



# LOCAL AUTHORITIES AND EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH IN WALES

*The Final Report of*  
**LINK-Wales: The Learning in Wales Network**

Sally Power, Jamie Lewis, Chris Taylor, Mark Connolly,  
Gerran Thomas and Susan Wyn Jones

2009



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**ISBN: 978-1-904815-88-4**

### **Institutional affiliations;**

Cardiff University: Sally Power, Jamie Lewis, Chris Taylor

UWIC: Mark Connolly

Aberystwyth University: Gerran Thomas

Bangor University: Susan Wyn Jones

### **All correspondence to:**

Sally Power, School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University, Glamorgan Building, King Edward VII Avenue, Cardiff CF10 3WT, Wales.

Email: powers3@cf.ac.uk

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

This research project set out to examine the research activities, capacity and needs of local authorities in Wales. It arose from a more general concern about the level of educational research currently being undertaken in Wales with a view to exploring whether it would be beneficial to bring local government and the higher education (HE) sector into a closer relationship with each other.

### ***Aim and objectives***

The broad and long term aim of the project is to increase engagement between local authorities and the higher education research community in Wales. The short-term objectives of the project were to:

- Undertake a review of current local authority education research capacity and activity in Wales;
- Identify factors that impact on that research capacity and activity;
- Examine the usage and usefulness of existing datasets in Wales;
- Identify how local authorities identify research priorities and develop research strategies;
- Explore the usage and usefulness of existing research networks both within Wales and beyond;
- Elicit local authority perceptions of current and future research needs;
- Identify next steps to consolidate further engagement.

### ***Research methods***

The research methods involved two desk-based reviews and a series of interviews with local authority representatives and other key stakeholders. The first review involved exploring the internal organisation of local authorities and the second involved attempting to compile a more general audit of educational research activity across the country. This latter review confirmed the difficulties encountered by others in providing an overview of the state of play of educational research in Wales.

Twenty-three interviews were conducted in 20 of the 22 local authorities. The majority of the interviews (18/23) were conducted over the telephone. Two were conducted in Welsh. In addition to the local authority interviews, interviews were also conducted with six respondents from other key organisations involved in local authority research. Towards the end of the data analysis phase, a consultation exercise was conducted with local authorities.

## **KEY FINDINGS**

### ***Attributes of local authorities in Wales***

Perhaps more so than elsewhere in the UK, local authorities in Wales are seen as playing a crucial role in interpreting, delivering and evaluating government policy. However, while the political significance of local authorities has been upheld by the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG), they face serious challenges. Some local authorities are very small which creates difficulties with capacity. Others have very low levels of population density, which create additional challenges of transport and school size. Eligibility for free school meals is higher in Wales than for any other UK country. In addition, per pupil spending in Wales has gradually fallen behind that available in England. While some of the challenges of size and population density can be addressed

through consortia arrangements, the large number of small authorities and the financial circumstances they face are likely to *constrain their ability to develop robust and innovative evidence-based policy and practice.*

### **Research activities within local authorities**

The overall conclusion of this project is that *there is a considerable amount of research activity being undertaken by local authorities.* There is variation between local authorities in the scale of activities which is related to size, extent of collaboration with other authorities and level of research awareness.

Although there is a considerable amount of activity, the overwhelming majority of local authorities *undertake research on a reactive basis and rarely have a research strategy in place.* The nature and focus of activities are influenced by a range of stakeholders, including schools and community stakeholders. The dominant influence on research, however, is pressure arising from the WAG policy agenda and Estyn inspections.

Perhaps because of this, there is *a high level of consistency in the type of research activity* being conducted by local authorities. Based on a seven-fold typology of research, the distribution and issues associated with each type of activity are summarised below:

**Practice-based inquiry:** There are many small projects of this kind being undertaken within local authorities, most usually by individuals as part of professional development. While beneficial for personal professional practice, there are issues relating to the quality and dissemination of these small projects.

**Performance-monitoring:** This is the main research activity undertaken by local authorities and involves the most significant investment of resources – both in terms of researcher time and the commissioning of additional tests and survey data and analysis. While authorities have considerable strengths in this type of analysis, the opportunity costs limit local authority capacity to undertake other kinds of research.

**Logistical exercises:** All authorities undertook exercises designed to estimate future needs and provision. These were often small scale and, where they addressed particular facets of provision, involved drawing in external expertise. In general, such expertise was derived from professional experience rather than research expertise.

**Policy evaluations:** In addition to WAG evaluations, all authorities, to a greater or lesser degree, undertook evaluations of key initiatives. These were largely conducted ‘in house’ but occasionally external consultants were bought in. As with other types of research, there are issues relating to the robustness and dissemination value of these evaluations.

**Policy implementation research:** This was an area which local authorities felt the need for more research activity. Several respondents commented on the difficulty of implementing WAG policies – even where they agreed with the overall strategic direction.

**Policy development research:** Only occasionally did local authorities report being able to undertake research which could inform the development of policies for the future. A few felt they were able to draw on the existing research literature to help develop policy, but again there are issues about how systematically this literature is reviewed and whether it can be appropriately contextualised for Wales.

**Pure research:** As one might expect, local authorities did not concern themselves with this type of research, although several expressed an interest in being aware of what was going on in the research field.

The distribution of research within Welsh local authorities reveals considerable strengths and, not surprisingly, significant gaps. In general, *the pattern of research activity within local authorities in Wales contrasts with, and potentially complements, the pattern of research activity undertaken in the higher education sector.* Where local authorities in Wales are strong (performance-monitoring, scoping and policy evaluation), higher education is weak. And those activities which are of interest to local authorities but beyond their remit and capacity (policy implementation, policy development and pure research), are those areas which the higher education sector is better placed to undertake.

### ***Collaborations with higher education***

Although many local authorities enjoy close collaboration with local universities in connection with student progression and professional development, *only a minority reported research-based collaborations with higher education institutions.* Although a few individual academics do have research-based relations with local authorities, these usually involve small scale consultancies based on existing contacts. In general, local authorities do not appear to be familiar with the range of research on education being undertaken by universities in Wales.

There was a perception from several respondents that *there is a mismatch between higher education research and the needs of local authorities.* In general, local authorities felt that university-based research might be too abstract and found it hard to justify using their own resources to commission research which might be of only limited relevance to them.

Despite these concerns, the overwhelming majority of respondents felt that *local authorities would benefit from greater research collaboration with the higher education sector.* When asked about their future research needs, a long and comprehensive list of research areas and issues emerged which covered 'blue sky' issues as well as practical questions of resource distribution. Clearly if these needs are to be addressed, significant efforts will be required to build the educational research capacity of Welsh higher education institutions.

### ***Next steps***

In order to identify measures which might facilitate closer collaboration with the higher education sector, local authorities were sent a list of strategies which had been discussed during the course of the project. These can be categorised into those relating to: a) knowledge exchange; b) data and skill sharing; c) facilitating the commissioning of research; and d) organisational development. Local authorities were asked to identify which kind of strategy they would find most useful.

Those who responded felt that they would benefit most from the development of organisational structures to facilitate collaboration. In particular, *there was considerable support for the development of research strategies in partnership with WAG, Estyn and higher education institutions.* There was general support for various kinds of knowledge exchange activities, but little consensus on what form these might take. There was relatively little support for strategies to facilitate the commissioning of research, which indicates that *local authorities do not see themselves as being in a position to invest resources in commissioning research* in the near future.

In short, it appears that Wales faces a number of challenges in the coming years. Local authorities and the higher education sector face significant resource issues which

jeopardise the development and dissemination of educational research. It is imperative, therefore, that steps are put in place to maximise the value of that which already exists through selective development of a research programme and enhanced collaboration between government at national and local level and the higher education sector.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

We would like to thank all the people who assisted us with the research and the preparation of this report. Our particular thanks go to all the local authority respondents who agreed to be interviewed and who contributed to the consultation exercise. We would also like to thank other key stakeholders who contributed to the report through being interviewed or contributing comments. These include representatives of the following organisations:

ESIS (Education and School Improvement Service)

Estyn

GTCW (General Teaching Council for Wales)

WLGA (Welsh Local Government Association)

We would also like to thank the ESRC (Economic and Social Research Council) and HEFCW (Higher Education Funding Council Wales) for the funding which made this research possible and for WERN (Welsh Education Research Network) for its ongoing support.

Thanks also go to Carolyn Bowen and Sian Moseley for administrative support.

