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Impact of Welsh Government Social Research
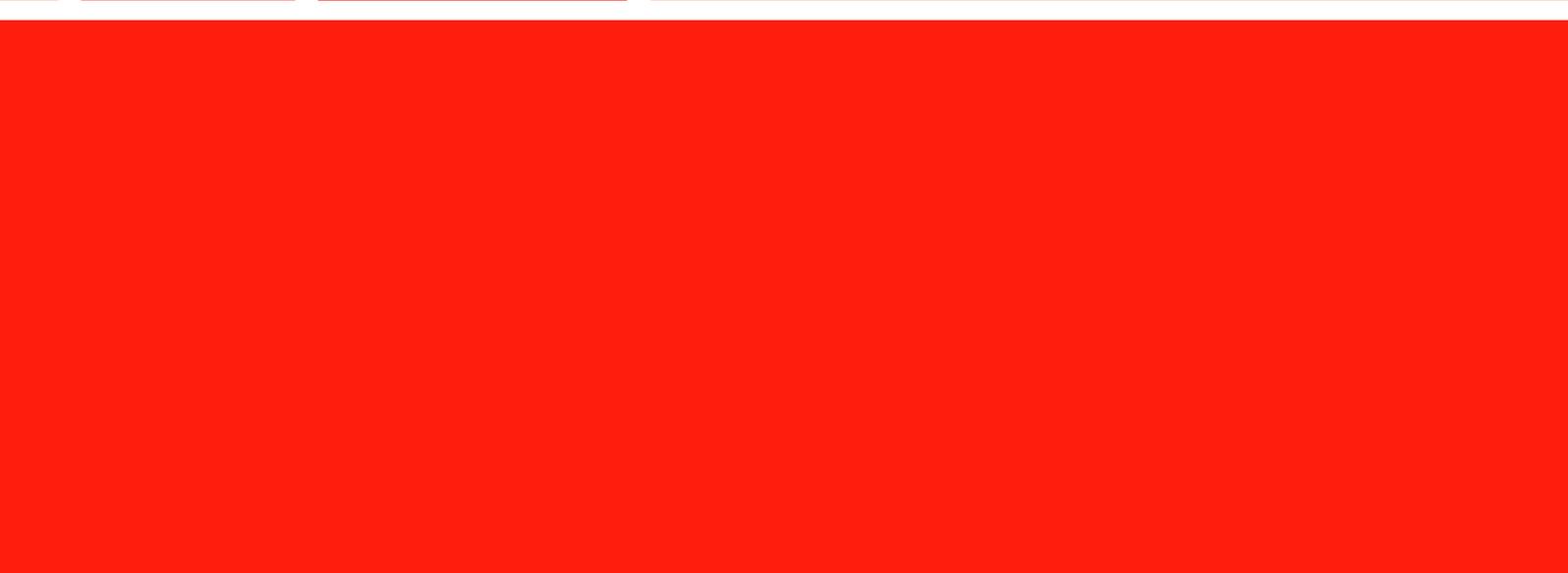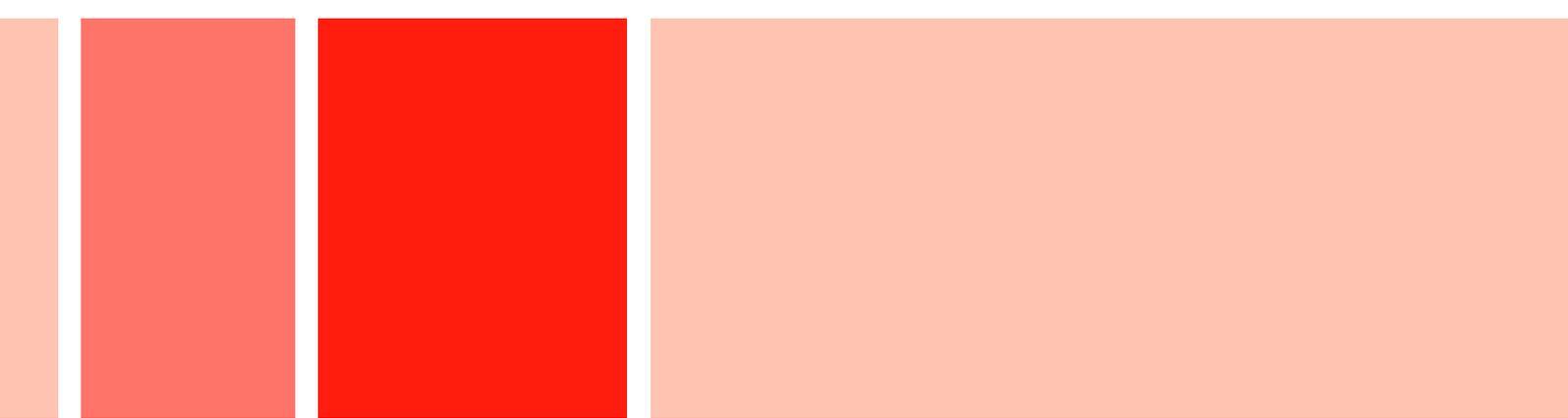
Impact of Welsh Government Social Research

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Views expressed in this report are those of the researcher and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government

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Glossary of acronyms

ESRC – Economic and Social Research Council

FE – Further Education

HE - Higher Education

HEFCW – Higher Education Funding Council for Wales

LSB – Local Service Board

LSOA – Lower Super Output Areas

Q&A – Question and Answer

REF – Research Excellence Framework

SEN – Special Educational Needs

SOLACE – Society of Local Authority Chief Executives

WAG – Welsh Assembly Government

WIMD – Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation

WISERD - Wales Institute for Social and Economic Research, Data and Methods

WLGA – Welsh Local Government Association

Summary

Background

1. Old Bell 3 and Consulting Inplace were commissioned by the Welsh Government in January 2011 to undertake a small study evaluating the impact of research within the Welsh Government. The overarching aims of the study were to:

    - evaluate the impact of two research projects as case studies
        - the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation, a composite index which is the official measure of relative deprivation for small areas in Wales;
        - the Learning to Improve Evaluation a long term independent evaluation of the Welsh Government's Local Government Policy;
    - draw out lessons to support and develop the use of research managed by the Welsh Government to ensure research funding is efficiently spent and has the maximum impact.

2. The study involved semi-structured interviews with 21 key stakeholders involved in the two case study projects (including analytical and policy staff within the Welsh Government and 'users' outside it), a small scale web-survey with users of the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation (WIMD) and a consideration of the findings in the light of other research into the way in which research informs the policy making process.

3. Findings from the case study research need to be qualified by the small scale of the work, the relatively low response rate to the web-survey (41 responses or just under 20%) and the fact that, in the case of the Learning to Improve, our research for the case study took place towards the end of a long period of fieldwork and evidence-gathering leading up to the publication of a second interim report by the evaluation team.

Case study findings

4. The case study research suggests that awareness of WIMD is quite widespread, with extensive use being made of it by the Welsh Government and its agencies, and with local authorities also making use of it alongside more local sources of data and information. Awareness is seen to have increased with each successive 'edition' of the Index, and users are generally confident that they understand how to use it. Awareness of the more recent Child Index is, however, much lower.

5. Three clear messages emerged from our fieldwork about the usefulness of the Index**:**

   • Firstly, that there is a widespread recognition of the need for an Index of this sort.

   • Secondly that the Index (as well as the domains and indicators which underpin it) is widely used to inform and influence the way in which policies are implemented spatially in Wales and that its usefulness has increased over time, principally as the result of the release of additional data which can be analysed discretely.

   • Thirdly, that there is a lack of clarity and consensus within the policy community (and within the Welsh Government more generally) about the extent to which spatial approaches to tackling deprivation are appropriate or desirable and consequently a nervousness about how to apply WIMD to address specific issues.

6. The main factors facilitating the use of WIMD in the policy process appear to be:

   • the clear commitment of successive Welsh Governments to the social justice agenda, with a spatially targeted initiative, Communities First, being at the heart of this;

   • the quality of the information materials available from the Statistical Directorate and the willingness of key staff to take time to respond

to questions and queries (though engagement with the formal information tools and techniques appears to be generally quite low);

- the increased availability as time has gone on of detailed data related to the indicators and the domains underpinning the Index.

7. The main barriers which are seen as constraining the impact of WIMD on policy and practice are:

- Significant concerns in some quarters about the appropriateness of using WIMD as a way of targeting funding on specific spatial areas rather than targeting individuals in need;
- The small spatial scale of the Index;
- The lack of any longitudinal element to the Index;
- Weaknesses in the underlying data (though the WIMD team were felt to be well aware of the problems);
- Issues of communicating clearly to non-specialists the ways in which WIMD should and should not be used.

8. By contrast, awareness of Learning to Improve appears much more limited, and is confined to those most closely involved with the study. This is despite the fact that considerable efforts have been made to generate interest across the Welsh Government in the findings and their potential implications.

9. While the quality of the research is generally recognised to be high, the formal outputs from the evaluation do not seem to have been widely used as yet to directly inform policy and practice. Extensive efforts at the time of the publication of the first Interim Report to engage with policy makers in the Welsh Government and in local government beyond the Local Government Division yielded disappointing results. Early indications suggest, however, that the publication of the second interim report, based on a series of case studies, may lead to a new phase in which Learning to Improve is perceived as being of greater use to policy makers and practitioners.

10. Facilitating factors in terms of the impact of Learning to Improve were identified as:

- The enthusiasm and engagement of the Steering Group and in particular the research manager;
- The professionalism and reputation of the research team; and
- The fact that each element of the research is prefaced by a literature review (looking beyond the Welsh experience) which provides a context for the findings.

11. Perceived barriers to the study having an impact on policy included:

- The fact that the research is long-term and strategic (rather than instrumental) in nature and is still at a relatively early stage, with the first interim report seen as rather abstract by some;
- The lack of 'rooted' ownership of the study;
- The design or even concept of having one 'blockbuster' piece of research rather than a succession of more focused pieces of work evaluating specific programmes or aspects of local government policy and/or the rather conceptual approach of the evaluation;
- The relationship between the research process and the learning and dissemination programme, and the protracted timescales of the research, with the first case studies appearing some three years after the evaluation was commissioned;
- The need for a more 'action learning' approach to the learning and dissemination programme, building on the initial workshops and presentations of the research findings;
- A view on the part of some interviewees that the evidence base is inevitably only one part of the process of reaching policy decisions.

Learning points from the case studies

12. In our view key learning points for the future are:

- In the case of **WIMD**:

- o the importance of continuing to make as much of the underlying data used in the Index available as possible;
- o the potential to use WIMD 2011 to consider the case for greater stability in the way the Index is constructed;
- o the importance in terms of information and dissemination of:
    - focusing effort on developing core guidance materials accessible to generalists;
    - using Statistical Directorate staff working on specific policy areas to cascade knowledge and understanding to policy colleagues; and
    - proactively targeting key 'user' policy divisions;
- o the need to increase the profile of the Child Index;
- o the need to find ways of supporting organisations who have no in-house resource to interpret and use WIMD data;
- o the need to ensure that WIMD is operating within a clear(er) policy framework which spells out when spatial targeting is appropriate;
- o the potential for somewhat stronger policing within the Welsh Government to ensure that WIMD is not used inappropriately.

- In the case of **Learning to Improve:**
    - o the need to use the forthcoming publication of the case studies as the focus for a major 'push' in term of the learning and dissemination programme, using a range of methods;
    - o the potential to make better use of the academic strengths of the study by encouraging the contractors to organise a conference with a target audience across the UK and possibly beyond;
    - o the need for a stronger focus on an action research approach to the four remaining case studies;
    - o the importance of using the publication of the case-studies and the second interim report to re-engage the interest of senior decision makers and broaden the scope of the Steering Group.

