

A local authority research system (LARS) for Bradford

Final report of a scoping study



BRADFORD INSTITUTE
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Context

- Local government has an important part to play in influencing the wider conditions that affect health such as education, transport, recreation and green spaces, housing, planning and licensing and social care
- They could be more effective in promoting policies which efficiently improve public health if they could better use evidence and generate new evidence where there are gaps. This would lead to more effective and efficient policy making

What is the problem?

- Local government doesn't have a very strong tradition of using and producing research evidence to inform policy. It lacks formal research resources, structures, evidence culture, and connection with the NIHR.
- Evidence informed policy in local authorities is challenging because:
 - They are politically led and so more likely to experience changes in leadership and direction. Quick wins can take priority over longer term public health benefits
 - Research evidence is only one type of evidence used to make decisions, in fact there are differences in what 'counts as' research between health and local government settings
 - Research can be a slow process and doesn't always work well for faster local authority decision making
 - Prevention research focuses on systems and is very complex

The development of a more formal research system offers an opportunity to address some of these problems

About Bradford

- Bradford is a city in West Yorkshire governed locally by Bradford District Metropolitan Council (BMDC) which is the 4th largest metropolitan council in England
- The city has a mixed ethnic population including a large Pakistani community and growing communities of East European and Roma people
- Almost a quarter of children living in Bradford are growing up in poverty
- 24% of children are obese at age 10/11 which is the highest rate in the Yorkshire and Humber region
- The city has the 6th lowest employment rate in England

Our aims

- The aims of the this scoping project were to:
 - Look at what research activity is already taking place in BMDC
 - Understand more about what makes research difficult to do in local government
 - Talk to people across the NIHR to see how they are supporting local government research
 - Explore what a LARS in Bradford might look like
 - Find out what would be needed to develop and keep it

How we did it

- We collected information in several different ways including:
 - An online survey of council staff (n=197)
 - Group interviews with council staff (n=11)
 - Individual interviews with key people in the council (n=11)
 - A rapid literature review of relevant models used and reported elsewhere
 - Review of council meeting minutes to see how research is used to make decisions in the council
 - An overview of what research training is given to staff in the council
 - Conversations with NIHR colleagues to learn more about how it supports local authority research

How we did it

- We also developed a way of scoring local government research activity so that we could assess current activity in BMDC and what would help the council move to the next level
- This scoring system was tested with interview participants and regional colleagues

Level	Summary of research activity
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Negligible engagement with research • Negligible use of research • Negligible participation in research
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Willing to respond to invitations to collaborate in research • Willing to share data • Some use of evidence in intervention and policy development in some parts of the LA
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evidence of strategic level research leadership • Investing in research (training, data and research roles) • Co-developing research (generating questions, co-applicants/funded roles, honorary academic contracts) with academic partners • Full data linkage and sharing • Formal protocol for policy development that includes search for and use of evidence • Evidence informed interventions • Sharing knowledge with partners and other local authorities • Named link to NIHR CRN, RDS, ARC and Dissemination Centre
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using a complex systems approach • Implementation of a LARS model • Forward plan to develop and sustain the LARS • Research department and Director of Research (working at board level) • Commissioning of research • Organisational access to online library and research databases • Embedded NIHR CRN staff • Honorary academic contracts and funded research time • University partners providing formal ethical review process • Local authority manual for evidence informed policy making • Local authority manual for evidence informed intervention development and evaluation

What we found

- Most people ranked BMDC at level 2 using our scoring system (range 1-3)
- **73%** of survey respondents agreed that using research was part of their role and **79%** said they had used some form of research or evidence in their role at BMDC
- There were varied interpretations of research - research was described as *“a really broad church”*
- Of those who agreed research was part of their role, **82%** said they had used research evidence to help inform or develop a policy, project, intervention or service
- A review of minutes of meetings found support for using research in decision making but no specific examples of this
- **76%** of survey respondents said they would like to use evidence more
- There is a clear appetite to do research within BMDC but some challenges make this difficult.

What we found

These challenges could be addressed by focusing on 4 main areas:

