Research Councils employee (Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council), so was able to discuss research needs and applications from the view of both a provider and a practitioner. He provided an overview of the Research Councils' work, then gave examples of local authorities working in partnership with the Research Councils. For example, 41 local authorities are engaged in the current EPSRC Infrastructure and the Environment Programme. Within IEP, the Sustainable Urban Environment programme has budget of £22M, but has also generated £2.7M in contributions (usually in kind) from local authorities.

Roger Sykes (Local Government Association and LARCI steering group member), raised the issue of the different timescales used by Local Authorities and the Research Councils, in terms of immediacy of research needs. The Research Councils are seeking to address this by developing funding which would cut the development time, for selected programmes. With sufficient planning and flexibility on both sides, Roger suggested solutions could be found to address existing disparity in timescales.

Other speakers covered a range of topics (e.g. energy, environment, rural economy, health, attitudes) of relevance to local authorities. Highlights included the presentation by Prof Robert Allison (University of Durham), who treated the audience to a whistle-stop tour of some of his current research of relevance to local authorities, including practical guidance on how to preserve archaeology whilst developing a site

for construction. (e.g. to see what frequency vibration equipment will destroy, or preserve, archaeology on your site – when to ignore PPG 16 – contact Bob r.j.allison@durham.ac.uk, or see the LARCI website for his full presentation). Alison Park (National Centre for Social Research) gave a highly relevant presentation on Researching Changing Attitudes, firmly emphasising key policy messages for local authorities. Further information can be found at: www.natcen.ac.uk/.

Breakout groups in the afternoon focused on three themes:

- Many Research Council programmes would benefit from an early input from local government. How can the views of local authorities be represented at this early stage?
- How can we best communicate the results of Research Council research to local government audiences?
- How can the outputs from the Research Councils be used to provide practical solutions to local government research needs?

Groups came up with some thoughtful and innovative ideas, including examples of how similar issues had been addressed by other organisations.

Outputs

The event rounded off with comments from Stephen Loader, Chair of the Research Council UK's Knowledge Transfer Group, and the presentation of a LARCI Agenda for Action, listing the outputs from the conference, which will be:

- A copy of all issues raised in discussion groups will be posted on the LARCI website by early January 2005, and circulated to delegates and the LARCI mailing list.
- A copy of speakers' presentations will be posted on the LARCI website by early January 2005.
- A meeting will be arranged with the Research Councils to pursue issues raised in discussions and by the breakout groups;
- A seminar will be organised at the Research Councils in Swindon to present outcomes of the conference to a broader audience of Research Council staff, including science programme managers and facilitators.
- A full report, including local authority and Research Council responses to issues raised, will be e-mailed to all delegates, and available on the LARCI website from February 2005.

Further information about LARCI

For further information about LARCI, including information on future events, contact Andrea Turner on (01793) 413121 or e-mail andrea.turner@esrc.ac.uk. Alternatively, access the LARCI website (www.larci.org.uk/).

Andrea Turner

Andrea is employed by LARCI as the LARCI Research Coordinator, based within the Economic and Social Research Council, Swindon. This is a part-time post, Wednesday to Friday.