- More generally:
    - the importance of building in to the design of long-term research programmes as much flexibility as possible;
    - the need to ensure that there is a wider collective understanding and 'buy in' to major programmes of research on the part of the 'customer' department and that research staff are fully satisfied about the programme design;
    - the need to build stakeholder engagement at strategic and operational levels into the research process, possibly through a two-tier system of research governance;
    - the importance of long-term research programmes showing 'early wins to secure the buy-in of key stakeholders;
    - the importance of making the most of academic-policy interaction by ensuring academic researchers are fully appraised of the key policy and practice questions.

The case studies in the light of wider research

13. Other recent studies into the way in which research impacts on the policy making process have found few examples where the relationship between and policy outputs/impacts follows a rational, linear or 'knowledge-driven' model.

14. The findings of our two case studies chime with this research, in particular with the view that the relationship between research and changes in policy and/or practice tends to be complex and non-linear.

15. Thus, WIMD is intended, and is used, as a resource to inform, not to drive, policy and practice. This does not mean it lacks value: in its absence it is likely that a number of more arbitrary factors might have had a greater influence on the decision making process in terms of decisions such as how to target Communities First.

16. Rather, the role which WIMD plays conforms much more closely to a 'pluralism and opportunism' model of the way in which research

impacts on policy, based on the observation that the impact of research on policy or practice takes place within the context of pragmatic decision-making under uncertainty. In this model, decision makers are perceived as taking account of a wider range of sources of evidence than that which might be regarded by a trained social scientist as robust research evidence, with most people engaged in the research and policy process (including social scientists) recognising the legitimacy of this type of approach to policy-making.

17. While the underlying rationale of Learning to Improve may have been more in line with the linear model, in practice it has, as yet at least, struggled to exert a decisive influence on policy formulation. To some extent this may reflect specific factors around the design of the study - its quite conceptual approach and its long time-scale at a time when the external environment has been changing rapidly. It also reflects findings in other research that the 'linear' model does not fully represent the process through which policy-makers take on board research findings in order to develop new or revised policies. Simply confronting policy-makers with research findings that they themselves have had a limited (if any) role in commissioning, and asking them to consider their implications for policy, may not have the desired effect.

18. While elements of the pluralist/opportunist model are also in evidence in the processes through which Learning to Improve is intended to (and is beginning to) influence local government policy within the Welsh Government, this case study also highlights two issues which have been identified in the wider literature as key factors which can limit the influence of research in the 'policy making mix' as portrayed in this model:

- the political awareness, understanding and alertness among researchers of the policy-making environment and their capacity to communicate research concepts and findings in a way that is understandable to policy-makers; and

- the mismatch in time horizons between the typical researcher and the typical policy-maker.

19. Learning to Improve also, in our view, aspires to (but does not yet) represent a relationship model of the research – policy relationship, where policy making emerges from networks of collaborating research producers and users. Such models require the existence of a small but influential group of people with social science backgrounds working in policy-making or related roles and the advocacy of an evidence-based approach by some non social scientists in very senior positions. While the WIMD case study illustrates the capacity for strong and mutually reinforcing relationships between researchers and policy-makers within the Welsh Government, there does seem scope both to strengthen these relationships further and to expand the relationship to embrace more fully external academic researchers and other policy makers, for example in local government.

20. We recognise that pressures both within Government and in academia (for example, procurement rules and the pressure on academics from the Research Excellence Framework assessment, as well as resource constraints) can militate against such partnerships: in our view, despite its limited impact to date, Learning to Improve still has the capacity to act as a 'test-bed' for relationship-type approaches.

1. Introduction

1.1 Purpose of the Report

1.1 Old Bell 3 and Consulting Inplace were commissioned by the Welsh Government in January 2011 to undertake a small study evaluating the impact of research within the Welsh Government.

1.2 The context for the research was the recognition that the Welsh Government invests considerable resources in research (both that undertaken by its own analysts and that commissioned from external researchers) and that the challenging environment for public sector spending requires close consideration of ways in which the effectiveness of this research can be maximised.

1.3 The overarching aims of the study were to:
- 'Evaluate the impact of two research projects managed by the Welsh Assembly Government[1] as case studies. (Namely, The Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation and Learning to Improve Evaluation)
- Draw out lessons to support and develop the use of research managed by the Welsh Assembly Government to ensure research funding is efficiently spent and has the maximum impact'.

1.4 For each of the case studies, the objectives were to:
- 'Identify who the user communities for the research findings are
- Identify how the user communities are made aware of the research
- Identify the ways in which the user communities use the research findings, and the extent to which they use them
- Describe the extent to which the studies have impacted on policy and practice

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[1] The former name for the Welsh Government

- Assess the extent to which the studies have impacted on policy and practice, highlighting where studies could have made more impact and good practices
- Describe the process through which any identified impact was generated, including:
  - how and why any impact was generated
  - mechanisms that facilitated impact of the studies
  - barriers to the studies making an impact
- Draw out learning points from the case studies that can assist researchers in ensuring that research is used widely and has maximum impact.'

1.5 The intention was that the research would be qualitative, based largely on face-to-face interviews with key stakeholders and users of the research products.

1.6 This is the final report of the study. Two case study reports, which contain more detail on the findings with regard to the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation (WIMD) and the Learning to Improve Evaluation, are attached at Annexes 1 and 2.

1.2 Research Methods

1.7 This study was carried out over a period of two months (March-April 2011).

1.8 The research involved:
- A brief review of background material on WIMD and Learning to Improve;
- Face-to-face interviews with key staff within the Welsh Government (in both policy and analytical roles) and other organisations with an interest in one or both of the two subjects: in total, some 18 individuals were interviewed in respect of WIMD and 11 individuals in respect of Learning to Improve;

- An electronic survey addressed to individuals who receive the regular WIMD newsletters and to individuals who had attended consultation events on WIMD in late 2009. In all, 41 completed responses were received, a response rate of a little under 20%[2];

- Follow-up telephone interviews with seven WIMD survey respondents who stated that they were happy to participate in additional stages of the research[3].

1.9 Findings with regard to Learning to Improve need to be qualified by the fact that it was difficult to identify a broader cohort of stakeholders able to speak with any authority about their views of the actual and potential impact of Learning to Improve. This was largely a result of timing: the research took place towards the end of a long period of fieldwork and evidence-gathering leading up to the publication of a second interim report based around a series of case-studies, to be published in summer 2011. We are therefore conscious that our findings are based on a narrow range of interviewees, primarily from within the Welsh Government, potentially giving disproportionate weight to the views of a small number of individual informants.

1.10 Further details are contained in Annexes 1 and 2.

1.3 The Structure of the Report

1.11 In the remainder of the report we present a brief overview of WIMD and the Learning to Improve Evaluation (Section 2), then summarise our key findings in respect of the two case-studies (Section 3) before finally considering our findings in the light of previous research on the policy impact of social research (Section 4).

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[2] An e-mail containing a link to the web questionnaire was sent to 253 e-mail addresses received from the Welsh Assembly Government. Of these 29 were undeliverable, making a population of 224 potential respondents. On this basis the response rate was 18.3%.
[3] Eleven participants – or 27% of those responding to the web survey – agreed to participate in telephone interviews.

2 The Research Projects

2.1 Introduction

2.1   In this section, we briefly introduce the two research projects which were the subject of the case-study research.

2.2   The Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation (WIMD)

2.2   The Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation (WIMD) is the official measure of relative deprivation for small areas in Wales. Deprivation is a wider concept than poverty, and refers to problems caused by a lack of both resources (e.g. money) and opportunities[4].

2.3   The primary purpose of WIMD is to identify the most deprived areas of Wales in order to inform policy and funding decisions.

2.4   The first WIMD was published in 2000, and was developed by researchers from Oxford University. Subsequent development was taken in-house by the Welsh Government's Statistical Directorate (working with the Local Government Data Unit - Wales) and a new index was published in 2005. A further Index which included data on community safety domain for the first time was published in 2008. An update of this Index – which will not involve any changes to methodology or indicators except where changes to the data provision make this unavoidable – will be published in August 2011. In addition, a Child Index, using the data for WIMD 2008 has been developed.

2.5   The Index ranks the 1,896 Lower Layer Super Output Areas (LSOAs) within Wales, each of which have roughly the same number of people living within them. Deprivation ranks have been worked out for each of these areas; the most deprived area has a rank of 1, and the least deprived area has a rank of 1,896.

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[4] Information in this section is taken from the Welsh Government website http://wales.gov.uk/topics/statistics/theme/wimd/?lang=en and 'The Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation, 2008'

2.6   WIMD (2008) is based on eight separate domains, each of which denotes a 'type' of deprivation. The eight domains are: income; employment; health; education; housing; access to services; environment; and community safety.

2.7   Each of the domains is based on a range of different indicators and is measured in different ways, using different units. Indicators within each domain are weighted to reflect their contributions to the Index before being combined to formulate a domain score. Each domain is summarised as a single measure and these are combined in the overall index.

2.8   Because of changes in the way in which successive Indices have been developed, it is not possible to make comparisons over time in relation to ranking within the Index as a whole[5]. Nor is it possible to aggregate to larger spatial areas (electoral wards or local authority areas) using the rankings within the Index. However, the underlying indicators can be used to track changes over time and to enable comparisons at larger spatial areas and this underlying data has increasingly been made available over the last ten years. Most recently, in March 2011 the Statistical Directorate made available a new data set comprising the WIMD indicators not only at LSOA level but also at the levels of Local Authorities, Strategic Regeneration Areas, Communities First Areas and a number of other groupings[6].

2.9   WIMD is overseen by a Steering Group (formerly the Project Board) consisting of staff within a range of roles across the Welsh Government. The Steering Group is assisted by an Advisory Group, a Dissemination Group and seven domain working groups covering the eight deprivation

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[5] Even if there were no changes to the methodology for the different editions of the Index, it would still not be possible to track change for an individual area over time using the ranks, as it is not possible to tell whether rank movement is due to changes in the area itself, or changes to other areas.
[6] WIMD newsletter 5 February 2011

domains (with income and employment combined), each of which involve both Welsh Government and external experts/representatives. The WIMD team also held an open consultation in late 2009 about its work programme and communicates through a regular electronic newsletter which is available on request.

2.10 Further information is available at:
http://wales.gov.uk/topics/statistics/theme/wimd/?lang=en

2.3 The Learning to Improve Evaluation

2.11 The Welsh Government's 2007 policy statement *A Shared Responsibility*[7] set out its local government policy for the period from 2007 to 2011. Building on the *Making the Connections* strategy and Welsh Government's response[8] to the Beecham review[9], the policy statement emphasises the importance of:

- putting the citizen at the centre of policy and delivery (or citizen engagement);
- collaboration between public service providers (including working between local authorities across local government boundaries and partnership with other service providers);
- effective working between local and central government.

2.12 These three themes are the focus of a long term independent evaluation of the Welsh Government's Local Government Policy, known as Learning to Improve. The evaluation was commissioned in 2008, after a feasibility study which was carried out by the Centre for Regional and Local Government Research within Cardiff University Business School.

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[7] WAG (March 2007), *A Shared Responsibility: Local government's contribution to improving people's lives* - A policy statement from the Welsh Assembly Government
[8] WAG (November 2006), *Making the Connections - Delivering Beyond Boundaries, Transforming Public Services in Wales.*
[9] Beecham, J., Morgan, G., Webb, A., Martin, S. (2006), *Beyond Boundaries, Citizen-Centred Local Services for Wales,* Report to the Welsh Assembly Government.

2.13 After a public tender, the contract was awarded to the Centre in partnership with Shared Intelligence, an independent organisation specialising in research into effective local governance and capacity building among local authorities and related stakeholders. The Cardiff University team of four researchers was to lead the research process while a learning and dissemination programme, led by Shared Intelligence, was intended to be a two-way process throughout the evaluation, involving a series of learning events aimed at engaging Welsh Government officials, local authority councillors and officers, and representatives of other public service providers.