**LOCAL AUTHORITIES  
AND  
EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH IN WALES**

**FULL REPORT**



# 1: INTRODUCTION

## **Background**

The future presents local authorities in Wales with a combination of exciting opportunities and difficult challenges. In terms of opportunities, parliamentary devolution has enabled the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) to develop a distinctive educational agenda that seeks to promote traditional civic virtues within a future-oriented programme of reform (WAG 2001, 2006).

Local authorities in Wales, perhaps more so than elsewhere in the UK, are seen as playing a crucial role in interpreting, delivering and evaluating this programme. However, while the political significance of local authorities has been upheld within Wales, they face serious challenges in ensuring that their strategies and initiatives are sufficiently evidence-based. Like their counterparts in the UK, their resource base has been progressively ‘squeezed’ by limited financial settlements from above and financial delegation to schools from below. The capacity of Welsh local authorities is further constrained by their size. As we discuss further in Section 2, although authorities vary widely in size (Cardiff has 48,000 children while Merthyr has only 9,000) and density (Cardiff has 341 children per square kilometre, Powys has just 4), they are generally much smaller than their counterparts in England. Moreover, these combined difficulties of resource constraint and diseconomies of scale are likely to become more acute as a result of increasing financial difficulties over the coming years. It is certainly difficult to see how any one authority will be able to develop its own evidence-base for the development, implementation and evaluation of policy.

These concerns are magnified when set against the problems facing the education research community. Wales is also home to 12 higher education (HE) institutions, many of which contain centres of research excellence. However, in relation to educational research, there have been a number of reports and articles which have pointed to a decline in activity (Furlong and White 2001; Rees and Power 2007; Daugherty and Davies, 2008; Davies, 2009). The results from recent Research Assessment Exercises indicate that, although there are isolated cases of high quality educational research within Wales, these are mostly performed by individuals and/or small research teams who lack the capacity to attract or secure large scale sustainable funding. If this situation fails to improve, it is doubtful that the Welsh higher education sector will have sufficient resources to help local authorities address the challenges of evidence-based policy and practice.

It is against this background that this project has sought to explore the research activities and capacities of local authorities in Wales in order to see whether closer research collaborations may be developed between local authorities and the higher education sector in Wales that benefit both parties – and ultimately contribute to enhancing the achievements and experiences of learners in Wales.

## **Aim, objectives and methods**

The broad and long term aim of the project is to increase engagement between local authorities and the higher education research community in Wales. The specified research objectives are further elaborated below:

- *Undertake a review of current local authority education research capacity and activity in Wales;*  
Relatively little is known about the extent of research currently undertaken in and for local authorities in Wales, or about their capacity to undertake or commission research in the future.
- *Identify factors that impact on that research capacity and activity;*  
In addition to ascertaining the scale of activity and capacity, we were concerned to identify any factors which appear to account for variation between authorities.
- *Examine the usage and usefulness of existing datasets in Wales;*  
There already exists a number of datasets in Wales which can be used for research. Some, such as the National Pupil Database are education-specific. Others, such as the Living in Wales and Labour Force Survey, are more general but will have relevance for education. However, we do not know whether these are used by local authority staff to any extent.
- *Identify how local authorities identify research priorities and develop research strategies;*  
In addition to quantitative datasets, local authorities potentially have access to a number of constituencies which may play a role either in shaping the research and policy agenda or in providing data on the implementation of initiatives. We were concerned to find out who drives the research agenda.
- *Explore the usage and usefulness of existing research networks both within Wales and beyond;*  
There are already a number of research networks upon which local authority staff can draw. The project examined the extent to which these networks are drawn upon and, where applicable, explored the reasons why not.
- *Elicit local authority perceptions of current and future research needs;*  
In addition to gauging current practice and networking, the project was concerned to gather local authority personnel's perceptions of their future.
- *Identify next steps to consolidate further engagement.*  
There are a number of possible directions in which engagement between local authorities and higher education institutions in Wales might be enhanced. The project included a consultation exercise to elicit perceptions of which strategies are likely to be most fruitful.

The principal methods of data collection involved desk-based reviews of local authority structures and of research activities and a series of semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders.

*Desk-based reviews of local authority structures and research activities*

These two reviews involved systematic searches of local authority and research websites, supplemented where possible with documentary evidence. The review of local authority websites revealed wide discrepancies in the level of detail and accessibility – itself indicative perhaps of the extent to which responsibility for education is being reconfigured within authorities. The review of research activities confirmed the difficulties encountered by other researchers (eg Daugherty and Davis 2008) in attempting to provide an accurate picture of educational research activity in Wales. In the absence of sufficiently accurate data, we developed a matrix of research activities (see Section 3). This provides an overview of the distribution of different types of research activity in Wales, rather than a detailed itemisation of actual projects.

### *Interviews with key stakeholders*

All 22 local authorities in Wales were contacted by letter and email to inform them of the research and request an interview with the relevant representative. Because of the internal restructuring of local authorities, and particularly the move towards multi-agency working, it was not always easy to identify any one person with responsibility for educational research. There also appears to be a high degree of fluidity amongst local authority personnel.

In total, 23 interviews were conducted in 20 of the 22 local authorities. The majority of the interviews (18/23) were conducted over the telephone. Two were conducted in Welsh.

In addition to the local authority interviews, we have also conducted six interviews with other key stakeholders from organisations who are involved in local authority research. These include representatives from the higher education sector engaged in research with local authorities and from key national agencies. For the main part, their contributions are treated as providing important insights into the political and professional context.

### *Consultation exercise*

Towards the end of the data analysis phase, a consultation exercise was conducted with local authorities. This included sending for comment our overview of the distribution of education research activities across Wales and asking respondents to identify which steps local authorities would find most useful in developing closer research collaborations with the higher education sector in Wales. Response to the consultation exercise was disappointing, with only six authorities responding.

Throughout the report, responses have not been attributed to individuals and the name of the authority has been codified.

## **Structure of report**

The next section begins with an overview of the organisation of local authorities in Wales and then goes on to identify their diverse characteristics. Where possible, comparative data from England are used to reveal commonalities and differences.

Section 3 outlines the main research activities undertaken by local authorities. In order to get an overview of the differences in the kind of research undertaken in authorities, activities are classified and compared according to a seven-fold typology of research. The section concludes by mapping out the distribution of education research activities across Wales.

Section 4 explores local authorities' experiences of research collaborations with universities in Wales, and identifies various matches and mismatches. The final section explores what next steps would need to be put in place to bring local authorities and the higher education sector in Wales into a closer research relationship with each other.

## 2: LOCAL AUTHORITIES IN WALES: ATTRIBUTES AND CHALLENGES

### Local government reorganisation

The current organisation of local government in Wales dates back 13 years. In 1996 Wales discarded with the old county system and moved towards 22 unitary authorities: Blaenau Gwent, Bridgend, Caerphilly, Cardiff, Carmarthenshire, Ceredigion, Conwy, Denbighshire, Flintshire, Gwynedd, Merthyr, Monmouthshire, Neath Port Talbot, Newport, Pembrokeshire, Powys, Rhondda Cynon Taf, Torfaen, Vale of Glamorgan, Wrexham and Ynys Mon.

Each local authority receives around £4 billion a year to spend on their services, 80% of which is funded by the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG 2009). Among numerous other activities, authorities are responsible for servicing the educational needs of their community. Although the structure of educational provision can differ markedly between authorities, each constituency's remit will include responsibility for servicing foundation phase schooling, primary and secondary schools, further education, lifelong learning and library services.

The Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) represents the interests of these 22 local authorities in Wales. Related to this is ADEW, the Association of Directors of Education in Wales. As a professional group of local authority officers accountable for statutory education functions in each of the Local Authorities in Wales their remit is to collaborate with WAG and the WLGA.

ADEW has become the main vehicle for local authority collaboration, communication and distribution. But it also has a more regional dimension in that Consortia Cymru comprises four consortia: *North Consortium* (Denbighshire, Flintshire, Wrexham, Ynys Mon, Gwynedd and Conwy); *Central South Consortium* (Merthyr, Bridgend, RCT, Vale of Glamorgan, Caerphilly); *South East Consortium* (Torfaen, Cardiff, Newport, Blaenau Gwent, Monmouthshire); and the *South West Consortium* (Powys, Ceredigion, Pembrokeshire, Swansea, Carmarthen, Neath Port Talbot).

The regional consortia meet regularly and play an integral role in developing and delivering the 'Making the Connections' agenda, balancing national and local elements in policy delivery. It is likely that as financial pressures increase the viability of 22 local authorities will become increasingly dependent on arrangements such as these. As one of our respondents noted:

We need to collaborate more and more across boundaries, what with the pupil led funding, because our school numbers are diminishing, and consequently our budget is diminishing. On top of that we have got the double whammy of the Assembly about to lessen the amount going into authorities. It is going to push us towards collaborating across borders. We are starting to do that now with the North Wales consortium and to try and identify more and more ways where we can work jointly on things. [NW1].

