

ADULT SOCIAL CARE RESEARCH

ADASS Research Group top tips for engaging with local authorities

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ADASS believes that research can lead to better care and support and better lives. ADASS believes that it is most likely to do so when research is *with* adult social care, rather than *into* adult social care. By working collaboratively, we can ensure that research questions are relevant, methods are practical, and findings have real-world impact for people drawing on care and support.

One of the roles of the ADASS Research Group is to encourage strong learning relationships between our members, academics and other researchers.

The group has developed the following Top Tips to help and encourage researchers engage fruitfully with local authorities and avoid possible misunderstandings.

We encourage you to:

- Consider whether the practical impact of your research findings would depend (partly or entirely) on local authorities making changes in the way they work. If so, discuss your research ideas at the earliest stage with local authority officers who can give you honest advice about what knowledge would and wouldn't make a difference.
- Engage with local authority staff in relevant positions at all levels, but be aware that decisions on providing substantial input (data, surveys, workshops etc.) will usually be made at a senior level in the local authority.
- Clarify how your research interest sits in relation to how the local authority organises itself. Functions – such as adult social care, children's social care and public health – are structured and led differently in different places.
- Explain how your research will benefit the local authority or authorities you want to engage, and the people they support. Find out about the authorities' strategic objectives and business plans. Find out about the priorities of the ADASS region or ADASS nationally, too, so you can understand where our priorities are shared.
- Show how your research interests and approaches will support local authorities' commitments to inclusive services and equitable outcomes
- Show how your commitment to ethical considerations – for staff and for people who draw on care and support – matches with that of the local authority
- Consider how local authorities could benefit from involvement in your research within timescales that are important to them.

- Be explicit and realistic about how much of the local authority's time you will be requesting, and be prepared to find alternative approaches where your initial plans can't be accommodated by the local authority.
- Consider how to work collaboratively with local authorities to engage people with lived experience – councils are often expert partners
- Engage with local authorities to understand the variety of ways in which they structure services and gather data. These differ from place to place, and requests can often be 'lost in translation'
- Be as flexible as possible with your methodology, taking on board the views, insights and ways of working of local authority colleagues.
- Check with local authority officers responsible for statistical returns whether there are nuances that you should be aware of if your research relies heavily on interpretation of published statistical data.
- Consider your relationship with local authorities on a long-term basis, wherever possible, rather than only as a one-off request.
- Support local and regional networks or communities of practice which have been established to promote research capacity and nurture research mindedness across adult social care. Perhaps there are opportunities to develop embedded research roles.

We would discourage you from:

- Basing your research design on assumptions about what information councils will hold if you haven't checked with local authority officers who can tell you from experience what is and is not practical to find out.
- Basing your research objectives and grant applications on assumptions about the value to councils of better understanding of an issue without talking to experienced operational managers in local authorities about what information they might practically be able to act on.
- Sending out national surveys 'cold' to councils.
- Using FOIs unless other reasonable options have been exhausted (including creative use of published data) and without first talking to officers in councils that you are in contact with about whether the questions you intend to ask will have clear and meaningful answers.
- Confusing FOIs with surveys – FOIs should only ask for specific recorded information that you know local authorities are likely to hold in a structured form, not for opinions.
- Assuming that senior leaders will often be in a position to join advisory boards that meet regularly; but you may be able to take their views and access their advice more flexibly
- Excluding local authorities from conversations with providers; they will generally be supportive and facilitate appropriate approaches

If you want to know more about ADASS and research, please contact paul.buddery@adass.org.uk