2.14 Learning to Improve involves a four year programme of work (expected to conclude in mid 2012) at a cost of around £500,000 which aims to provide ongoing feedback to policy makers to help ensure that policy is 'soundly conceived, responsive, well implemented, and effective'[10]. Learning to Improve is also intended to contribute to the development of a new statement for local government policy and has already informed the development of the 'New Understanding published in 2009[11].

2.15 The specific objectives of Learning to Improve are to analyse:
- the way in which local government policy is developed and communicated;
- how policy is delivered;
- the impacts and outcomes that policy has on the ground.

2.16 The study adopts a multi-method approach whereby the evidence-gathering aspect of the study, led by the Cardiff team, utilises primary and secondary research methods, drawing on data from four key sources:
- existing data sets, reports, and policy documents;

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[10] Invitation to Tender Specification
[11] *A New Understanding between the Welsh Assembly Government and Local Government in Wales, November 2009.* This joint statement by the Welsh Government and the Welsh Local Government Association set out to explain 'how we will work together to deliver excellent services to our citizens.

- a repeated All Wales survey – a baseline completed in 2009 and a follow-up survey planned for 2011. The surveys are multi-respondent surveys targeted at senior officers and councillors from all 22 unitary authorities across Wales;

- in-depth, multi-method case studies focused on the three key themes of the Welsh Government local government policy (citizen engagement, collaboration and central-local relations) and around issues of wider interest and importance;

- in-depth interviews with policy makers and other key national stakeholders.

2.17 The first phase of the evaluation comprised a baseline survey of local authority officials undertaken between November 2008 and March 2009 and interviews with Welsh Government and local government stakeholders. This resulted in the First Interim Report[12] of the evaluation, published in July 2009 and which drew conclusions in terms of the way in which the Welsh Government's local government policy was developed, communicated and delivered on the ground.

2.18 The findings of the Interim Report were disseminated through a series of two-hour workshops targeted at middle managers within the Welsh Government, linked to the Leadership Network of senior officials which are organised by the Welsh Government learning and development team. In addition, research team members and lead Welsh Government officials made a number of presentations to other civil service and external audiences. For example, the Welsh Government project manager and the lead official from the local government division took the findings to the Welsh Government Business Group, chaired by the Permanent Secretary and the research team delivered a presentation and follow-up discussion to Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE) members. In January 2011, the findings were presented to

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[12] Guarneros-Meza, V., Downe, J., Entwistle, T. and Martin, S. (July 2009), *Learning to Improve: An Independent Assessment of the Welsh Assembly Government's Policy for Local Government,* Centre for Local & Regional Government Research, Cardiff Business School.

the Minister for Local Government, who expressed positive interest and asked to be kept in touch with the research.

2.19 The research team has been in regular contact with the key local government organisations and a small number of presentations of the interim report findings were made to local government audiences. These included a session for SOLACE, led by the project director, and a presentation to the four group leaders in the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA).

2.20 The second phase entailed a series of four in-depth case studies of different policy areas, which were carefully selected to ensure maximum relevance to policy makers. The case study research was undertaken throughout much of 2009 and 2010 and gathered evidence through surveys, focus groups, and in-depth interviews. The four case studies are:

- Communities First in Caerphilly and Rhonda Cynon Taf;
- school modernisation in Powys (involving an examination of the primary school reorganisation process in two catchment areas);
- the four regional transport consortia;
- Local Service Boards (LSBs), looking in detail at four LSB projects in three Local Authority areas.

2.21 The case-studies have been completed and will inform a second interim report which is due to be published in Summer 2011. This is also expected to be the focus for a series of learning and dissemination events[13].

2.22 The final phase is expected to involve a further four case-studies[14], a second survey of senior local government officers and interviews with

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[13] Some of these events had taken place by the time this report was completed.
[14] Regional partnership working in North Wales; schools re-organisation in Ceredigion; the role of LSB lead officials; and the development and implementation of the 2009 Local Government Measure.

key stakeholders within both the Welsh Government and local government. A final report will be published in 2012.

2.23   The project is overseen by a Steering Group, chaired by the lead officer within Social Research Division, which comprises representatives from the WLGA and SOLACE as well as Welsh Government officials.

3 Findings from the 'Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation' and 'Learning to Improve' Case Studies

3.1 Introduction

3.1 In this section we summarise the findings from the two case studies WIMD and the Learning to Improve Evaluation.

3.2 In doing so, we consider in turn awareness of, and the user communities for, the two research projects (Section 3.2), usefulness and use made of the research (Section 3.3), the impact on policy and practice, including consideration of barriers and facilitating factors (Section 3.4) and key learning points in respect of the two research projects (Section 3.5).

3.2 Awareness and User Communities

3.3 In terms of **WIMD**, our consultations and web-based survey[15] suggest that:

- the Welsh Government itself (particularly the Department for Social Justice and Local Government[16]) and its agencies (such as the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales – HEFCW) would appear to make considerable use WIMD;
- use of WIMD elsewhere is more mixed and dependent on the availability of skills and knowledge within the user organisation;
- Welsh local authorities use WIMD to inform policy and resource allocation decisions, although appear to use it more as a way of interrogating local views and evidence rather than as a stand-alone instrument;

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[15] It needs to be recognised that the data sources and the response rate to the survey mean that the results are not necessarily representative of all users. However, this section is based both on the survey results and on the views of face-to-face interviewees including analytical staff.

[16] We use the titles of Departments in use at the time of the fieldwork: Welsh Government Departments were restructured after the May 2011 Elections.

- the voluntary and community sector would appear to make more limited use of WIMD, for example as a way of supporting funding applications;

- there is relatively little evidence of the use of WIMD by the private sector (though Welsh Government statisticians are aware of examples of this, as well as use of the Index by academics).

3.4 WIMD is generally seen as having a high profile within the Welsh Government and elsewhere in the public sector in Wales, which reflects its quality as a product and generally effective dissemination. Awareness is seen to have increased with the publication of successive indices. Users generally are fairly confident that they have a good understanding of the Index though knowledge of the Child Index is much less common.

3.5 At the same time, while the Statistical Directorate was praised for its willingness to respond to enquiries and queries, there appears to be generally relatively low levels of engagement with the more formal information tools and techniques deployed by the Directorate, such as the consultation and training/ dissemination events and the electronic newsletter.

3.6 In contrast to WIMD, current awareness of the **Learning to Improve Evaluation** is restricted to quite a narrow circle of individuals within the Welsh Government and local government, principally those directly involved through the Steering Group, which is widely perceived to be highly engaged and supportive of the study. This is despite the fact that considerable efforts have been made to generate interest across the Welsh Government in the findings and their potential implications.

3.7 Engagement on the part of local authorities is generally very limited and those representatives of local government involved in the Steering Group see the study as principally being of value to the Welsh Government. Within the Welsh Government, several interviewees

thought that proactive involvement in the study is limited primarily to the Steering Group itself and to the Local Government division within the Welsh Government, with limited evidence of engagement from other departments.

3.8   Some interviewees were hopeful that the publication of the case studies and the second interim report later this year will enable a new push to raise awareness of, and engagement with, Learning to Improve, both within the Welsh Government and across the local government sector.

3.3 Usefulness and Use Made of the Research Products

3.9   Three clear messages emerged from our fieldwork with regard to the usefulness of **WIMD:**

- Firstly, that for the overwhelming majority of those interviewed, there is a need for an Index of this sort.

- Secondly that the Index (as well as the domains and indicators which underpin it) is widely used to inform and influence the way in which policies are implemented spatially in Wales and that its usefulness has increased over time, principally as the result of the release of additional data which can be analysed discretely.

- Thirdly, that there is a lack of clarity and consensus within the policy community (and within the Welsh Government more generally) about the extent to which spatial approaches to tackling deprivation are appropriate or desirable and consequently a nervousness about how to apply WIMD to address specific issues.

3.10   Interviewees were able to point to a considerable number of instances where WIMD plays a key role in informing or targeting policy and resources, for example, Communities First, the deployment of police resources, the allocation of funding for post-16 provision in education, the assessment of schools performance, and the Child Poverty strategy.

3.11   While WIMD is widely used, around half of those interviewed were concerned that there is a risk of WIMD being misunderstood or misapplied. These concerns are largely within the Welsh Government, perhaps reflecting a greater tendency (or perceived tendency) for policy makers to give a uniquely important role to WIMD in terms of providing a picture of local circumstances, whereas other bodies (such as police authorities and local government), are more likely to use WIMD in conjunction with other data and intelligence (sometimes anecdotal).

3.12   As with WIMD, most of those with knowledge of the **Learning to Improve Evaluation** believe that the work undertaken by the research team is of high quality and of value in getting to grips with the complex and sometimes contradictory attitudes and behaviours within the Welsh Government and local government to partnership working, though some questioned the usefulness of the conceptual model developed as part of the first interim report to identify different sorts of central-local relations.

3.13   However, the formal outputs from the evaluation do not seem to have been widely used as yet to directly inform policy and practice, though they have undoubtedly been of use to the Local Government Division in highlighting the range of different approaches to local authorities within the Welsh Government and appear to have informed the development of the 'New Understanding'.

3.14   Although extensive efforts were made by the Steering Group to ensure the dissemination of the first interim report, these appear to have achieved mixed success, with relatively limited follow-through. Our research suggests that this was partly because the report presented relatively early findings from the baseline study, with little in the way of substantive research findings or recommendations and partly reflected a shortage of appropriate opportunities for the dissemination of research findings. Having said this, a number of meetings and small-scale presentations to groups such as SOLACE, WLGA, key Welsh

Government committees and the Minister for Local Government have helped to maintain some level of senior awareness of the study.

3.15 Early indications suggest, however, that the publication of the case studies may lead to a new phase in which Learning to Improve is perceived as being of greater use to policy makers and practitioners than has been the case to date, building on the initial interest generated through the dissemination activities described above.

3.4   Impact on Policy and Practice: Facilitating Factors and Barriers

3.16 The research fieldwork suggested that **WIMD** has had a significant impact on policy and practice, most notably through shaping the flagship Communities First initiative (which has also acted as a 'transmission mechanism' for WIMD in some instances), but also through a wide range of other applications, for example in respect of education policy and policing. This is much less true of the newer, and less well established Child Index.

3.17 The main factors facilitating the impact of the main Index appear to be:
- the clear commitment of successive Welsh Governments to the social justice agenda, with a spatially targeted initiative, Communities First, being at the heart of this;
- the quality of the information materials available from the Statistical Directorate, including the strong visual presentation of data and the willingness of key staff to take time to respond to questions and queries;
- the increased availability as time has gone on of detailed data related to the indicators and the domains underpinning the Index.

3.18 The main barriers which are seen as constraining (or which, in the view of some interviewees ought to constrain) the impact of WIMD on policy and practice are:

- Significant concerns about the appropriateness of using WIMD as a way of targeting funding on specific spatial areas rather than targeting individuals in need;

- The small spatial scale of the Index, largely because of the very clear guidance that WIMD rankings should not be aggregated[17] (though the question of aggregation is intended to be addressed by the recent publication of underlying indicator data aggregated at different spatial levels);

- The lack of any longitudinal element to the Index, perceived as being due to changes in its composition in each successive 'edition' (though again the publication of the underlying indicator data should help here);

- Weaknesses in the underlying data (though the WIMD team were felt to be well aware of the problems);

- Issues of communicating clearly to non-specialists the ways in which WIMD should and should not be used (including the need for Statistical Directorate to be more assertive when WIMD was misused and to use statisticians working in specific policy areas to raise awareness and understanding of the Index).

3.19 Given the long-term and broad nature of the **Learning to Improve** research and evidence of limited awareness of its early outputs, it is unsurprising that there is little evidence that the evaluation findings have had a noticeable impact to date on the way that the Welsh Government works with local government.

3.20 To the limited extent that interviewees identified factors which had facilitated impact to date, these revolved around:
- The enthusiasm and engagement of the Steering Group and in particular the research manager;

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[17] Although it does also need to be recognised that guidance also suggests that, e.g. at the level of Local Authorities it is possible to compare across Authorities by comparing the percentage of all wards in each Local Authority ranked within the 10% most deprived across Wales as a whole.