### Educational Structure

Re-organisation of local government work in Wales has not just been limited to changes at the centralised level. The structure for educational provision also differs at the local

level too. It is possible to categorise the arrangements of education service within the 22 local authorities in to three categories. For example, education in Wales can reside in:

- **Conventional Education Service:** Where education is located in a traditional single unit for education services.
- **Integrated Children Services:** Where the local authority has moved to a more integrated structure to children services provided to cover not just traditional education but also social care youth services too.
- **Multi-Functional Service:** Where the provision of education sits within a wider structure of education, leisure and lifelong learning.

Authorities change between these models – and not always in the direction of integration. For example, one authority has reverted back to a more traditional structure after having tried to integrate.

The ways in which the local authority arranges their educational structure can determine the types of provision they provide, the amount of resources allocated to education service and the number of staff that they can call on.

### Local authority profiles

The geography of Wales’ landscape is both urban and rural, mountainous and coastal. The result of this variance means the size, scale and cultures of local authorities differ markedly between one another. Each authority has its own individual educational challenges and difficulties to face, and its own specific requirements to be met. One obvious indicator of the difference between local authorities is pupil population. Authorities in Wales are not partitioned into sections of equal population and there are significant size differences between the larger and smaller authorities (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Pupil Population of Local Authorities**

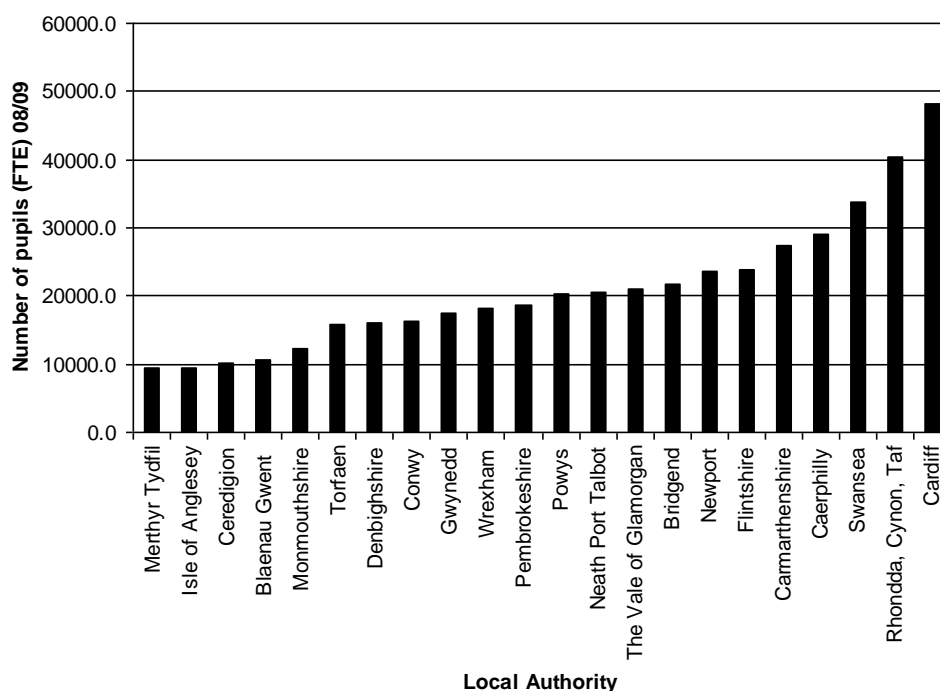
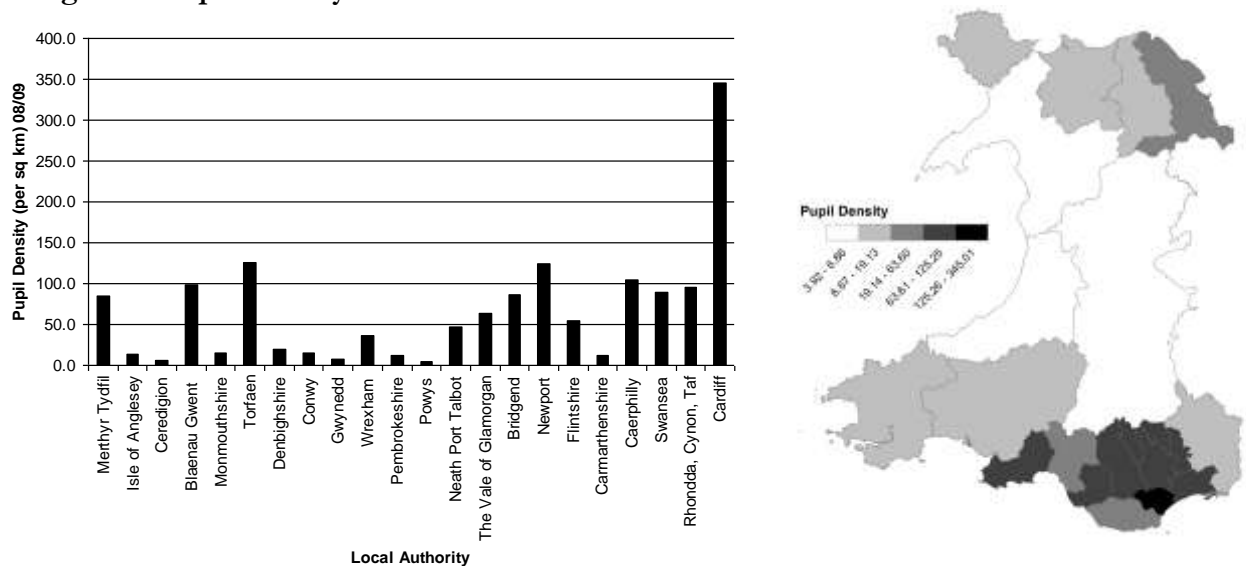


Figure 1 demonstrates the variance in size between local authorities. Cardiff, the largest local authority, has close to 50,000 pupils. It contains almost five times the pupil population of the smallest local authority – Merthyr Tydfil, and is similar in size to the combined total of the five smallest local authorities: Merthyr Tydfil, Ynys Mon, Ceredigion, Blaenau Gwent and Monmouthshire.

The five largest authorities in terms of pupil population are all located in South Wales, and nine out of the top ten largest authorities can be found situated along the M4 corridor stretching 80 miles from Swansea to Newport. Even so, the population of pupils in local authorities alone does not tell the full story. Cardiff does not only contain the most pupils, but it is far and away the most densely populated authority too. Here we see an even larger discrepancy between authority sizes, where we see particular differences between more rural and urban areas (see Figure 2).

Within Cardiff there are 350 pupils per square kilometre. This is almost three times more than the next largest authorities; Torfaen and Newport, which both have a pupil population density of around 120 per square kilometre. Swansea, the second largest city in Wales, has the sixth densely pupil populated area in Wales. Merthyr, the smallest authority in terms of size, has a pupil population density of around 80 per square kilometre, while Ceredigion, Gwynedd and Powys have the smallest density of all authorities with fewer than 10 pupils per square kilometre. More sparsely populated and rural areas will require specific school transport provisions, while both pupil population and pupil density will impact on classroom sizes and school modernisation decisions.