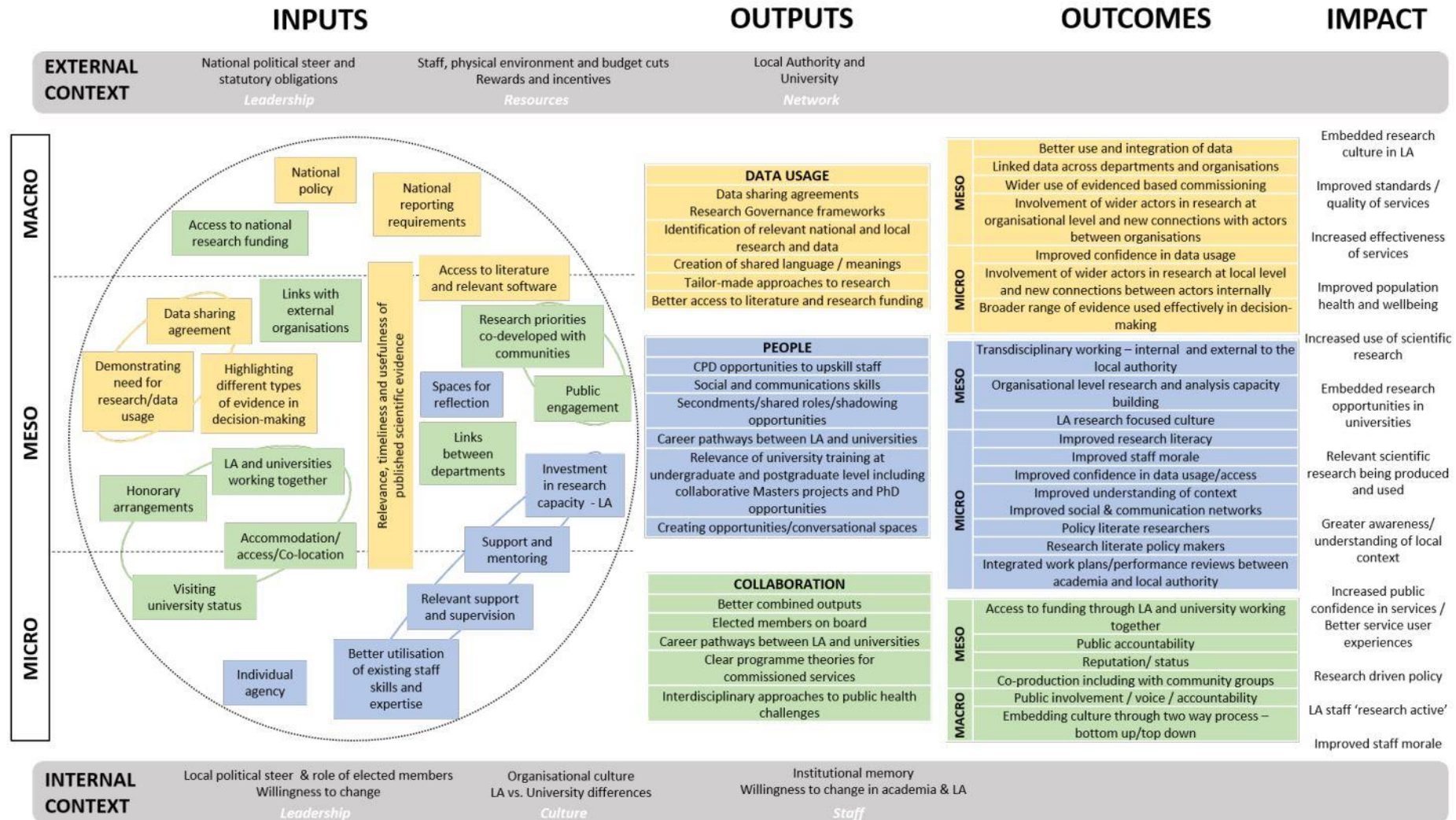
- **Leadership** *“When staff are very, very busy they do struggle to give up their time to get involved in something like that [research]. So it needs some leadership and gentle persuasion to sit behind it”*
- **Resource and capacity** *“In the past we used research to steer our work, now all we seem to do is be reactive to situation. I feel this is due to job cuts as people are just getting on with things every day and no time to research or reflect”*
- **Culture** *“I work in public health - so clearly evidence is important! It’s not something which is appreciated or recognised across other departments. It’s not within their culture/approach to work. So there’s something about raising awareness, increasing skills and capacity, and showcasing how important and how it can make a difference”*
- **Partnerships** *“... we’ve got a great asset ..in the Institute of Health Research that you’re sitting in, and Born in Bradford and we’re very lucky in Bradford compared to probably Wakefield or Doncaster in terms of having that, and we do use that but not, not as much as we could do to match our kind of overall ambitions...”*