- The professionalism and reputation of the research team; and
- The fact that each element of the research was prefaced by a literature review (looking beyond the Welsh experience) which provided a helpful context for the findings.

3.21 In terms of the barriers which, so far at least, have prevented Learning to Improve from making a real difference to policy and practice, a wide range of issues were raised (albeit each by only a small number of interviewees), including:

- The fact that the research is long-term and strategic (rather than instrumental) in nature and is still at a relatively early stage and the nature of the initial findings, which set out the baseline position and a suggested typology of central-local relations, rather than focusing on any specific policy area(s), questions or initiatives;

- The lack of 'rooted' ownership of the study, with a relatively low level of engagement from local government and a perceived lack of a clear champion for the work at a very senior level within the Welsh Government: some interviewees traced this back to the origins of the project which was seen to have been largely due to the strong commitment of one key policy official who had subsequently left the policy area, while others highlighted the unique nature of local government relations, cutting across a very large swathe of Welsh Government, which meant no one official below the Permanent Secretary has overarching responsibility;

- The design or even concept of having one 'blockbuster' piece of research rather than a succession of more focused pieces of work evaluating specific programmes or aspects of local government policy and/or the rather conceptual approach of the evaluation – an approach that is not familiar to many of the potential users of the research findings;

- The relationship between the research process and the learning and dissemination programme, and the protracted timescales of the research, with the first case studies appearing some three years after

the evaluation was commissioned: some interviewees argued that the policy agenda had moved on significantly in this time (although others felt that no fundamental changes had occurred and argued that there was widespread agreement that the three themes of Learning to Improve remained as valid in 2011 as they were in 2008);

- The need for a more 'action learning' approach to the learning and dissemination programme, building on the initial workshops and presentations of the research findings;

- A view on the part of some interviewees that the evidence base was inevitably only one part of the process of reaching policy decisions.

3.5 Key Learning Points for the Future

3.22 Drawing on both the evidence from these two small scale case-studies and the wider evidence base on the impact of policy and practice (including our own research)[18] it is possible, in our view, to draw some specific learning points for the future.

3.23 In the case of **WIMD** these include:

- the importance of continuing to make as much of the underlying data used in the Index available as possible;

- the potential to use WIMD 2011 to consider the case for greater stability in the way the Index is constructed so as to enable greater scope for some longitudinal comparisons (though we recognise the intrinsic difficulties of using any index based on rankings in this way);

- the importance in terms of information and dissemination of:
  - o focusing effort on developing core guidance materials accessible to generalists;
  - o ensuring that Statistical Directorate staff working on specific policy areas have ownership of the Index, so that they can act as intermediaries in cascading knowledge and understanding to policy colleagues; and

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[18] See Section 4 below

- proactively targeting those policy divisions which are seen as most likely to need the Index in their work;

- the need to increase the profile of the Child Index, including through a much clearer profile on the Index's web pages;

- the case for investigating the potential to create a fund to support academic institutions in interpreting WIMD data for organisations who have no in-house resource to use it;

- the need to ensure that WIMD is operating within a clear(er) policy framework which spells out when spatial targeting is appropriate and for the Welsh Government to consider where there is scope for using WIMD in combination with other quantitative or qualitative data sources rather than as a stand-alone tool;

- the potential for somewhat stronger policing within the Welsh Government to ensure that WIMD is not used inappropriately .

3.24 As regards the **Learning to Improve Evaluation,** in our view learning points for the remainder of the research programme include:

- the need to use the forthcoming publication of the case studies as the focus for a major 'push' in term of the learning and dissemination programme, using a range of methods, perhaps including on-line discussion groups as well as meetings and focussing on key policy questions about central-local relations which emerge from the case-studies. Opportunities to hold joint events where Welsh Government and local government officials work through these issues together should be sought;

- the potential to make better use of the academic strengths of the study by encouraging the contractors to organise a conference with a target audience across the UK and possibly beyond, to raise the profile of the study and also to generate awareness of the commitment of the Welsh Government to high quality social research;

- the need for a stronger focus on an action research approach to the four remaining case studies;

- the importance of using the publication of the case-studies and the second interim report to re-engage the interest of senior decision makers and broaden the scope of the Steering Group to bring in Welsh Government officials from other policy divisions and local authority senior officers.

3.25 More generally, we believe learning points from the Learning to Improve case study are:

- the importance of building in to the design of long-term research programmes as much flexibility as possible, consistent with the need for the overall research programme to address coherent themes;

- the need to ensure that there is a wider collective understanding and 'buy in' to major programmes of research on the part of the 'customer' department and that research staff are fully satisfied about the programme design;

- the need to build stakeholder engagement at strategic and operational levels into the research process, possibly through a two-tier system of research governance;

- the importance of long-term research programmes showing 'early wins to secure the buy-in of key stakeholders;

- the importance of making the most of academic-policy interaction by ensuring academic researchers are fully appraised of the key policy and practice questions. For example, research-policy-practice focused conferences or seminars are useful to help generate mutual understanding and effective communication.

4 The Impact of Research on Policy and Practice

4.1 Introduction

4.1 In this final section we consider the evidence from the two case studies in the light of wider recent research into the impact of research on policy and practice.

4.2 A number of researchers, including Carol Weiss, Sandra Nutley and others[19] have investigated the extent to which and ways in which social research influences policy and practice. In addition, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) has commissioned a number of studies to examine the impact on policy and practice of their investments in UK social science research. The ESRC-commissioned research includes a case study of the Welsh Government, focusing on researchers with postgraduate qualifications and the influence of academic research centres, undertaken by Consulting Inplace and Old Bell 3[20].

4.3 A consistent finding of these studies, which have examined specific policy initiatives[21], broad policy areas[22] and investments in resources such as the Millennium Cohort Study[23], is that the relationship between research and changes in policy and/or practice is complex and non-linear. Our case

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[19] See for example, Weiss, C. 'Meanings of research utilisation', *Public Administration Review*, 39(5), 1979, 426-431; Nutley, S. M., Walter, I. and Davies, H. T. O. (2007) *Using Evidence: how research can inform public services*, Policy Press, Bristol; Nutley, S., Percy-Smith, J. and Solesbury, W. (2003) *Models of research impact: a cross-sector review of literature and practice*, Learning and Skills Development Agency; Sanderson, I. (2002) 'Evaluation, policy learning and evidence-based policy making' *Public Administration*, 80(1), 1-22; Boaz, A., S. Fitzpatrick and B. Shaw 'Assessing the impact of research on policy: a literature review' *Science and Public Policy*, 36(4), May 2009, 255-270.

[20] At the time of writing, the ESRC report was in the final stages of editing and is likely to be published in the near future.

[21] Consulting Inplace (authors: Johnson, S. and M. Antill) *The economic impact of ESRC research on Pathways to Work*, Report to Economic and Social Research Council, January 2010
http://www.esrc.ac.uk/_images/Impact%20of%20ESRC%20Research%20on%20PTW_tcm8-5905.pdf

[22] Consulting Inplace (authors: Morrin, M. and S. Johnson) *The conceptual impact of ESRC research: case study of child poverty policy*, Economic and Social Research Council, 2011 (forthcoming)

[23] Johnson, S. and M. Antill, *Impact evaluation of the Millennium Cohort Study*, Economic and Social Research Council, 2011 (forthcoming)

study of the Welsh Government identified the development of the Welsh Child Poverty Strategy as something close to an 'ideal type' linear model whereby evidence was reviewed systematically with the input of expert social scientists and incorporated into the resulting strategy document[24]. However, even in this case we noted that the strategy was at the time of writing at the consultation stage and there was scope for a range of 'non-research' factors to feed into the final version of the strategy and into specific policies implemented on the back of the strategy.

4.4   Researchers have put forward a number of useful conceptual models of research impact, starting with Carol Weiss' distinction between knowledge-driven, problem-solving, interactive, political, tactical and enlightenment models[25]. More recently, impact evaluation work commissioned by ESRC has built on the work of Nutley and colleagues which suggests a continuum between 'instrumental' impacts on specific policies or practices, and longer-term 'conceptual' impacts on the broad thinking that underpins policy development. These models have been reviewed and synthesised by Cozzens and Snoek in their recent review paper[26], resulting in a typology that is helpful (in conjunction with the earlier work described above) in framing our understanding of the impact of WIMD and Learning to Improve. The elements of this typology are outlined briefly below and discussed in relation to WIMD and Learning to Improve.

4.2 Rational, Linear or 'Knowledge-driven' Model

4.5   This may be regarded as an 'ideal type' in relation to 'evidence-based policy', but it is often difficult to identify clear links between research input and policy outputs/impacts. A key conclusion from our ESRC study of

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[24] Consulting Inplace and Old Bell 3 (authors: Johnson, S. and G. Williams) *Evaluating the impact of social scientists*, Economic and Social Research Council, 2011 (forthcoming). See in particular the case study of the Child Poverty Expert group, pp20-22.

[25] Weiss, C. 'Meanings of research utilisation', *Public Administration Review*, 39(5), 1979, 426-431

[26] Cozzens, S and Snoek, M. *Knowledge to policy: contributing to the measurement of social, health and environmental benefits*, Workshop on the Science of Science Measurement, Washington DC, December 2010

research and policy in the Welsh Government was that the linear model is not typical of policy impact processes operating within the organisation (or indeed other organisations). For example, several respondents observed that research inputs tend to take place primarily at the *post hoc* evaluation rather than the policy development stage of the 'policy cycle'.

4.6   In the case of WIMD, the intention was never to influence specific policies but to provide a <u>resource</u> to inform policy and operational decisions across a range of policy areas. WIMD is also intended to be used by a wide range of organisations in addition to the Welsh Government. We might therefore expect to find that the existence of WIMD has contributed to, but has not been the primary driver of, policy and/or practice primarily by improving the quality of policy and operational decisions that have themselves been influenced by a range of factors. This is precisely what we did find, which in turn is in line with the findings of our recent evaluation of the impact on policy and practice of the Millennium Cohort Study. In this last case we noted the importance of ongoing communication between researchers and policy-makers, with academic researchers, 'think tanks' and other non-governmental organisations playing a potentially important role in the transmission process between research findings and policy implications.

4.7   For example, we cannot conclude that WIMD was instrumental in the establishment of the Communities First programme – that was influenced by a range of factors including social research into deprivation at the local level, and political and wider societal concern about the concentration of deprivation in a small number of areas across Wales. However, we can observe that WIMD played a crucial role in decisions about which areas should be eligible for Communities First funding. In particular WIMD is widely regarded as a relatively robust and independent source of data, without which a number of more arbitrary factors might have influenced

the decision-making process[27]. Similar models can be applied to the wide range of other policy/operational decisions influenced by WIMD, such as Flying Start, FE and HE funding allocation and many locally-based funding decisions reported to our research team.

4.8   In the case of Learning to Improve, the underlying rationale was closer to the rational, linear model of policy impact, the aim being to undertake and disseminate high quality research with the intention of influencing – in the long term - the policy and practice decisions of the Welsh Government and local authorities across Wales. The nature of that impact, however, is intended to be on the 'conceptual' end of the instrumental-conceptual continuum, helping Welsh Government, local authorities and other stakeholders to understand and conceptualise central-local relations, citizen engagement and collaboration, rather than providing evidence to inform the development or implementation of specific policies or programmes. While Learning to Improve was described as an 'evaluation study' it was intended to be primarily formative rather than summative in nature and in reality exhibits more of the characteristics of an exploratory, developmental research study.