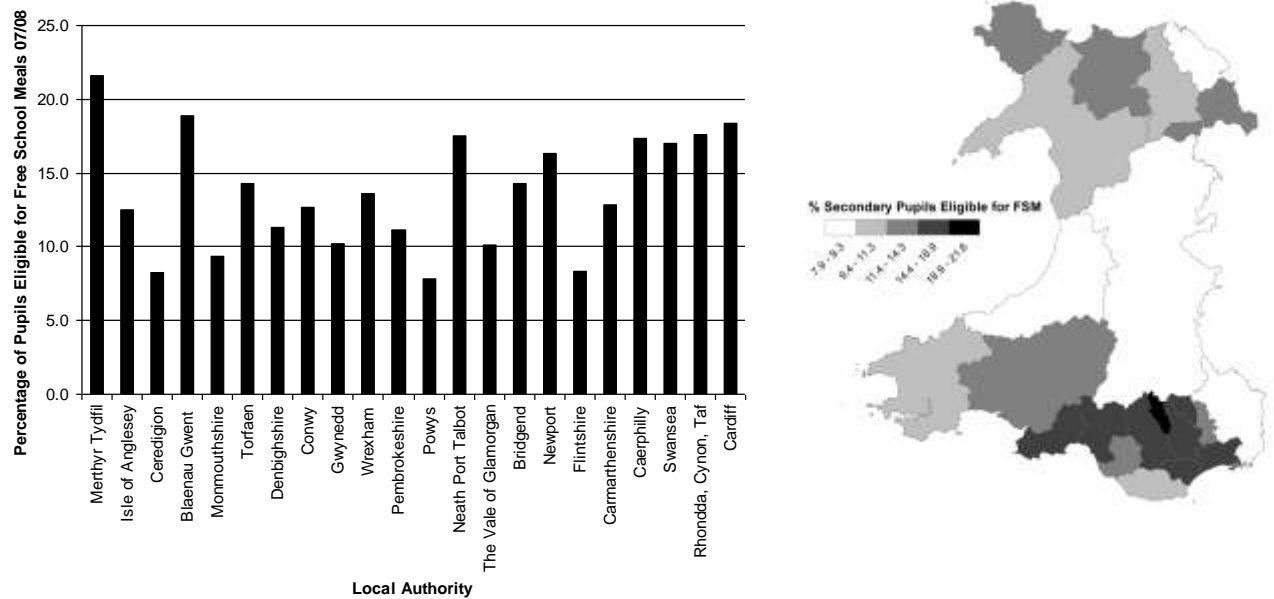
**Figure 2: Pupil Density within Local Authorities**



The entitlement to free school meals (FSM) is a nationally used marker of family poverty and is an indicator that is inversely linked to education attainment and achievement. According to Gorard, Lewis and Smith (2004) eligibility for FSM is higher in Wales than for any other UK country. Figure 3 shows how over 20 percent of pupils in Merthyr Tydfil are eligible for FSM, while other Valley authorities, such as Rhondda Cynon Taf and Blaenau Gwent are also high. The more rural and sparsely populated authorities of Ceredigion, Gwynedd and Powys have the least disadvantaged figures (both under 10 percent), while the larger cities of Swansea, Newport and Cardiff are relatively high (all

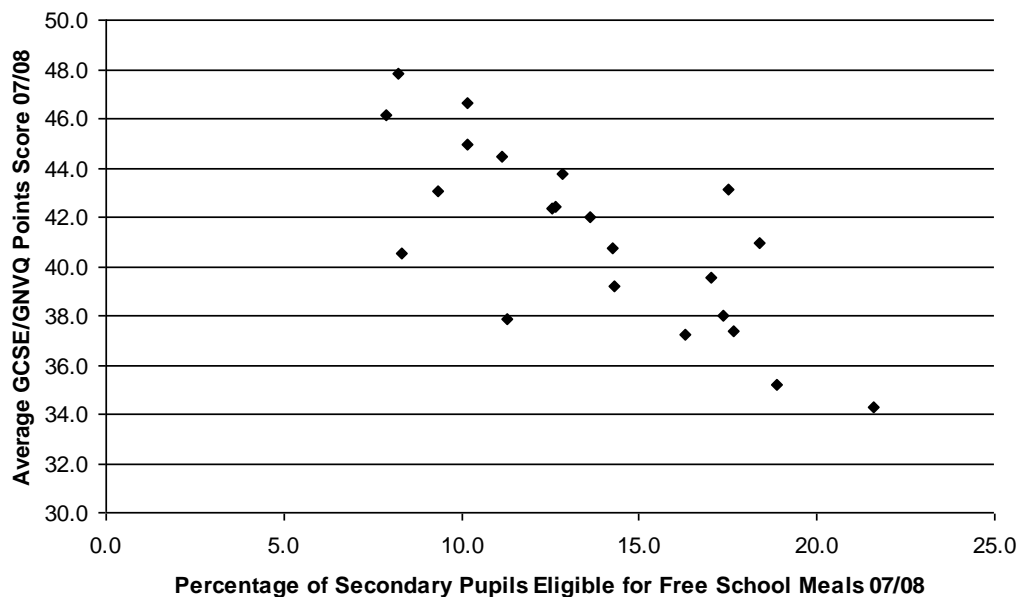
over 16 percent). These diverse characteristics confront each authority with unique circumstances and challenges.

**Figure 3: Free School Meal eligibility by Local Authority**



Plotting FSM eligibility against GCSE attainment, there is a clear inverse pattern between GCSE points scores and the percentage of secondary pupils eligible for FSMs (see Figure 4). Merthyr Tydfil, with the highest percentage of FSM entitlement has the lowest average GCSE/GNVQ point scores of 34. When compared to some of the highest attaining authorities, there is a clear gap of at least 12 GCSE points score. In authorities such as this one, it is possible to see the development of research agenda which reflects a concern with the impact of families and vulnerable people on educational achievement.

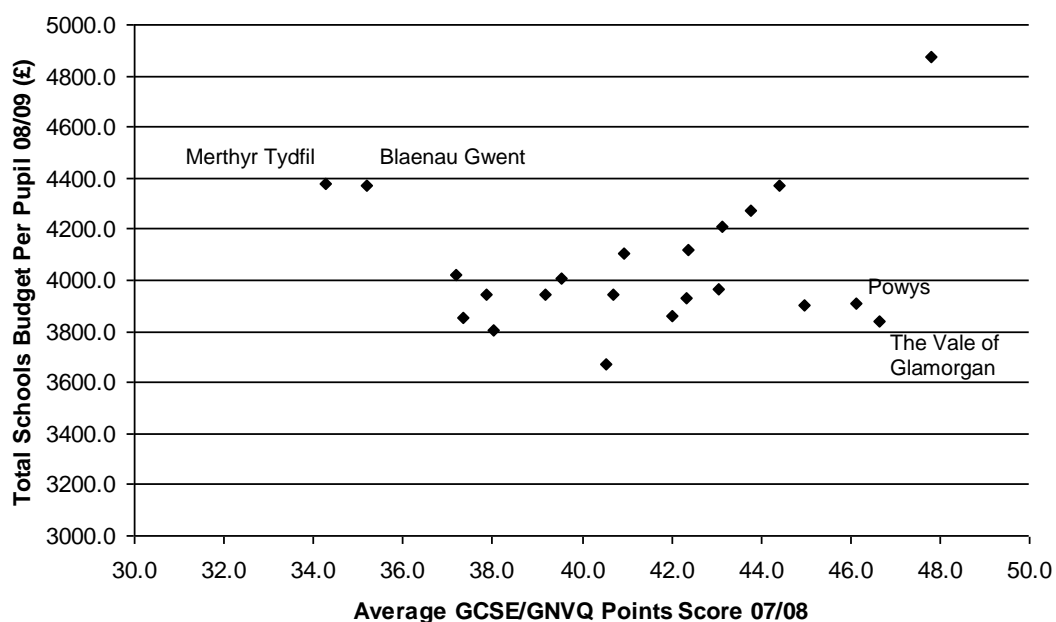
**Figure 4: Socio-economic composition and educational attainment**



Another important contextual factor is funding. Local authority education expenditure, in terms of spend per pupil, in Wales has gradually fallen behind that of England since 2001-02 (WAG 2009). Budgeted spend in 2008-09 was £496 per pupil lower in Wales than in England (£316 excluding London). This represents 8.7% less funding per pupil to that found across England (5.7% excluding London). Furthermore, Wales has the lowest per pupil budget for 2008-09 of all the regions of England. This is particularly striking given the relatively higher levels of poverty in Wales compared to England, measured here in terms of eligibility for free school meals (13.4% of secondary school pupils are eligible for FSM in England compared to 16.3% for Wales).

Levacic et al (2005) suggest that £100 of additional funding per pupil in England is associated with an average increase of between 0.04 and 0.1 of a level in maths attainment at KS3, depending on how that additional funding is spent. An even greater improvement is associated with KS3 science attainment. The authors also suggest that positive benefits of additional funding are greater amongst the pupils from the poorest backgrounds (as measured by their eligibility for free school meals). It could be estimated, therefore, that the difference in funding between Wales and England of just under £500 per pupil could account for around 0.5 of a level in KS3 maths attainment.

**Figure 5: Funding per pupil and levels of educational attainment**



Not only are the differences in education funding between England and Wales of some significance. There are also important funding differences *within* Wales, between different local authorities (Figure 5). Apart from some interesting outliers, such as Blaenau Gwent, Merthyr Tydfil, the Vale of Glamorgan and Powys, there is a significant and linear relationship between levels of funding and overall levels of educational attainment. Once more we see how each local authority has unique local circumstances. For example, one of the anomalies, SEW1, argues that: ‘One of the difficulties we feel, is that a lot of Wales is very different to the position we are in’. Such variations in resourcing are clearly of concern amongst local authorities. For example, in Bridgend concerns have been raised about the relative low levels of external funding for education and that further resource



constraints would have severe consequences, “To propose further cuts (otherwise labelled as efficiency gains) in education funding in Bridgend against this backdrop [of low levels of funding] would appear to be both nonsensical and obscene” (Bridgend CBC 2008: 1).

