



Making evidence work: How "embedded researchers" can support decision-making in local government

Summary

- Local government is responsible for critical public health decisions, from housing to youth services.
- To make decisions effectively, teams must navigate different types of evidence (e.g. academic research, community perspectives, routine data) alongside political and time pressures.
- Embedded Researchers — academics who work directly within local government teams — can help navigate this "messy" reality by co-producing and sharing evidence in ways that are practical, timely, and tailored to the local context.
- Measuring the 'success' of embedded researchers can be difficult because the long-term goal of an embedded research approach is often policy or culture change, which can take years to happen.
- Shorter-term, relational "markers of change" can be useful for tracking progress and more immediate changes (e.g. trust and integration, changes in mindset, examples of applying evidence to practice) - these often come about when an embedded researcher becomes a valued and visible member of a local government team who is consulted early and often.

Implications for local government

To maximise the value of embedded research initiatives, local government could:

- **Define success via "markers of change":** Use identified markers — such as increased trust and mindset shifts — to set realistic, short-term performance objectives for embedded researcher roles.
- **Recruit for relational skills:** Ensure that embedded researcher recruitment focuses on strong social and communication skills, and the ability to build networks as vital technical expertise.
- **Formalise integration and visibility:** Ensure embedded researchers are invited to strategic meetings and included in project planning from the earliest stages to foster trust and early input to support evidence-informed decision-making.
- **Protect time for critical reflection:** Explicitly build "space for reflection" into work schedules, allowing practitioners and researchers to think critically about how evidence could apply to specific local priorities.
- **Foster cross-boundary collaboration:** Use an embedded researcher's unique position to connect different departments or external partners, helping to break down any silos that might exist and address complex local challenges.

The Challenge: Tracking the progress of embedded research in a complex system

Local government is responsible for some of the most important public health decisions in England, including on housing, urban planning, and youth services; and must use evidence to make effective decisions. Yet political pressures, tight deadlines, and the sheer volume of academic and other types of data, means that the reality for many local government teams is that "using evidence" is really messy in practice. [New research](#) explores how embedded researchers — in this case, public health academics who work with and alongside local government teams — can make evidence work for decision-makers.

Understanding the role of embedded researchers

The goal of an [embedded researcher](#) is often linked to "culture change" or "increasing capacity" in the way evidence is used. These are important aims, but they are also broad and long-term. Because these changes don't happen quickly, it can be difficult for embedded researchers and their host organisations to know if or how progress is being made in the shorter-term.

New research identifies practical strategies and "markers of change" that suggest that embedded researchers are making progress towards evidence-informed policy in local government.

A key finding is that evidence doesn't move on its own; it moves through relationships, through people

How to make embedded research work

Four relational strategies are often used by embedded researchers to help support evidence-informed practice:

- 1. Tailor Communication:** Adapt how information is shared to make sure it fits the local context and specific needs of the team.
- 2. Collaborate Across Boundaries:** Help to connect different departments or external partners who might otherwise work relatively separately.

3. Be Visible and Accessible: Simply be "part of the team" (as much as is possible in your role) so that colleagues feel they can reach out for a quick chat or informal advice.

4. Create Space for Reflection: Help busy practitioners find the time and space to step back and think critically about how different types of evidence might apply to their work.

Spotting "short-term" signs of progress

Measuring a final policy outcome can take months or years. However, "markers of change" can be used to track whether the embedded researcher role is starting to have an impact on how evidence is viewed and used (see also Figure 1).

Trust and Integration: A key marker is when a researcher is seen as a trusted colleague - for example, being asked to provide input on a project early on or being invited to attend strategic meetings.

Changes in Mindset: Shifts in how teams approach their work, such as colleagues actively seeking out research or expressing a growing interest in how data can inform their decisions, can be a sign of change.

Applying Evidence to Practice: This might involve tracking clear examples of a team using research to help shape a local service or using evidence to challenge and refine existing assumptions.