4.9   One of the key questions we encountered in relation to Learning to Improve was the identity of the target group(s) for the study, i.e. who was (and is) the evaluation intended to influence in terms of policy and operational decisions? The initial commissioning document implied that the study was intended to influence both the Welsh Government and Welsh local authorities, in both cases primarily at the strategic level (hence the proposed engagement of local authority chief executives and senior politicians, for example). Our research suggested that, in reality, the Welsh Government was the key target, and that local authorities have in practice thus far been less significant in terms of dissemination and learning activities (although there were some suggestions that local

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[27] This is not to say that all stakeholders regarded WIMD as a perfect source of information. Some respondents expressed concerns about the make-up of the index, whereas others felt that the S-curve nature of the index meant that there was a degree of arbitrariness in the allocation of funding to areas outside the 'most deprived'.

authorities might become more engaged towards the end of the study). Furthermore, we identified a degree of uncertainty as to which Welsh Government departments were the primary targets in terms of policy influence; this is a key point given that local authorities are important partners for a wide range of divisions and departments, in addition to Local Government and Social Justice. However, the Learning to Improve case studies provide an opportunity for engagement with a range of departments over specific issues such as transport consortia and school reorganisation.

4.10 A final issue complicating our assessment of the extent to which Learning to Improve has influenced policy or practice in a 'classic' rational, linear or 'knowledge-driven' manner, relates to the time period over which the study is taking place and hence over which we might observe consequent changes in policy or practice. Indeed, as demonstrated by other studies[28], the impact of Learning to Improve research may only occur some time after the study has been completed.

4.11 Learning to Improve was intentionally established as a long-term research programme designed to investigate in depth a number of fundamental issues regarding central-local relations in Wales. It was expected that Learning to Improve would provide a basis upon which the Welsh Government and local authorities could think seriously about how to operationalise key concepts such as 'collaboration' and 'citizen engagement' and develop ways of working that consistent with the relevant policy documents such as *A Shared Responsibility* and *Making the Connections*.

4.12 As we have noted in our case study report, while the broad themes which are the focus of Learning to Improve research continue to be the basis of the Welsh Government's approach to local government, the policy and

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[28] Consulting Inplace (authors: Morrin, M. and S. Johnson) *The conceptual impact of ESRC research: case study of child poverty policy*, Economic and Social Research Council, 2011 (forthcoming)

financial environment has changed since the instigation of Learning to Improve, throwing into question some of the assumptions underpinning its commissioning. In particular, changes in the financial environment have generated much greater pressures on the resources available to local government and the Welsh Government than was the case in the period leading up to the commissioning of Learning to Improve. We also noted that to date the only outputs to reach the public domain have been the findings of baseline surveys and interviews which, by definition, provide only a limited (albeit interesting) basis upon which to influence the policy-making process.

4.13 An implicit underlying model of a rational, linear, knowledge-driven process is further underlined by the incorporation into the Learning to Improve research programme of a significant element of dissemination and learning, to be delivered by an organisation that specialises in such activity, with demonstrable success in relation primarily to local authorities in England. Our research suggests that, to date, this process has had limited success, with very little penetration into the local authority sector and a number of difficulties encountered in attempting to share and discuss baseline findings at a senior level with Welsh Government officials, despite reported interest at Ministerial level.

4.14 To some extent, the difficulties encountered by researchers and project managers in attracting the active interest of policy-makers reflect the limited nature of the material available at the time (a conclusion supported by the reported views of some of the participants in the workshops held to disseminate the interim Learning to Improve findings). A further factor, however, might be that the 'linear' model does not fully represent the process through which policy-makers take on board research findings in order to develop new or revised policies. Simply confronting policy-makers with research findings that they themselves have had a limited (if any) role in commissioning, and asking them to consider their implications for policy, may not have the desired effect. Our ESRC-commissioned study into research and policy in the Welsh Government highlighted a

wide range of 'non-research' factors that influence (quite legitimately) the policy-making process. These include the commitments made by politicians, the influence of external advisers, 'public opinion' and anecdotal evidence from visits, meetings etc. Research evidence - such as that generated by the Learning to Improve programme - and its dissemination, needs to relate in some way to at least some of these factors if it to catch the attention of policy-makers.

4.15 Furthermore, our investigation into the conceptual impact of social research on child poverty policy across the UK noted that research findings can take many years (even decades) to filter through to changes in policy-makers' thinking about the conceptual underpinnings of policy. In the case of child poverty policy this process was assisted greatly by the existence of strong informal relations between government advisers and several key researchers, coinciding with a significant change in political priorities consequent upon the election of a new UK government in 1997. In other words, it is optimistic to expect to observe substantial policy impact two years into a long-term research programme designed to play a 'conceptual' or 'enlightenment' role. Previous research does, however, highlight the key role of dissemination, the engagement of politicians as well as public servants and advisers and the creation of mechanisms whereby academics, government researchers, policy-makers, think tanks and politicians can exchange views in both formal and informal ways.

4.16 In our wider study of the Welsh Government, we found that officials in policy roles who have some qualifications and/or background in research (e.g. a PhD or Masters degree or experience in the Analytical Division) tend (perhaps unsurprisingly) to be more open than others to the influence of research findings. We also highlighted the potential benefits of close working between research and policy colleagues and good communication skills on the part of researchers. All of these factors appear to be present to some degree in relation to Learning to Improve. However it is clear that policy impact to date has been limited. While this is likely to improve with time, particularly as new case study evidence

emerges, it also suggests that it is necessary to explore more sophisticated models to explain (and therefore influence) the extent and nature of research impact on policy. These models are explored briefly below, in relation to WIMD and Learning to Improve.

4.3 Pluralism and Opportunism

4.17 This model is based on the observation that the impact of research on policy or practice takes place within the context of <u>pragmatic decision-making under uncertainty</u>. The model therefore incorporates a wider view of the useful sorts of knowledge that are taken into account, including non-academic sources, local populations and civil society. This model resembles more closely than the linear model described above, the role of research in many of the policy development processes that were described to us during the ESRC case study of the Welsh Government.

4.18 Politicians and policy-makers typically take account of a wider range of sources of evidence than that which might be regarded by a trained social scientist as robust research evidence, with most people engaged in the research and policy process (including social scientists) recognising the legitimacy of this type of approach to policy-making. As noted above the influence of Ministerial special advisers, pressure groups (e.g. professional bodies or trade unions) and broader 'public opinion' considerations are key sources of 'evidence' considered by policy-makers.

4.19 In this context, both WIMD and Learning to Improve might be regarded as part of a much wider range of evidence and influence that ultimately determines the policy decisions that are made. Most of the people that we spoke to in relation to their use of WIMD articulated a process that conforms to the 'pluralism and opportunism' model. In particular local authority respondents who used WIMD to identify areas on which to target local initiatives mentioned in most cases that other locally-available statistical evidence was taken into account, as well as well 'anecdotal' local knowledge and other information.

4.20 Similarly, the role of WIMD in relation to national initiatives such as Communities First and Flying Start might be conceptualised quite accurately by the 'pluralism and opportunism' model. As suggested above, WIMD was not seen as the primary driver for such initiatives, nor was it the only source of evidence used in developing and implementing these key policy initiatives. Other sources of evidence, research-based and otherwise, were drawn upon and the policies were developed within a wider (albeit contested) notion that spatial targeting in the most appropriate and effective means of addressing social deprivation.

4.21 The role of WIMD and the Child Index in relation to the development of the Welsh Child Poverty Strategy is also instructive in this regard. We noted above that the development of the Child Poverty Strategy was fairly close to a pure 'rational, linear' model; however it is also true to say that a pluralistic element was also in evidence. Child Index evidence was indeed used during the process of formulating the Child Poverty Strategy, but it was used in conjunction with a wide range of other sources of statistical evidence not incorporated in the Child Index, and it was influenced by non-quantitative social researchers, interest groups and political interests.

4.22 Elements of the pluralist model are also in evidence in the processes through which Learning to Improve is intended to (and is beginning to) influence local government policy within the Welsh Government. As we have already noted, the evaluation was never intended to provide evidence to influence exclusively and directly specific policy initiatives. Rather it was intended to have a 'conceptual' or 'enlightenment' impact through exploring a range of cross-cutting themes, the findings from which should influence the context within which specific policies are developed. In particular, the objective was to highlight the importance, and elucidate the workings, of central-local relations, collaboration between authorities (and other agencies) and citizen engagement in ensuring effective policy development and implementation.

4.23 Our findings suggest that the dissemination and learning activities associated with the baseline stages of the Learning to Improve research programme have made (understandably) relatively limited contribution to wider debates about policies relevant to local government. However, it seems that the case study reports provide a potential basis for Learning to Improve to feed into this 'pluralistic' process in an effective way. For example, the case study of citizen involvement in school closure decisions should help to inform central and local government policies in relation to education, as well as learning valuable lessons regarding the process of citizen involvement in the context of budget constraints and austerity, which might apply across a range of policy areas.

4.24 Our research - including this study and earlier work for ESRC on the research-policy interface - suggests that there are a number of important success factors in helping researchers to ensure that their work is considered within the context of such a pluralistic/opportunistic process.

4.25 Key amongst these are political awareness, understanding and alertness among researchers, who need to monitor closely the political and policy-making processes and pro-actively ensure that those responsible for making policy decisions are aware of the relevant research findings and take them into account in the decision-making process. Where external researchers are involved (as with Learning to Improve) it is important to ensure that they are as aware as possible of political/policy issues; the internal research team has an important role to play here.

4.26 Linked to the above needs to be an appreciation among researchers (internal and external) of the wide range of factors and pressures that affect the decisions made by policy-makers. While the availability of robust research findings is clearly very important (in the view of most policy-makers also) other concerns may influence the overall outcome, and researchers need to appreciate this.

4.27 This process is helped, as argued above, if at least some of the key policy-makers have some qualifications in, background and/or understanding of the research process and key concepts such as statistical significance.

4.28 Conversely, there is a responsibility on the part of researchers to communicate research concepts and findings in a way that is understandable to policy-makers and (for example) recognises that most policy-makers are interested in the implications of the researchers' findings for the decisions they need to make. Non-researchers tend to be much less interested in the technical detail of the research work itself.

4.29 Finally, most studies of the research-policy interface (including this one) have identified a mismatch in time horizons between the typical researcher and the typical policy-maker. Put simply, robust research tends to take a long time to plan, undertake and report, whereas policy-makers tend to be looking for instant (or very short term) results. There is no easy way around this conundrum, but researchers who wish to influence the policy-making process may need to be prepared to share emerging results with policy-makers, rather than waiting for everything to be double-checked (and in some cases peer-reviewed) before discussing the implications for policy or practice[29][30]. This approach was found to be helpful in relation to the child poverty case study described above, whereby leading researchers were prepared to share with key politicians and policy-makers – on a non-attributed basis – early findings from work in progress. In this way, social research was beginning to influence the policy process even before it had entered the formal dissemination and publication cycle.

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[29] Although it needs to be recognised that, in some cases, notably the release of statistical data, the extent to which researchers can share their findings in advance is subject to legal restrictions

[30] By definition, it is difficult to track such informal interactions, but it is clear from this study and others (e.g. the Consulting Inplace study of child poverty policy, for ESRC) that such interactions do indeed take place on a regular basis in many different policy environments.

4.4   Relationship Models

4.30 These types of models based on relationships that develop within networks of collaborating research producers and users: this is very similar to the 'pluralism and opportunism' model and represents, in our view, the type of model aspired to (but not yet achieved) in relation to the Learning to Improve study. An important potential contributor to the success of such a model is the existence of a small but influential group of people with social science backgrounds working in policy-making or related roles. This, coupled with advocacy of an evidence-based approach by some non social scientists in very senior positions, helps to create a number of formal and informal networks through which social scientists are able to exert influence on the policy process. Our ESRC study of the role of social scientists in the Welsh Government found that this is not always the case, however, and several respondents alluded to the patchiness of these relationships across the Welsh Government and beyond.