Other important dimensions to local authority education funding relate to their relative size, structure and administrative overheads. Andrews and Boyne (2009) identify significant differences in economies of scale across local authorities in England. They found that larger local authorities tended to have much lower central administrative costs, after controlling for other factors such as socio-economic disadvantage. Although their analysis did not consider the impact of this on local authority education services specifically, similar relationships are likely to exist. Whilst recent local government reorganisation in Wales to single-level unitary authorities may, according to Andrews and Boyne’s analysis, have produced some important economies of scale, the large number of small local authorities (in terms of population) must have some impact on the levels of funding available to individual schools. It is also likely to have an impact on the levels of funding available to the authority to undertake research which will support schools and learners – an issue to which we turn in the next section.

### 3: RESEARCH ACTIVITY WITHIN LOCAL AUTHORITIES

#### What do we mean by ‘research’?

In attempting to ascertain the scale and nature of research currently taking place in local authorities, it was important to think about what counts as research. For external assessment purposes, the higher education sector operates a definition of research which includes ‘original investigation undertaken in order to gain knowledge and understanding’ or the ‘development of analytical techniques’ but excludes ‘routine analysis of materials, components and processes such as for the maintenance of national standards, as distinct from the development of new analytical techniques’. (RAE 2006)

While such a definition can include different kinds of applied research (see Furlong and Oancea 2008), it would exclude many, but not all, of the analytical activities undertaken by local authorities. And indeed many respondents began by stating that their local authority did not *do* research at all. For example:

The authority doesn’t carry out any direct research. [SWW1]

We might call it different things...it tends to be more consultancy reports than traditional research...feasibility work, external consultancy, commissioned work. [MW1]

I wouldn’t describe it as research. I would say evaluating the effectiveness of our schools and evaluating the effectiveness of our support that we provide. [MW2]

However, while this narrow definition of research might be appropriate for some purposes, it was not appropriate for this inquiry. Firstly, it seems to us that the boundaries between routine analysis of processes, the development of new analytical techniques and original investigation are highly permeable. Moreover, our review is less interested in gauging the **outputs** or **quality** of research and more interested in assessing the scale of **activities**, **skills** and **expertise**. With this in mind, we wanted to adopt a broad definition of research which included all forms of systematic inquiry.

#### Scale of research activity

Our overall impression from the interviews with local authority representatives and other stakeholders is that, if a broader definition of research is used, there is significant research activity within local authorities in Wales. In part this arises because of the wide range of data which is now available. In addition to the National Pupil Database, there are a multitude of other data sources. These include specially commissioned attainment tests as well as data – qualitative and quantitative - from other surveys and agencies. While we found extensive use of education-specific data sources, we uncovered relatively little usage of other sources, such as the *Living in Wales* and *Labour Force Survey*.

As one might expect, some authorities conduct considerably more research than others. This variation appears to be partly related to the size and organisation of the authority. Small authorities found it difficult to do anything other than the bare minimum, eg:

We are such a small authority and there is so much fire-fighting and operationalisation to be done on a daily basis that we don’t have the luxury to be able to stand back and commission research. [NW6]

Strong inter-authority collaborations and organisations, such as ESIS and Cynnal, appeared to overcome some of these difficulties, eg:

We wanted to promote race equality so I went to ESIS with the proposal ... on a consortium basis we get much better value for money ... regional economies of scale. [MW1]

However, it also appears that some of the smaller authorities with limited budgets can be research-aware, particularly through using networks. Although there appeared to be very little awareness of LARIA, the UK-wide Local Authorities Research Intelligence Association, many respondents spoke to us about the benefits of the NFER database EMIE, eg.

EMIE has very good materials ... Mainly through their documents or conferences they organise. We mainly work like that, rather than commission research for budgetary reasons but we do work in partnership with them on projects. [SWW2]

### **Research strategies**

All of our respondents emphasised the importance of research for their authority. However, none appeared to have an explicit research strategy. Research priorities outside performance monitoring tended to be identified reactively rather than proactively, and the extent to which research was actually undertaken appeared to depend on available resources at any one point in time.

In general, there appears to be no formal process for agenda-setting of research activities within authorities. In some authorities, the identification of issues to be researched comes from different sections of the authority and reflects particular advisors' or other stakeholders' interests

Agendas are pretty much officer driven. After reviewing performance, they can mark up issues. But stuff will come from schools themselves too and issues raised by head teachers - for example provision for the more able and talented. Another area is from elected members, not so much the cabinet but more from the education scrutiny committee. They will ask questions that we don't know the answers to. Some scrutiny officers do their own research too. [MW1]

In general, though, the research agenda is largely driven by national requirements, such as WAG policies:

Research priorities for future years is the evaluation of any initiative that they put in place ... Priorities have not changed but the requirement to evaluate and monitor has increased – greater pressure on WAG for accountability and value for money which has sifted down to LAs. [MW2]

### **Types of research activity**

Thus, although there is variation between authorities in terms of the **amount** of research being undertaken, there is remarkable consistency in the **type** of activities. In order to illuminate the nature of local authority research activity, and compare it with research activities undertaken elsewhere, we developed a typology of activities. This seven-fold typology is designed to include, but also to distinguish, the spectrum of activities ranging

from an individual teacher engaged in a piece of practice-based inquiry to ‘blue skies’ thinking on the nature and purposes of education. The seven categories are as follows:

- Practice-based inquiry
- Performance monitoring
- Scoping exercises
- Policy evaluations
- Policy implementation research
- Policy development research
- ‘Pure’ research

In the following sections, we describe each of these activities, illustrate the kinds of questions they address, and evaluate the extent to which each kind of research activity is undertaken within local authorities.

### ***Practice-based inquiry***

This category contains all those activities which are designed to illuminate and improve contextually-specific problems. Examples might include teacher-driven projects, such as:

- *Which strategies help my pupils understand fractions?*
- *What kind of behaviour management approach works best with Year 1 children?*

There is a significant amount of research of this kind undertaken by and within local authorities. Examples of practice-based inquiries undertaken by local authorities include recruiting a recently retired science teacher to conduct three days research into how £6 million investment into science laboratories could be enhanced – ‘a body of practical knowledge came out of it’ [SWW4]

More commonly, though, practice-based inquiries are initiated and undertaken by individuals as part of their professional development. For example, ‘Think to Learn, Link to Learn’ is a programme validated by UWIC and run in conjunction with ESIS which is designed to enable professionals to evaluate learning and training and identify examples of good practice. Additionally, there are many instances of practice-based inquiry undertaken by teachers as part of the GTCW continuing professional development programme. Since 2002, the GTCW has funded over 3000 projects each year which can involve international visits, sabbaticals and designated ‘research scholarships’.

In summary, there appear to be many small, often individually-initiated, practice-based inquiries being undertaken within Wales. These activities will undoubtedly be of great benefit to individuals, both in terms of increasing professional reflexivity and research literacy. However, there must be some concerns about their potential to provide local authorities with evidence to inform policy and practice. Firstly, there can be a disarticulation between the focus of the research and the needs of the authority. This was seen as particularly problematic by one of our respondents:

There’s soreness in giving £3million to the GTC W to allocate it randomly without evidence coming back .... It should be in line with priorities and give something back. [SWW4]

Secondly, these small disparate projects tend not to be widely disseminated and are therefore unlikely to have much impact beyond the classroom in which they were undertaken. There may be occasions where findings are made more widely available, for

example, through consortia ‘portals’, but this sporadic sharing of information does not constitute a systematic strategy for knowledge exchange.

Thirdly, there must be some concerns about the quality of the research. The inquiries are largely undertaken by practitioners, even when commissioned by the local authority. This may enhance the contextual understanding of the phenomenon under investigation, but also weaken the validity and reliability of any research findings. Without robust research methodologies it is unlikely that the findings from any single study can be usefully transferred into other learning and teaching contexts.