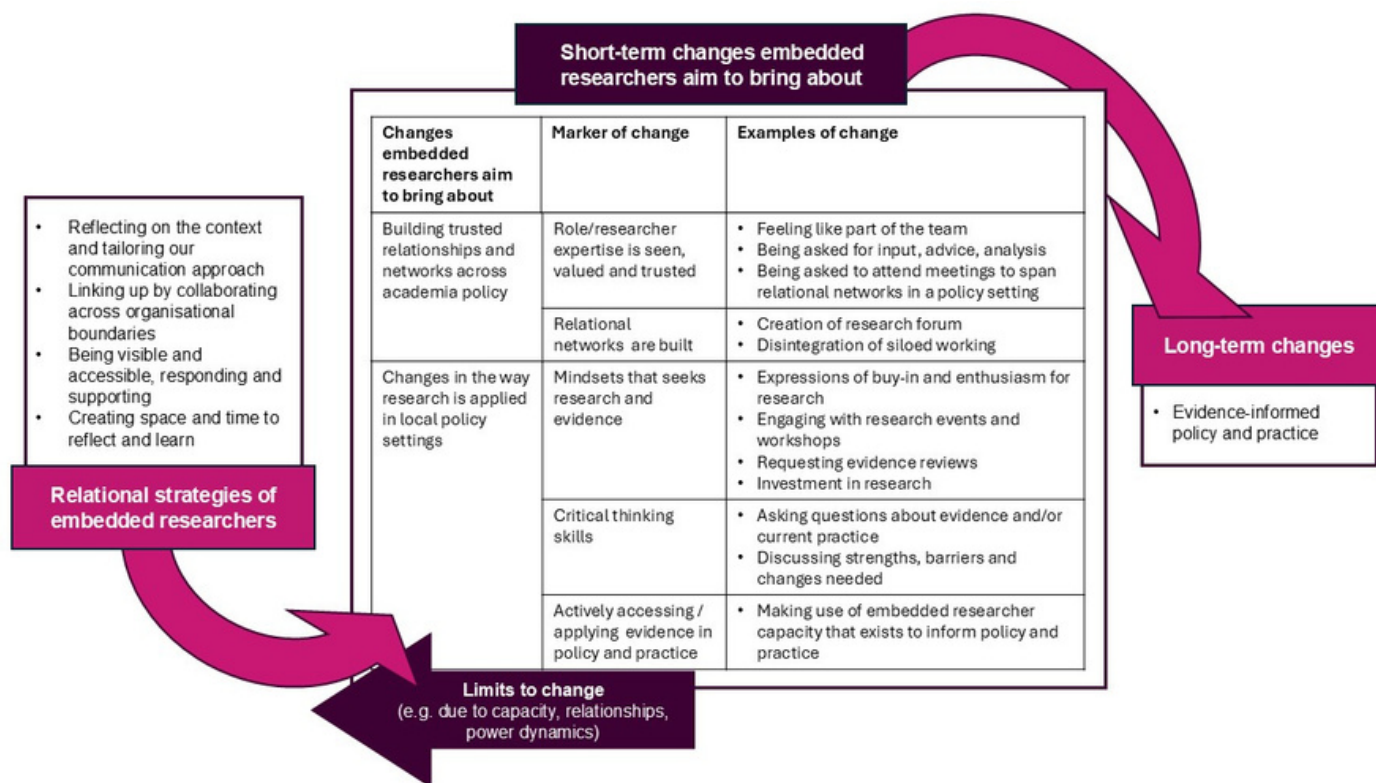


Figure 1. Framework showing the relational strategies used by embedded researchers and the changes that they can support in local government, with markers and examples of change. Full diagram is available to download at: <https://wellcomeopenresearch.org/articles/11-133/v1>

Why this matters

The markers of change provide a useful reference point for local councils and embedded researchers.

By identifying early markers of change, local government and host teams can develop clearer expectations for embedded researcher roles, and embedded researchers can build more confidence in their day-to-day practices.

Insights about the important relational strategies used by embedded researchers can be used to inform the recruitment of new embedded researchers.

Further information

This briefing draws on findings from: Dowling L, Barnes A, Southall-Edwards R et al. The role of embedded public health researchers in local government: Identifying markers of changes in relationships and how evidence is applied in policy and practice, Wellcome Open Res 2026, 11:133
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