4.31 Relationships between producers and users of research are very important in relation to WIMD and its potential influence over key policy and operational decisions. Our consultations suggest that relationships within the Welsh Government between the statisticians responsible for producing WIMD and the relevant policy teams are relatively strong and mutually reinforcing. The WIMD team makes considerable efforts to maintain good relations with policy teams and to understand the policy concerns, issues and constraints facing them. Conversely the reputation of the WIMD team for high quality, careful, accurate research means that policy respondents expressed a high degree of trust in the researchers' work. In general, policy-makers felt that members of the WIMD team communicated complex technical issues relatively clearly; however there is always scope to improve this aspect of the researcher-policy maker relationship.

4.32 It was clear from our discussions with WIMD users outside the Welsh Government, however, that relationships between researchers and policy-

makers in local authorities and other user organisations are variable. In many cases, there may be only one statistician within the local authority who has the skills to use and interpret WIMD. Many other local authorities and most third sector organisations had no statistical expertise at all, constraining the extent to which WIMD could be used effectively (and indeed raising the possibility of misuse, inadvertent or otherwise). This raises a question as to whether there is scope, even given tightly constrained resources within the Welsh Government and beyond, to stimulate more widespread communication between researchers and policy-makers across local authority borders and with other non-governmental organisations. While most external WIMD users appreciated the efforts made by the WIMD team to communicate through events, newsletters, consultations etc., it is clear that resource constraints will limit future investment of time and resource in this direction. New relationship models based on new forms of central-local and inter-authority collaboration (such as that being investigated by the Learning to Improve project) might form the basis for efficient and effective sharing of intelligence about WIMD and its implications for policy and practice.

4.33 A further key factor that applies to both WIMD and Learning to Improve is the active engagement of academic researchers in the process, and the ways in which they relate to policy-makers and practitioners. While WIMD is delivered in-house by the team based at the Welsh Government, academic researchers play an important role as users, members of advisory groups and as providers of feedback to consultations etc. Our consultation was limited in scope, so we were unable to explore in depth the role of academic users of WIMD. Nonetheless our feeling is that there is scope to further develop the relationship between the WIMD team, academic researchers and users (or potential users) in local authorities and third sector organisations. Possible models include collaborative studentships, where research students may be linked to the Welsh Government and a group of local authority and other organisations to undertake projects that have potential policy implications while being sufficiently challenging academically. Groups such as the Wales Institute

for Social and Economic Research, Data and Methods (WISERD) could be an important catalyst for projects such as this.

4.34 Our wider study of research-policy relationships within and beyond the Welsh Government highlighted the importance of maintaining close relationship between academics (principally but not exclusively within Wales), researchers and policy-makers within the Welsh Government. This current research has added the local authority and third sectors into this equation. Academic researchers told us that they are keen to work more closely with government and related bodies, but that factors such as procurement processes and short-term requirements to meet immediate policy objectives, acted to constrain the development of such a relationship. Conversely government respondents (research and policy) felt that academics in general need to communicate research findings and their implications in a way that is helpful to decision-makers. Finally, the incentive structures facing academics – and in particular the need to produce articles for peer-reviewed journals in order to achieve high Research Excellence Framework (REF) grades – were felt by research and policy respondents to affect academics' ability to meet the expressed needs of policy-makers.

4.35 In our view, none of these obstacles is insurmountable. Indeed it is important to build on the good practice that does exist within the Welsh Government and elsewhere (see our ESRC report for details) and to support the process of communication between academic, policy research and policy-making communities as far as possible. The remaining time period of the Learning to Improve research programme provides an opportunity to identify and address many of the issues associated with academic-policy collaboration. As a four-year programme, Learning to Improve clearly represents a long-term investment of the type that academics rarely receive from government agencies. The brief encourages a large element of independence and challenge on the part of the researchers and – in principle – the learning aspect of the project

provides an opportunity for academic and policy researchers to interact with potential research users in a challenging yet constructive way.

4.36 Our investigations suggest that there is some way to go to bridge the gap between the research undertaken by the team at Cardiff University and the needs (often latent rather than explicitly stated) of policy-makers within the Welsh Government and the local authority sector. It is undoubtedly a difficult process, as illustrated by other studies into the research-policy interface. Nonetheless, we believe that a continued significant and determined effort on the part of the key individuals – all of whom are keen to see Learning to Improve succeed – and the injection of new impetus from the local authority angle can bear fruit over the remaining period of the study. To an extent it may be seen as a test-bed for 'relationship-based' approaches that might be used in other policy-related research initiatives, albeit almost certainly on a smaller scale.

4.37 The case study findings can, we believe, provide a catalyst to re-ignite interest in the Learning to Improve research programme; the skills and experience of Shared Intelligence – acting as 'honest broker' – can help to bring policy-makers to the table to discuss issues that continue to be real and urgent, despite changes in the broad economic and policy context. Discussion of the research findings needs to be placed high on the agenda of relevant Welsh Government, local government and other events, with senior-level 'push' and with the explicit objective of creating a relationship-based approach to ensuring that research findings in which a great deal has been invested, make a difference.

4.5   Other Models

4.38 Our observation is that a combination of the 'rational/linear', 'pluralist/opportunist' and 'relationship' models provides a useful representation of the process of research-policy interaction within the Welsh Government, including the WIMD and the Learning to Improve case studies. For the sake of completeness, however, it is useful to consider briefly the two other models set out by Cozzens and Snoek:

4.39 **Politics and legitimisation**: This model reflects a view that power is infused through the knowledge process: this was alluded to by a small number of our respondents, but we were not able to find robust evidence to suggest the widespread existence of such a model of policy-making in relation to WIMD or Learning to Improve, nor across the Welsh Government more generally in our ESRC-commissioned study.

4.40 **Systems models** can be described as 'embedded in relationships (and)…interwoven with the priorities, cultures and contexts of organisations and systems'[31]. This describes a model that appears to be aspired to by those within and beyond the Welsh Government who seek to ensure an approach to policy that is evidence-based, but which reflects the realities of both the research and the policy processes. The systems described by these models also need to incorporate the relationship between internal and external social scientists and with policy-makers at different levels. There is no one organisational model that will generate such a systems-based approach, and changes to broader organisational structures, systems and cultures are outside the scope of this modest study of two Welsh Government research investments.

4.6 Overview

4.41 Bringing together the WIMD and Learning to Improve case-study evidence with wider findings regarding the policy-research interface, it appears that the extent and nature of policy impact depends to a large extent on communication and/or political skills of individual social scientists (including statisticians). Research knowledge and skills among 'users' of research helps to ensure that research projects and resources (such as WIMD) have a noticeable impact on policy, as does the existence of a positive culture from top down in some divisions or departments. However the policy development process and research processes do not always fit neatly together, regardless of the technical quality of research by internal

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[31] Wood and Holmes (2010), cited in Cozzens and Snoek *op cit*

or external researchers. This suggests that pluralist, relationship-based models are the most appropriate (but not the only relevant) means of conceptualising the research-policy relationship within and beyond the Welsh Government. Actions to develop and improve relationships and communications on a multi-lateral level are, therefore, central to continued efforts to ensure that investments in initiatives such as WIMD and Learning to Improve are cost-effective and make a real difference to policy and practice over the short, medium and long terms.

Annex 1: Welsh Index Of Multiple Deprivation Case Study

1. **Introduction**

1.1 Purpose of the Report

1.1   Old Bell 3 and Consulting Inplace were commissioned by the Welsh Government in January 2011 to undertake a small study evaluating the impact of research within the Welsh Government.

1.2   The context for the research was the recognition that the Welsh Government invests considerable resources in research (both that undertaken by its own analysts and that commissioned from external researchers) and that the challenging environment for public sector spending requires close consideration of ways in which the effectiveness of this research can be maximised.

1.3   The overarching aims of the study were to:
- 'Evaluate the impact of two research projects managed by the Welsh Assembly Government[32] as case studies. (Namely, The Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation and Learning to Improve Evaluation)
- Draw out lessons to support and develop the use of research managed by the Welsh Assembly Government to ensure research funding is efficiently spent and has the maximum impact'.

1.4   For each of the case studies, the objectives were to:
- 'Identify who the user communities for the research findings are
- Identify how the user communities are made aware of the research
- Identify the ways in which the user communities use the research findings, and the extent to which they use them
- Describe the extent to which the studies have impacted on policy and practice
- Assess the extent to which the studies have impacted on policy and practice, highlighting where studies could have made more impact and good practices

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[32] The former name for the Welsh Government

- Describe the process through which any identified impact was generated, including:
  - how and why any impact was generated
  - mechanisms that facilitated impact of the studies
  - barriers to the studies making an impact
- Draw out learning points from the case studies that can assist researchers in ensuring that research is used widely and has maximum impact.'

1.5   This report is one of two case-study reports and considers the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation (WIMD). A parallel report presents our findings in respect of the Learning to Improve Evaluation case-study and a short final report draws together some of the conclusions from the two case-studies.

1.2   The Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation (WIMD)

1.6   The Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation (WIMD) is the official measure of relative deprivation for small areas in Wales, and is used extensively both within and outside government. Deprivation is a wider concept than poverty, and refers to problems caused by a lack of both resources (e.g. money) and opportunities[33].

1.7   The primary purpose of WIMD is to identify the most deprived areas of Wales in order to inform policy and funding decisions.

1.8   The first WIMD was published in 2000, and was developed by researchers from Oxford University. Subsequent development was taken in-house by the Welsh Government's Statistical Directorate (working with the Local Government Data Unit - Wales) and a new index was published in 2005. A further Index which included data on community safety domain for the first time was published in 2008. An update of this

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[33] Information in this section is taken from the Welsh Assembly Government website http://wales.gov.uk/topics/statistics/theme/wimd/?lang=en and 'The Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation, 2008'

Index – which will not involve any changes to methodology or indicators except where changes to the data provision make this unavoidable –will be published in August 2011. In addition, a Child Index, using the data for WIMD 2008 has been developed.

1.9 The Index ranks the 1,896 Lower Layer Super Output Areas (LSOAs) within Wales, each of which have roughly the same number of people living within them. Deprivation ranks have been worked out for each of these areas; the most deprived area has a rank of 1, and the least deprived area has a rank of 1,896.

1.10 WIMD (2008) is based on eight separate domains, each of which denotes a 'type' of deprivation. The eight domains are: income; employment; health; education; housing; access to services; environment; and community safety. Of the eight domains, income and employment are considered the most important factors and were given the most significant weighting in the overall index.

1.11 Each of the domains is based on a range of different indicators and is measured in different ways, using different units. Indicators within each domain are weighted to reflect their contributions to the Index before being combined to formulate a domain score. Each domain is summarised as a single measure and these are combined in the overall index.

1.12 Because of changes in the way in which successive Indices have been developed, it is not possible to make comparisons over time in relation to ranking within the Index as a whole[34]. Nor is it possible to aggregate to larger spatial areas (electoral wards or local authority areas) using the rankings within the Index. However, the underlying indicators can be used to track changes over time and to enable comparisons at larger

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[34] Even if there were no changes to the methodology for the different editions of the Index, it would still not be possible to track change for an individual area over time using the ranks, as it is not possible to tell whether rank movement is due to changes in the area itself, or changes to other areas.

spatial areas and this underlying data has increasingly been made available over the last ten years. Most recently, in March 2011 the Statistical Directorate made available a new data set comprising the WIMD indicators not only at LSOA level but also at the levels of Local Authorities, Strategic Regeneration Areas, Communities First Areas and a number of other groupings[35].

1.13   WIMD is overseen by a Steering Group (formerly the Project Board) consisting of staff within a range of roles across the Welsh Government. The Steering Group is assisted by an Advisory Group, a Dissemination Group and seven domain working groups covering the eight deprivation domains (with income and employment combined), each of which involve both Welsh Government and external experts/representatives. The WIMD team also held an open consultation in late 2009 about its work programme and communicates through a regular electronic newsletter which is available on request.