### ***Performance monitoring***

This category includes the diverse forms of data collection and analysis which enable service providers to assess the quality of provision and the relative effectiveness of particular schools. Questions might include:

- *How are our schools performing relative to their statistical neighbours?*
- *How are our FSM pupils performing this year compared with last?*

Our interviews with local authorities revealed extensive activity of this kind. Indeed, this kind of research is the principal analytical activity taking place in authorities. Several respondents spoke of large dedicated teams – sometimes of around ten people – tasked with performance monitoring. This most commonly involved the evaluation of attainment data to map trends, to identify local issues, to target ‘continuous improvement’ and to benchmark and compare between schools and other local authorities. This kind of analysis has been made possible thanks to the extensive data available:

We have far more information available now on traditional education performance, school and pupil performance than we have ever done because we have a range of staff and expertise to draw on’ [NW5]

We have a very wide range of data on standards [SWW2]

The extent of performance monitoring undertaken can be partly explained by the need for local authorities to fulfil their statutory requirements and satisfy ESTYN inspectors. But many authorities go well beyond these requirements and collect and analyse a broad range of performance-related data. Several commission a range of additional external performance tests, such as PIPS, Yellis and NFER tests. Others collect qualitative data relating to attitudes and learning experience. For example, PASS survey (Pupils’ Attitudes to School and Self) which assesses pupil wellbeing [MW2].

Analytical capacity has also been enhanced by inter-authority collaboration – either through ADEW and its consortia or through existing collaborations such as ESIS and Cynnal.

The majority of local authorities also referred to the usefulness of analyses provided by the Fischer Family Trust. Occasionally, local authorities commissioned experts from higher education. For example, one [SEW2] employed a consultant from Birmingham to undertake comparative analysis of similar urban authorities in England.

While our research indicates that performance monitoring is strong within local authorities, some anxieties were expressed about the dominance of this form of research

and the opportunity costs of meeting statutory requirements. For example, two of the smaller authorities complained that:

In LEAs there is so much statutory stuff, so many things that we have got to do that our hands are tied. [NW6].

So much effort is put into collecting data that there is no-one left to analyse it. (SEW1).

In terms of analysis, while there appear to be significant amounts of statistical expertise, there may be little innovation:

I don't think we are particularly short in any area, but neither do I think we are particularly groundbreaking in the data that we collect. [MW1].

It may well be the greater collaboration between the school improvement and effectiveness experts within the higher education community might help with analytical capacity and the development and application of new statistical and analytical tools.

### ***Scoping exercises***

Related to performance monitoring are research activities which attempt to look into the future and ensure that needs can be adequately met. Examples of these kinds of activities include:

- *How many places in Welsh medium schools will be needed in 2020?*
- *What are the implications of rationalising post-16 provision?*

We have included these as a distinct kind of research activity because they involve the development of analyses which integrate different kinds of data and attempt to predict future needs and implications. Clearly, the provision of school places is always an issue which confronts local authorities – and this is particularly the case in Wales with its high numbers of small rural schools and the requirement to provide Welsh medium education. Authorities are often faced with the difficulty of calculating what is needed to make adequate provision in the face of changing initiatives, eg:

What we need as in instrument that can measure what we need.... At the end we can have a formula that can assess the implications of size of school and impact... How do we measure the operational capacity of schools? What are the implications of the new reforms for this? [SWW4]

While performance monitoring activities are generally undertaken by local authority staff, scoping exercises are more likely to draw in external expertise. Examples of this kind of activities include:

- recruiting a retired head to look at the post-16 sixth form provision and retention rates [NW1]
- assessing future demand for Welsh medium education [SWW3]
- assessing the impact of school size on provision of and attainment within Welsh medium education [SWW4]
- commissioning an ex-director of education to come and work with them on the re-organisation of school funding. [SWW1]

- bringing in external consultants ‘to get an objective external view’ on the implications of implementing the authority’s inclusion strategy. [MW1]

These scoping exercises are generally less-well resourced and often small scale. As can be seen from the above list, while they often involve the commissioning of external consultants, these usually come with practitioner- rather than research-based experience. They are also nearly always individuals who are known to the authorities. As one director said:

We use retired people with ‘shelf-life’ ... If you use your own internal networks in Wales, you’ve generally got what you need. [SWW4]

There are clearly political and practical reasons for privileging practitioner-based expertise, but it may not always yield the most robust basis on which to plan for future provision.

### ***Policy evaluation***

This category covers research which attempts to gauge the impact of specific initiatives that have been put in place, eg:

- *What impact has RAISE had on attainment within this authority?*
- *How effective is liaison between teachers and social workers?*

There are clearly significant amounts of what might be called policy evaluation within local authorities. Much of the work of advisors often involves exploring the impact of particular teaching and learning initiatives – monitoring implementation issues and trying to assess whether there is any impact. The reliance on advisors and school staff to evaluate policies was occasionally seen as problematic, eg:

I am not fully comfortable with the ad-hocness of it all – it is not coherent. [SE3]

We would like more thorough evaluations of our own policies – which currently tend to be outcome evaluations using existing data. [MW4]

There are more structured and systematic evaluations, particularly where there is a budget built into their funding regimes. But even here there are concerns about the adequacy of funding, eg:

Funding is an issue for major research. Better schools fund is a pot of £2.5M.... they are allowed to spend no more than 4% on administrating it and...only 1% goes on evaluation.’ [MW2]

There was an impression from some stakeholders that particular WAG initiatives, such as RAISE and the WAG policy on looked-after children, have helped local authorities to evaluate impact because they are relatively narrowly targeted.

Occasionally external organisations are involved in these evaluations. For instance, one authority [SEW2] works with Warwick University on longitudinal research into the impact of ‘Flying Start’. Swansea University has been used by another [SWW6] to evaluate various initiatives, such as the literacy programme.

In general, though, authorities felt that they just did not have the resources and/or found it difficult to justify buying in external researchers other than for very small pieces of research:

Because of capacity issues the tendency is to buy people in on a small time basis ... members tend to get a bit iffy when buying consultants in or agency people on an extra basis. They sometimes come in from the angle of 'Why can't we do it in-house?'. But we don't have the expertise always in house to get someone with time energy and expertise...We have a bit of work to do to educate our members when they question paying to get someone in . [NW1]

### ***Policy implementation research***

Activities within this category include attempts to ascertain how policies and strategies can be most successfully implemented, eg:

- *What strategies are most likely to promote pupil well-being at the foundation phase?*
- *What mechanisms are most effective at increasing parental engagement?*

Many of our respondents spoke of the difficulties of implementing the WAG agenda. A few felt that the relative lack of experience of the recently devolved administration was evident in the development of radical policies which came with little guidance on how to put them in place. For example, one local authority spoke of the problems experienced while WAG was 'finding its feet':

The difficulty is they don't understand how to deliver the business. Research needs to be influenced with 'how you're going to get it done' not just 'what you're going to do'. [SWW4]

The hiatus between a policy and its implementation was explained sometimes in terms of WAG being 'a step removed from the actual practicalities' [SWW4], but at other times it was the nature of the policies themselves. One respondent claimed that 'policy-borrowing' was part of the problem:

Australia superimposed on Wales. [MW4]

Another felt that the emphasis on tri-level reform hindered effective implementation:

It is rather like the tower of Babel – a thousand tongues coming at you at once. [MW3]

In general, though, most respondents agreed with the overall direction of WAG's policies, but they wanted access to a better research base for implementation. As already noted, several authorities spoke of the usefulness of the NFER's information service, EMIE. But others felt that the particularities of their own authority required a more tailored research approach. As with research for policy evaluation, therefore, local authorities often employ known individuals or private consultancies when commissioning this type of research. But the overall impression is that this is an area which is under-resourced. As one respondent put it:

There are no resources routinely available – a case for resources has to be found each time. [MW4]



### ***Policy development research***

This category contains research and analysis which can be used to inform the development of future policies. Its connection with current policy and practice can be tentative. It might include questions such as:

- *In what ways can and should communities be involved in education decision-making?*
- *What forms of civic engagement do we want schools to promote?*

Research for policy development is more exploratory research that might lead to the development of new courses of action.

We uncovered occasional instances this kind of activity. For example, one authority [NW6] commissioned Bangor University to interview young people to find out what their concerns are. Another has just put tenders out for research on bullying and autism and another [SWW4] is about to commission someone to do research on 'NEETs'.

In general, though, local authorities felt that they had no resources to undertake this kind of research. The following are typical of many responses:

Virtually no capacity at all [MW4]

Very low capacity - basically just officers who have their own initiative and drive to tap into materials that are around. There is that definition of research where you are looking around for materials that are available or going to the basics of doing your own research work [NW1].

As an authority we are pretty short on capacity and pretty limited. [MW1].

Difficult to do proper research. [MW2].