What we found

Our rapid review found 9 models

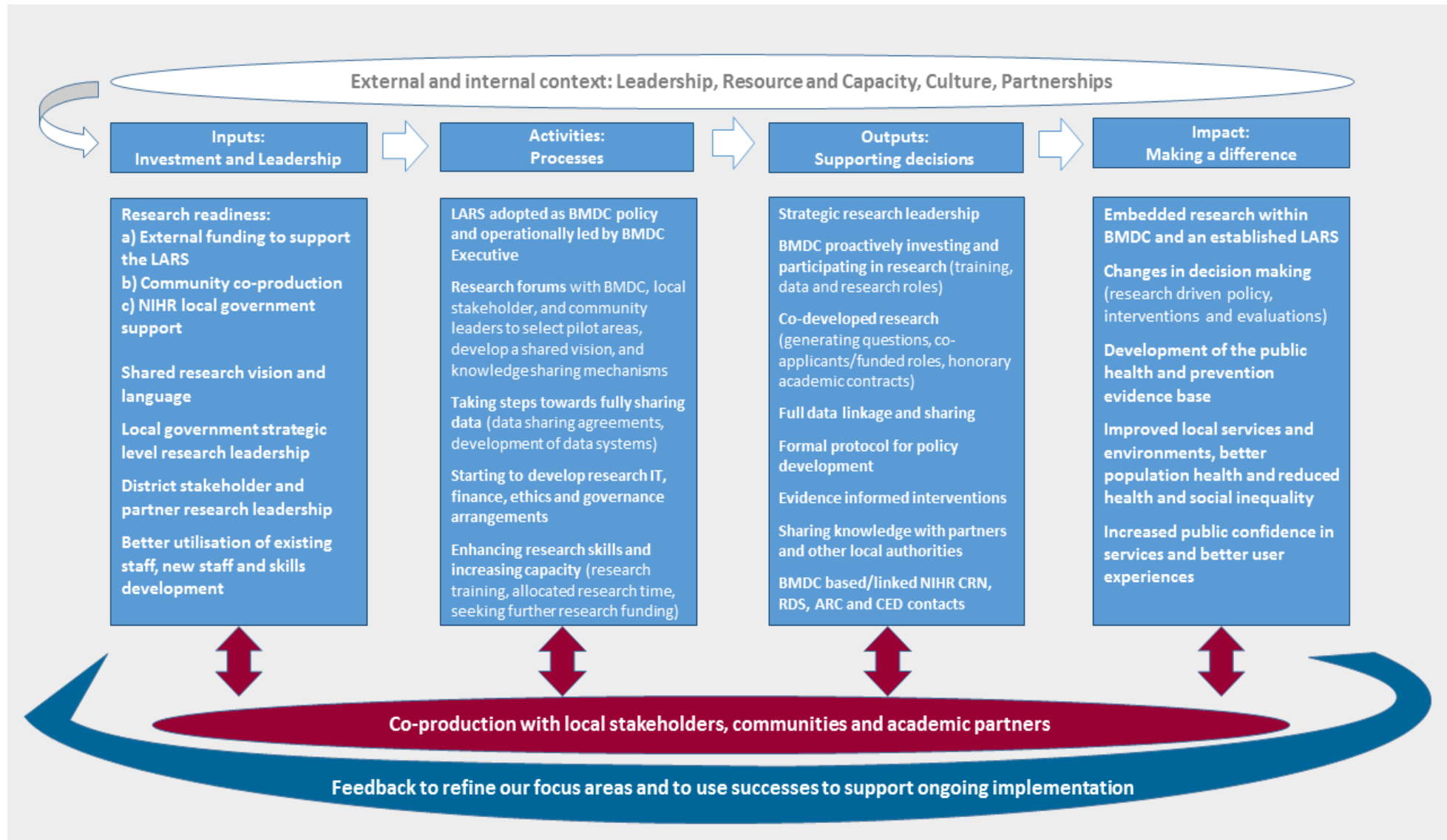
The one that seemed to fit best with Bradford was the Local Authority Champions of Research (LACoR) Logic Model

Developing local authority champions of research through an embedded research culture: A proof of concept project. The Health Foundation 2019; <https://www.health.org.uk/funding-and-partnerships/programmes/developing-local-authority-champions-of-research-through-an-embedded-research-culture>:accessed03.09.2020



What we are proposing for a Bradford LARS

We adapted the LACoR logic model and will use this to help BMDC move up the research activity typology



What needs to happen next

To move forward in Bradford we need:

- A common language and understanding of research
- External funding to build the LARS (including research staff, Infrastructure such as data systems, IT research related access and software, research finance support, governance and ethics guidance)
- Ways to work with our partners (NHS, VCSE, universities) and communities
- NIHR to accelerate its pace of change so that it can support research in local authorities more. Work is needed to extend funding and support to local government settings. Better local government support from NIHR (including local authority based CRN and RDS support, CED local government research register) is important

Actions needed to build a Bradford LARS

We will:

- **seek commitment** for a Bradford LARS from **senior BMDC leadership** and other leaders across the local system (e.g. the LARS will become BMDC policy)
- **pilot our adapted model** using two high priority topic areas for BMDC to demonstrate the value of research to generate interest for roll-out of the framework more widely
- **focus on the activities** identified in our adapted model
- **use improvement methods** and a stepwise action plan, learning from each step
- more **formally evaluate what we do** and the effect it has on things like changes in decision making and evidence informed policy making
- **evaluate the process of putting the LARS in place**, learn from what worked well and what didn't so that we can make changes to the LARS and help other local authorities to develop something similar

Summary

More evidence-informed decision making in LAs could improve public health and policy making.

This requires investment of funding, infrastructure and the development of a clear research culture and strong leadership.

We have proposed and outlined steps to take this forward over the next few years in Bradford. This would be a good investment in a Local Authority that has already demonstrated an appetite for research and enthusiasm to do more.