1.14   Further information is available at:
http://wales.gov.uk/topics/statistics/theme/wimd/?lang=en

1.3   Research methods

1.15 This study was carried out over a period of two months (March-April 2011).

1.16   The research involved:
- A brief review of background material on WIMD;
- Face-to-face interviews (using the topic guide at Appendix 1) with:
  - o   Staff in within the Statistical Directorate with lead responsibility for the WIMD;
  - o   Four other staff with research or analytical roles within the Welsh Government (one interviewed by telephone): all of these were members of the WIMD Project Board;

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[35] WIMD newsletter 5 February 2011

- o Seven policy staff (one of whom is a member of the WIMD Project Board) within the Welsh Government who were known to be actual or potential key users of WIMD: these were drawn from the Department for Social Justice and Local Government, the Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills and the Department for Rural Affairs[36];
  - o A representative of the Welsh Local Government Association and four local authority officials working in the field of economic development/community regeneration[37].

- An electronic survey addressed to individuals who receive the regular WIMD newsletters and to individuals who had attended consultation events on WIMD in late 2009. The purpose of the survey was principally to identify users of WIMD from outside the Welsh Government to generate additional interviews, and to gather some basic information about their awareness and use of the Index. In all, 41 completed responses were received, a response rate of a little under 20%[38]. The questionnaire is attached at Appendix 2.

- Follow-up telephone interviews with seven survey respondents who stated that they were happy to participate in additional stages of the research[39], using the topic guide at Appendix 1. These interviewees included individuals in research roles in a Police Authority, the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales, and two local authorities; policy staff in a further local authority and a voluntary sector organisation; and an academic researcher.

1.17 It had also been hoped to arrange a focus group with Flying Start Coordinators within Local Authorities and to speak to additional representatives of third sector organisations. However, it proved

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[36] This reflects the Departments which these individuals worked within at the time of their interview: Welsh Government Departments were restructured after the May 2011 Elections.
[37] This was a group discussion.
[38] An e-mail containing a link to the web questionnaire was sent to 253 e-mail addresses received from the Welsh Assembly Government. Of these 29 were undeliverable, making a population of 224 potential respondents. On this basis the response rate was 18.3%.
[39] Eleven participants – or 27% of those responding to the web survey – agreed to participate in telephone interviews.

impossible to arrange focus groups within the timescales for the research and email contact with Flying Start Coordinators and the End Child Poverty Network generated very limited results.

1.4 The Structure of the Report

1.18 In the remainder of the report we report our findings in terms of the case-study objectives set out at para 1.4 above (Section 2) before presenting some brief conclusions for maximising future impact. (Section 3).

2. Findings

2.1 Awareness and User Communities

2.1 Our consultations and web-based survey suggest that the Welsh Government itself is the largest user of WIMD, with the Department for Social Justice and Local Government (and in particular the Communities Directorate) being the most significant. Other Welsh Government Departments have also made considerable use of WIMD, for example the Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills, as have a number of Assembly Government Sponsored Bodies (such as the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales [HEFCW]).

2.2 Use of WIMD outside of the Welsh Government and its agencies appears to be more mixed and dependent on the availability of skills and knowledge within the user organisation, although the Police appear to use the data to a considerable extent (see para. 2.19 for further discussion). Welsh local authorities use WIMD to inform policy and resource allocation decisions, although appear more often to use it as one source of evidence alongside very local data and feedback rather than as a stand-alone instrument. To a lesser extent the voluntary and community sector makes use of WIMD, for example in campaigning work, and academic institutions undertake research work on spatial issues, making some use of WIMD and its underlying data.

2.3 In reporting the feedback from the consultations and web-based survey, unless otherwise stated the findings are common across the different user groups. However, we distinguish where appropriate between the responses of different types of users.

2.4 Interviewees generally believed that WIMD had a high profile within the Welsh Government and elsewhere in the public sector in Wales which reflected the seriousness and professionalism with which it was compiled and disseminated ('presentationally it's brilliant, with lots of

great maps – it's really useful for dealing with Ministers'), and that awareness had increased with the publication of successive Indices. Indeed, several of those who were concerned at the emphasis on spatial targeting within the Welsh Government (see 2.2 below) believed that WIMD almost had too high a profile, in that, in their view, it had virtually become the default mechanism when considering how to target policy, rather than being used as one source of information.

2.5   The survey responses suggested that the awareness and use of WIMD was relatively dispersed across the public sector (with less evidence of engagement from third sector and, perhaps less surprisingly, the private sector[40]) (Figure 2.1). Of the respondents to the survey, the largest number 14 (34%) were from local authorities, with eight (20%) being from within the Welsh Government. Only four respondents were from the voluntary sector and three from the private sector: none of these private sector respondents offered to take part in follow-up interviews, with two of them stating that they were not particularly aware of WIMD.

Figure 2.1: Employing Organisations for Surveyed Respondents
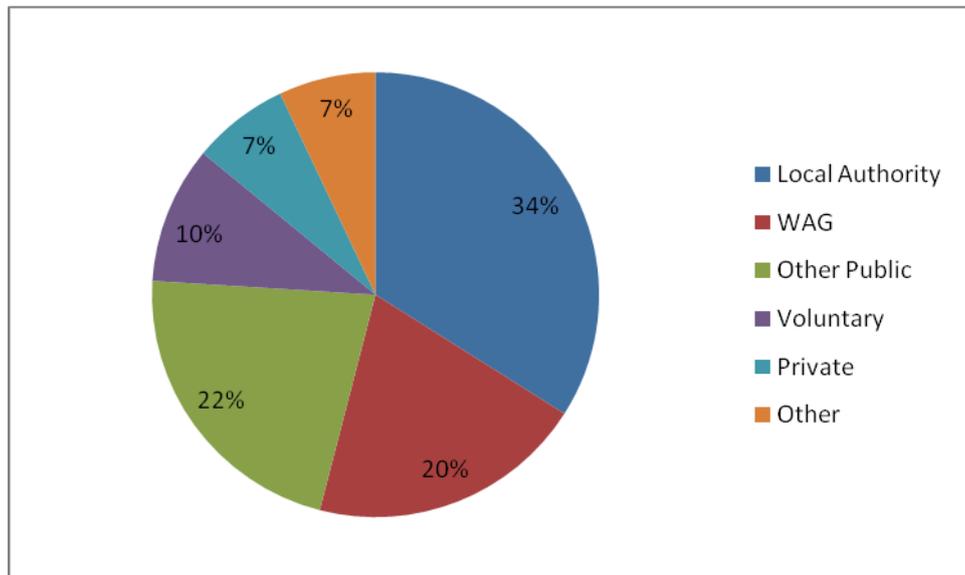
Base: 41 Repondents

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[40] Though it is accepted that, given the relatively low response rate, this may reflect a differential response rate from different groups

2.6 Perhaps unsurprisingly, more than half of the respondents to the survey regarded themselves as being in research-based (18 or 44%) or operational (seven or 17%) roles, with smaller numbers describing themselves as occupying strategic/senior management roles (eight or 19%) or policy making roles (four or 10%)[41].

2.7 Generally, survey respondents believed themselves to have a relatively high level of familiarity with WIMD (Table 2.2) – though given the somewhat low response rate there is clearly a risk of selection bias here. Just over a third of respondents stated that they were 'very familiar' with WIMD, while only one respondent said that they were 'not familiar at all' with it. Those in research-based roles were more likely to say that they were very familiar with the Index (ten of the 18 respondents) than those in strategic/senior management or policy-making roles.

Figure 2.2 Surveyed Respondents' Level of Familiarity with WIMD
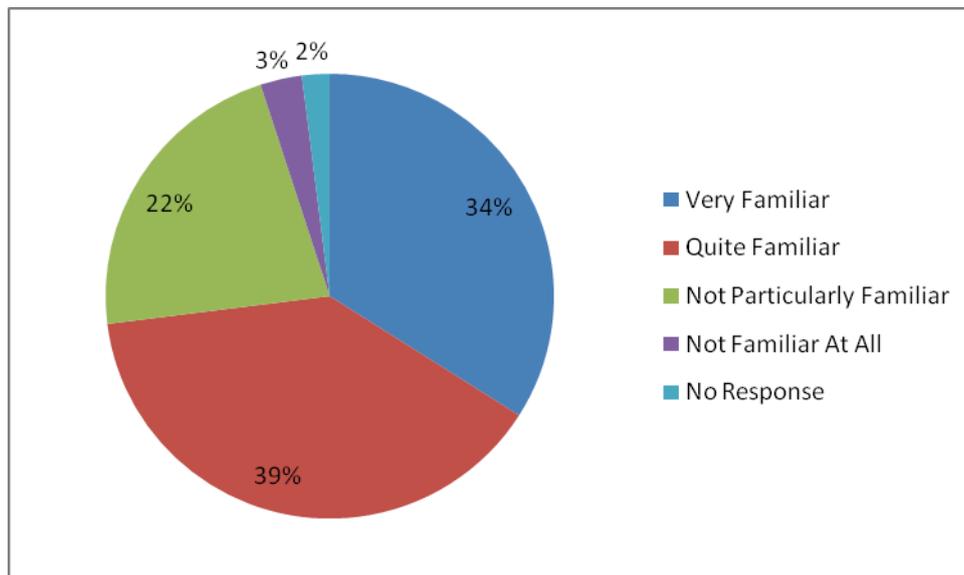
Base: 41 Respondents

2.8 It was clear both from the web survey and from the qualitative interviews that there was a much lower level of awareness of the Child Index than of the main Index.

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[41] The remaining four selected 'other' as the response to this question.

2.9   In terms of the web survey respondents, a majority said that they were either not particularly familiar (11 or 27%) or not at all familiar with the Child Index (12 or 29%) while all of those seven (17%) who said they were very familiar with it were in research-based roles. (Table 2.3)

Figure 2.3: Surveyed Respondents' Level of Familiarity with the Child Index of WIMD
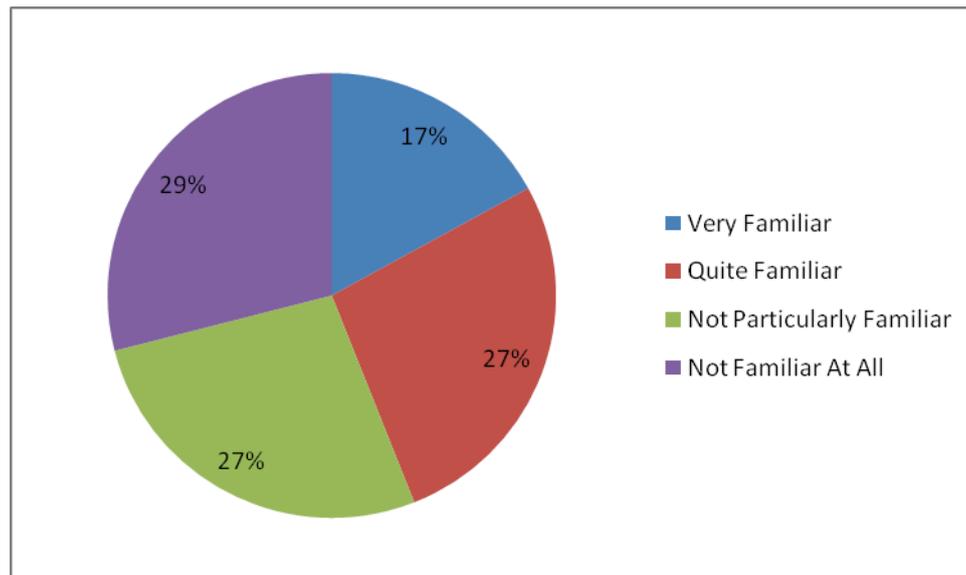
Base: 41 Respondents

2.10 Similarly, most of those who were interviewed (particularly in terms of those with policy responsibilities) said that they had relatively limited knowledge of the Child Index: this included two interviewees whose responsibilities were largely in the field of children and young people.