My budget is under pressure. We would like to engage more in grass-roots stuff. It's always good to have independent view but pressures will impact on that. There has been a significant drop in budget on the back of an increase in service needs. [MW3].

In some cases, local authority staff gather evidence through reviewing the available literature, for example:

The modernisation project will try to tap in to what is happening elsewhere – Estyn produces a couple of reports, WAG and the small schools work by David Reynolds and then Googling. [NW1]

One authority [SE4] had appointed an advisor with a dedicated remit to feed research findings into the policy development process. This, however, was the exception. In general, authorities did not appear to have the time to 'do it properly' [SE3] leading to concerns about the robustness of the resulting evidence, eg:

Significant weaknesses in this evidence. Cheap methods – e.g. reviews rather than primary data, and approach - not systematic. [MW4]

This is the area, perhaps, in which local authorities felt most acutely the opportunity costs of having to invest too many resources into performance monitoring activities. In

this context, research is often seen as a luxury which has to be sacrificed – albeit reluctantly:

Research priorities are changing - becoming harder. They're mostly about pupil performance, the efficiency agenda and good practice. This is a shame in some sense as it's important to keep turning over stones. There is a lot more research about value for money, more for less. Even the luckiest authorities will get 0% guaranteed for next 3 years ... unfortunately research will suffer as a consequence unless there is a separately identified pot that is protected... The private sector have always realised you can't skimp on research and development. but I don't think that is the same in the public sector. I think it will be one of the first things to go. If it is a toss up between a social worker and a teacher or researcher we know which one that tends to suffer - which is short-sighted I think?. [NW5]

### ***Pure research***

This category contains what is often referred to as 'blue-skies' research. It is driven by a concern with expanding knowledge for its own sake. Although it will almost always have some relevance for policy and practice, this is not its primary purpose, eg:

- *At what stage do young children develop a sense of self?*
- *How has Welsh-medium education reconfigured service class formation in Wales?*

Not surprisingly, authorities do not involve themselves in this kind of research.

In terms of straight academic research, I'd say we do very little of that, it is more to do with the grass roots stuff. [MW3]

We will not put in a raw research activity just for the sake of finding something out... We are not going to do a blind study with control groups; we are going to do things that we want to have an impact with the funding that we have and then evaluate the effectiveness to do that...we are not going to follow the correct research methodologies to do that, we are not going to set up control groups etc... [MW2]

While one would not expect local authorities to undertake this kind of research, it is likely to have potentially important implications for the enduring challenges which they face in enhancing the experiences and attainments of learners. This kind of research has traditionally been the domain of higher education.

### **The distribution of research activities**

The above analysis has revealed a high level of consistency in the type of research activity being conducted by local authorities. The distribution of research within Welsh local authorities reveals considerable strengths and, not surprisingly, significant gaps.

In general, though, the pattern of research activities within local authorities in Wales contrasts with, and potentially complements, the pattern of research activity undertaken in the higher education sector. Where local authorities in Wales are strong (performance-monitoring, scoping and policy evaluation), higher education is weak. And those activities which are of interest to local authorities but beyond their remit and capacity (policy implementation, policy development and pure research), are those areas which the higher education sector is better placed to undertake.

This can be represented diagrammatically through Figure 6.

Data derived from interviews with key stakeholders and from existing mapping exercises (eg Daugherty and Davies 2009) indicate that teachers are most likely to engage in practice-based inquiries and the schools they work on will undertake performance monitoring activities - either independently or in conjunction with their local authority.

Local authorities undertake a significant amount of activity, particularly in relation to performance monitoring, but also to scoping exercises and policy evaluation.

There are strong similarities between the kind of research being undertaken by local authorities and national agencies, such as ESTYN. Although it is not surprising that local authorities have relatively few resources to engage in policy implementation and policy development research, one might have expected WAG to be better placed to undertake these kinds of activities.

Higher education is well-placed to undertake those research activities which are located at farthest from the practice-based end of the spectrum. And indeed, the matrix indicates that these are the kinds of activities that characterise research in the higher education sector. However, within Wales, the capacity of higher education institutions to undertake research has become increasingly limited.

**Figure 6 : Research distribution matrix**

<i>Type of research</i>	<i>Instigator of activity</i>			
	<b>Teacher/school</b>	<b>Local authority (LA)</b>	<b>National agency</b>	<b>Higher education sector</b>
<b>Practice-based inquiries</b>	Many small scale projects, often undertaken by individuals as part of GTCW fellowship or higher degree.	Occasionally undertaken by advisors in relation to, for example, curriculum development..	Rarely undertaken.	Rarely undertaken, unless in relation to teachers' CPD.
<b>Performance monitoring</b>	Many institutional projects, often based on identification of issues by LAs.	Extensively undertaken, using PLASC and other data. Significant in-house resources as well as investment in other data (NFER tests) and analysis (eg Fischer Family Trust).	Frequently undertaken by ESTYN and WAG. Significant investment of resources within national agencies.	Rarely undertaken. Limited resources and limited statistical capacity.
<b>Scoping exercises</b>	Occasional assessments of demand for places etc. Other occasional <i>ad hoc</i> investigations.	Routine assessments of demand for places and other issues. Usually undertaken in-house.	Routine assessments of demand.	Rarely undertaken.
<b>Policy evaluation</b>	Rarely undertaken.	Frequently undertaken. In-house, as well as through commissioning private or HE sector consultant.	Frequently undertaken, usually by private sector research organisations.	Rarely undertaken.
<b>Policy implementation research</b>	Rarely undertaken.	Occasionally undertaken. In-house, as well as through commissioning private or HE sector consultant. Limited resources.	Occasionally undertaken. In-house, as well as through commissioning private or HE sector consultant.	Occasionally undertaken.
<b>Policy development research</b>	None.	Rarely undertaken.	Rarely undertaken.	Frequently undertaken, but with limited capacity in Wales.
<b>Pure research</b>	None.	None.	None.	Frequently undertaken, but with limited capacity in Wales.

**KEY**

Significant amount of activity
Occasional activity
Rarely undertaken activity

## **4: RESEARCH COLLABORATIONS WITH HIGHER EDUCATION**

It is clear from the preceding section that local authorities contain considerable expertise in various kinds of research activity. It is also clear, that they have relatively few resources to undertake research outside their statutory responsibilities and particularly research which is more developmental and less directly linked to policy evaluations or service improvement. This kind of research is important, though, for the longer term direction and shaping of policy and is to be found largely within the higher education sector. In the next section, we explore the extent to which local authorities have research collaborations with universities.

### **Links with higher education**

Most local authorities have some kind of relations with the higher education sector. Most commonly, these relate to issues concerning student progression (eg through various 'Compact' agreements) or initial teacher education (eg through teacher supply and placements). Research collaborations with higher education usually take the form of staff taking higher degrees, most often with their local university.

As we saw in the last section, there are instances where local authorities have looked to higher education to commission research. However, these instances are few and far between. There are clearly a number of reasons why this might be the case.

### ***Resources***

As is already evident, lack of resources is probably the major constraint on authorities commissioning research from higher education institutions, eg:

We are not that involved in research due to budget constraints and capacity. We would like to do more, but we don't really instigate anything – but are happy to work with others. [SWW5]

This respondent points to the possibility of collaborating with other local authorities, and it is possible that ADEW might provide a vehicle for joint commissioning of research. There is little evidence of this to date though. It is also instructive that the recent ADEW Position Paper (ADEW 2008) on the relationship between ADEW and WAG contains no reference to research activity.

It is not only that local authorities have limited funds, it is also that commissioning higher education researchers can be very expensive – particularly where universities apply full economic costing. This can create an impression that commissioning research from universities is not good value for money – especially when it merely acts to confirm what is already known, eg:

There's a good level of competence amongst LA staff .... Research and data tends to support hunches anyway [SEW2]

There are also issues with timescale. For a variety of reasons, universities tend to have slower turnaround times than local authorities require, eg:

Most research needs to be responsive and within a three to six month timescale [SEW2]

### ***Usefulness of higher education research***

It is possible that the distinctive nature of the research activities to be found in universities and authorities has contributed to a perception that the work undertaken in the higher education sector is not particularly useful for local authorities. There were a couple of occasions where respondents mentioned the mismatch between their needs and the research provided:

... it wasn't helpful because it was 'so and so says this' and 'so and so says that' and what I wanted was a line. When it came to the issue of whether closing small schools damages Welsh, I didn't go to a university. I went to a colleague who went away and looked at the evidence and came back with a clear answer. A larger school is better. At least there was a conclusion from it. [SWW4]

A key element in this was the feeling that research undertaken by those with practitioner experience was more valuable than research undertaken by those with research expertise: eg:

Schools are very wary of research materials or reports that are produced without being evidenced by people who are obviously in tune with what happens in the school situation. It is very well expounding a theory and teasing that out, but unless it is linked in with what can happen and the practicalities within the school situation it won't be picked up by schools and therefore by us. You don't want to get into situation that you are supporting high-faluting pie-in-the-sky type research theories. It has to be practically based. [NW1]

Even where research was seen to be relevant, it may be that it is not written in an accessible form. One respondent wanted to build a closer collaborative relationship which involved sharing research, but felt that universities did not want to cooperate:

You need to be more aware of current research, sometimes going on under your nose (both academic and corporate). And HE being aware of their role in the region and locality. We've felt strongly in the past that whereas HE will look all over world for students, they are very insular about sharing research with the authorities. [SWW3]

There was some acknowledgement that the higher education sector was under different kinds of pressures:

Priorities are too diverse at the moment. The way universities are going we do find it very hard to engage. This is no criticism ... universities are being pushed in one direction. Looking for cohesion in policy from Assembly would be helpful. [NW5]

### ***Lack of awareness of research expertise***

Awareness of the research undertaken in the higher education sector in Wales, and beyond, was generally low. Several of those respondents who were interested in accessing academic research were unsure where to search.

It may be my ignorance but I don't think I am as well informed as I should be about the main strands of research undertaken in higher education institutes in Wales... I

am sitting in front on my PC and if somebody said to me ‘Right. In the next 5 minutes see if you can find a list of who is doing what around topic X’, I am not sure if I will be able to do it. [MW1]

Most collaboration between local authorities and universities takes place at a local level. This creates a number of issues. Firstly, the expertise locally available may not be the most appropriate.

One of the things I find across Wales is that research is excellent but it is patchy. Good practice in research is not always shared. I learn more from EMIE than I do from the University of Wales for example as a group. [NW5]

Secondly, authorities with no university nearby felt disengaged from the higher education sector.

We feel a little bit like we are in the middle of nowhere. We are stuck in the middle between Wrexham (Glyndwr) and Bangor and as we are stuck right in the middle, we don’t have a lot do with universities. [NW2]

### **Future research needs**

Despite these reservations, all respondents felt that increased collaboration with higher education would be a ‘good thing’. They were all able to identify a number of areas that they saw as priorities for developing an evidence base and on which they would find it useful to enter into a dialogue with the higher education sector.

The list of needs is too long to include here, and covers a range of issues – both substantive and operational. Examples of areas that were identified to us as a priority include:

- multi-agency working
- clarification of policy discourse, eg ‘wellbeing’ ‘key skills’
- regeneration
- engaging parents in learning
- able and talented students
- use of ICT for independent learning
- link between academic success and emotional wellbeing
- how to make better school leaders
- children at risk – when to intervene
- post-16 aspirations
- more effective pedagogies
- 14-19 provision
- reconfiguring schools

This wide range of areas which local authorities identify as being research priorities includes all phases of education, the relationship between education and social inclusion, connections between education and welfare and some fairly fundamental questions about learning and teaching. Indeed, it is hard to identify an aspect of education provision which does not appear on the cumulative priority list.

In thinking about meeting these needs, higher education could provide an important channel for putting local authorities in touch with the latest research. However, a key issue which needs to be addressed is the relevance of research findings derived from

elsewhere for the local context in Wales. A number of respondents expressed frustration that policies and evidence were not applicable to their own communities, eg:

Perhaps too often the documents/policies produced are more applicable to cities than to rural areas, and especially when we have a bilingual system. [SWW2]

The need for being sensitive to context may also mean looking outside Wales. For example, two authorities [NW5 and SWW6] complained about the lack of comparitors within the country and argued for greater awareness of what was going on elsewhere, eg:

The England/Wales attitude is not helpful. We have learned a lot from large English authorities who have a greater research remit and capacity. There's a feeling in Wales of parochialism, but we need to raise the vision a bit to broader opportunities across England and Wales. Obstacles are reducing budgets but more important is the welter of change. We need a period of research trialling and implementation following consolidation and reflection before doing something new. [NW5]

In the next section, we explore ways in which the higher education sector might collaborate with local authorities to help them in their work.



## 5: NEXT STEPS

If higher education is to support the work of local authorities in Wales, there are two main challenges that need to be tackled. One is the ongoing decline in educational research capacity within Welsh universities.

What is desperately needed in Wales is that you haven't got high quality research going on in Wales currently as you have in England. [SWW1]

The other aspect is finding a way of maximising the usefulness of such research as is available in, or applicable to, Wales. As the following respondent argues:

I don't believe that, as a country which is very small with limited resources and an opportunity to be far more coherent and joined up than we are, that we use research to be part of that glue. [MW5]

During the course of our investigation, we discussed with respondents a number of ways in which greater collaboration could be fostered – in which research might indeed become 'part of the glue' which links policy and practice across Wales. As a result of these discussions, we identified a number of different strategies that might be pursued and consulted local authorities about which they would find most useful. The results of that consultation exercise and, where appropriate, comments from the interviews are outlined below.

### **Strategies for supporting collaboration**

These were categorised into strategies relating to: a) knowledge exchange; b) data and skill sharing; c) facilitating the commissioning of research; and d) organisational development. Local authorities were asked to identify which strategies they would find most useful. Those strategies receiving significant levels of support are highlighted in bold.

#### ***Knowledge exchange***

- **Dissemination of higher education sector research to local authorities in an accessible form;**
- Regular roundtables (physical or virtual) to share local authority- and university-based research;
- Developing higher education-local authority networks of interest;
- Higher education researchers to function as anthologists of research in Wales, including local authority- and practitioner-led research;
- Higher education sector to develop regularly published applied research journal for local authorities and other stakeholders;
- Annual conference to bring local authorities and higher education researchers together.

There was significant support for developing a system through which higher education would disseminate research findings to local authorities – and particularly the need for this dissemination to be accessible. There was also general support for other kinds of knowledge exchange activity, but little consensus on which form this might take. For

example, while one respondent thought an applied research journal would be very useful, another wanted an annual conference.

### ***Data- and skill-sharing***

- **Infrastructure to improve the sharing of qualitative and quantitative data between local authorities and the higher education sector;**
- Mutual development of analytical expertise through workshops;
- Placements for local authority staff within universities;
- Placements for university researchers within local authorities.

There was no support for local authority/university cross placements – perhaps indicating the perceived gulf between the different kinds of research activities undertaken in these two organisations. There was, though, support for improved infrastructure to share data. This is an area which might be extremely fruitful for both higher education and local authorities. While higher education researchers would have access to data which is extremely difficult and expensive for them to gather themselves, local authorities might benefit from the development of new analytical techniques and access to research for policy implementation.

### ***Facilitating the commissioning of research***

- Development of a directory of expertise to support the direct commissioning of research from universities;
- Improved arrangements for supporting consortia-led commissioning of research;
- Improved arrangements for supporting the development of joint local authority-university tenders for research.

There was some limited support for strategies to support the direct commissioning and facilitate the joint commissioning of research. We suggest that this indicates that local authorities do not see themselves as being in a position to invest resources in commissioning significant amounts of research from the higher education sector in the near future.

### ***Organisational development***

- Higher education presence on relevant local authority committees
- **Partnership arrangements (eg regular meetings) between ADEW and heads of relevant higher education departments**
- Local authorities to develop research strategies in partnership with universities
- **Local authorities to develop research strategies in partnership with WAG, ESTYN and the higher education sector**
- The higher education sector to undertake systematic horizon-scanning of policy innovation for local authorities

Of the four kinds of strategies for promoting collaboration, it is the area of organisational development that received most support from local authorities. There was significant support for bringing ADEW and the relevant higher education representatives into partnership with each other. But the single most preferred approach, receiving almost twice the level of support as the other approaches, is that of the development of research strategies in partnership with WAG, Estyn and higher education institutions.

The lack of coherence between WAG and local authorities and between higher education and local authorities is something which was mentioned frequently. The development of a joined-up strategy was seen as an important antidote to this, eg:

We do not see any research structure at the Assembly. ... many thousands of research consultation documents that it is very difficult to see the woods from the trees. The Assembly wants everything to be a priority and this works against 'lets focus on this and get to the heart of it'. [NW5]

While it is unlikely the development of a research strategy will address all the challenges that local authorities and universities in Wales face, it might be an important first step in reducing the relative discontinuity and isolation which currently exists. It should also help to maximise the value of that which already exists through selective development of research and enhanced collaboration between government at national and local level and the higher education sector.

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