2.11 It is also interesting that while both the web-survey respondents and those who participated in the qualitative interviews were clearly an informed audience, in terms of the WIMD as a whole, (although less so in the case of the Child Index), levels of engagement with the information tools and techniques which were deployed by the Statistical Directorate were relatively low[42]. Again, only a minority of those interviewed appeared to have taken part in any of the consultation

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[42] It is possible that in part this was due to some respondents not having been in post at the time of the consultation events in 2008: the questionnaire did not ask specifically about the length of time respondents had held their current job.

events around the work programme. However, in some instances, this was because more junior or specialist staff had been sent or because they had no need to do so as they were engaged in other ways, for example as part of the Steering Group.

2.12 Of the web survey respondents, only a minority had taken part in any way in the consultation exercise (11 or 27%), with nearly a third (13 or 31%) saying they had not been aware of the consultation (Figure 2.4). All but one (an individual from the third sector) of those who had taken part in some way were employed either by the Welsh Government or by a local authority.

Figure 2.4: Surveyed Respondents' participation in the WIMD consultation
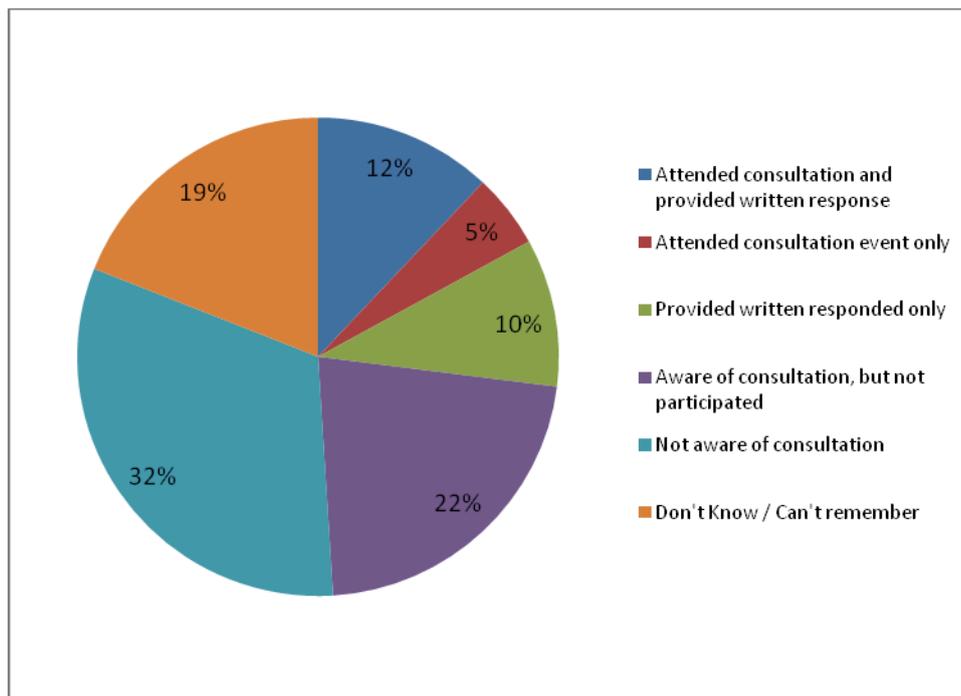
Base: 41 Respondents

2.13 Similarly, only eight of the web survey respondents (20%) said that they had taken part in any of the training and dissemination events around the launch of the WIMD 2008. Despite this, almost two thirds of respondents (27 respondents or 66%) said that they did not think there

were any specific sorts of events or training which were needed to enhance their understanding of the WIMD.

2.14 In terms of the electronic newsletter, web survey respondents generally also took quite a light touch approach. The vast majority said that they only skimmed through (23 or 56%) or rarely or never opened the newsletter attachment (10 or 24%), with only eight respondents (20%) saying that they read each edition carefully, of which three (7%) stated that they followed up the weblinks provided. Those who paid most attention to the newsletter were spread across a range of organisations but were exclusively in research-based or operational roles.

2.15 Having said this, most respondents found the various communication tools and techniques useful, with a majority of those having attended events having found them very or quite useful and a bare majority finding the newsletter very (1 respondent or 2%) or quite (20 respondents or 48%) useful. But, overall, the evidence from our survey does suggest an audience who feel that they know where to find information and are active users of the Index rather than being reliant on stimulus from the Statistical Directorate to use it.

2.16 Indeed, one of those interviewed in more depth praised the responsiveness of the Statistical Directorate in answering specific queries: 'WAG are very responsive to queries and of dealing with the statistical community'. Most of those who were interviewed qualitatively were also quick to praise the work that had been done to raise awareness and spread understanding of the WIMD.

2.17 Interestingly, however, one research interviewee thought that there was arguably too much effort put into dissemination. In reality, this interviewee argued, the direct users of WIMD were probably quite a small group of people, most of whom were well known to each other – 'it's a handful of knowledgeable people' – and had informal ways of engaging with each other.

2.2 Usefulness and Use of WIMD

2.18 Three clear messages emerged from our qualitative interviews with regard to the usefulness of WIMD:

- Firstly, that for the overwhelming majority of those interviewed, there was a need for an Index of this sort.

- Secondly that the Index (as well as the domains and indicators which underpin it) is widely used to inform and influence the way in which policies are implemented spatially in Wales.

- Thirdly, that there is a lack of clarity and consensus within the policy community (and within the Welsh Government more generally) about the extent to which spatial approaches to tackling deprivation are appropriate or desirable and consequently a nervousness about how to apply WIMD to address specific issues.

2.19 In terms of the first of these messages, the general view appeared to be that given by one interviewee that 'if it [WIMD] didn't exist, we would certainly need to invent it', given the concern of successive Welsh Governments (and the centre-left majority within the National Assembly) about identifying and tackling inequalities. Although many interviewees were aware of the technical problems and shortcomings inherent in developing WIMD or indeed any composite Index of this sort, a common view was that without such a tool, policy based on targeting would risk being determined by anecdote and political gamesmanship: 'I don't want to let people rubbish it, because without it we are stuck'.

2.20 In terms of the use of the Index, examples where WIMD plays a key role in targeting policy or resources cited (on the basis of direct knowledge by interviewees) during our fieldwork[43] included:

- The use of WIMD 2000 and 2005 in determining the Communities First areas, and more recently the use of WIMD indicators and domain data to inform decisions about prioritising activity within Communities First areas: we were told that Communities First

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[43] Both the face-to-face interviewees and the follow up telephone interviewees

staff both within the Welsh Government and in communities are encouraged to 'drill down' into the WIMD data to ensure that Communities First funded activity – not least through the Communities First Outcomes Fund – is targeted appropriately on those domains where individual communities are weakest;

- The use of WIMD to determine the allocation of police resources to individual areas: in at least one Police Authority area, WIMD is used (alongside more detailed community safety information) to develop a 'neighbourhood assessment matrix': each neighbourhood is ranked for deprivation levels and then weighted by community safety measures (anti-social behaviour and personal safety and welfare). This then produces a ranking for each neighbourhood via a traffic light system of red (top 20%), amber (the next 20%) and green (bottom 60%). The results are used to determine policing for each area - each neighbourhood is assessed using the traffic light matrix and scored as to the level of police resourcing necessary.

- The use of WIMD to inform the funding formula for Higher Education, in particular, by rewarding Higher Education Institutions for recruiting students from deprived areas as part of HEFCW's 'Reaching Wider' agenda;

- Similarly, WIMD being used to determine an additional weighting to per capita payments to Further Education, Sixth Form and Work Based Learning Providers for students from deprived areas;

- Using WIMD to develop a value added model to assess schools' performance by reference to their catchment;

- The use of WIMD 2000 (in combination with other indicators, notably eligibility for free school meals) to determine the original targeting of the Flying Start initiative;

- The use of WIMD and the Child Index to inform the Child Poverty Strategy, as part of the broader evidence base of data and indicators contained within the Children and Young Peoples' Monitor.

2.21 Turning to the more fundamental issue of the appropriateness of spatial targeting and the adequacy of WIMD to enable this, a majority of the policy interviewees (mostly in policy functions and outside of the Department of Social Justice and Local Government) expressed some reservations about spatial targeting based on WIMD as a way of tackling the key policy challenges which they faced within their roles. One interviewee argued that 'there's a massive risk that this [WIMD] could skew policy making' by appearing (despite the caveats within the guidance) to offer a really robust picture of where deprived individuals were located. Another interviewee thought that many of her colleagues in Welsh Government departments assumed that by targeting the most deprived areas as shown by WIMD you could automatically address any particular form of deprivation in an appropriate way without analysing in any more profound way the distribution of the targeted type of deprivation.

2.22 At the most fundamental level, at least five interviewees argued that Welsh Government policy was generally based on the principle of universal services, or targeting on the basis of individual need, and that this fitted poorly with an approach where support was spatially determined or rationed.

2.23 While it was accepted that in pragmatic terms targeting certain interventions on the most deprived areas might be the most efficient way of reaching a relatively large proportion of the population ('getting most bangs for your buck'), this, it was argued that this did not necessarily fit with social justice policy goals. Thus one interviewee argued that:

> 'This is why WIMD is a double edged weapon. You can get to the most people in the shortest time…at the least cost but there are all these people over here that you are really going to [annoy], and equally their need is real, it's not just perceived, and in some ways its more intense because it's more difficult to address'

2.24 Another interviewee pointed to work recently done on problem families in Bridgend, using administrative data to identify the 200 families which placed the most intense demands on a range of public services including social services, educational welfare and police and probation services. This had found that the vast majority of these 200 families were living in communities along the M4 corridor, which did not score highly on WIMD, and attributed this to the 'self-policing' nature of the statistically more deprived Valleys communities which basically forced out really dysfunctional families into the more anonymous settlements along the M4. In this case, focusing family services on the statistically most deprived communities would miss those most in need of support.

2.25 While by no means all interviewees shared these views, more than half of interviewees agreed that there remained a significant risk of WIMD being misunderstood or misapplied. Thus one interviewee argued that WIMD was conceptually and empirically complex and prone to be misunderstood: this interviewee argued that ideally the Index should be based on information about individuals rather than areas. Another interviewee thought there needed to be a much stronger emphasis on what the underlying absolute values were showing rather than the relativities which were the headline of the Index. Indeed, this interviewee thought there was a debate to be had over whether a combined index was in fact meaningful, given that it did not show whether individuals were multiply deprived, but just that there were concentrations of differently deprived individuals in the same spatial area.

2.26 In particular, two interviewees (while coming from very contrasting positions on the relative importance of rurality in terms of deprivation) questioned the inclusion of the 'access to services' domain as part of WIMD, with one arguing that it would be best to use this rather as a cross-cutting element against which WIMD could be cross-referred. (We address other perceived limitations to usefulness in Section 2.3 below).

2.27 These concerns appeared to exist largely within the Welsh Government, perhaps reflecting a greater tendency (or perceived tendency) for policy makers to give a uniquely important role to WIMD in terms of providing a picture of local circumstances. Other bodies, such as police authorities and local government, while making often making extensive use of both the Index and the underlying data, nevertheless appeared more likely to use it in combination with other data and intelligence (sometimes anecdotal), perhaps because of their more direct experience of the situation 'on the ground'. Thus one local government interviewee stressed that WIMD was useful mainly to 'sense check the findings of some of our community consultation work'.

2.28 While the web-based survey did not explore except in headline terms the perceived usefulness and actual use made of WIMD, its results largely confirm the view that WIMD is widely used – often in conjunction with other data and information sources - within the public sector both to target initiatives and to inform a wide range of other activities.

2.29 Most survey respondents found WIMD useful in terms of their work. (Figure 2.5). Sixteen respondents (39 per cent) said that WIMD was 'very useful' and 12 (29 per cent) said it was 'quite useful'. In only three cases did respondents state that WIMD was 'of no direct use' (with the remaining ten or 24% saying it was 'of limited use'). Breakdowns by work role suggest that researchers tend to find WIMD most useful.

Figure 2.5: Usefulness of WIMD Amongst Surveyed Respondents
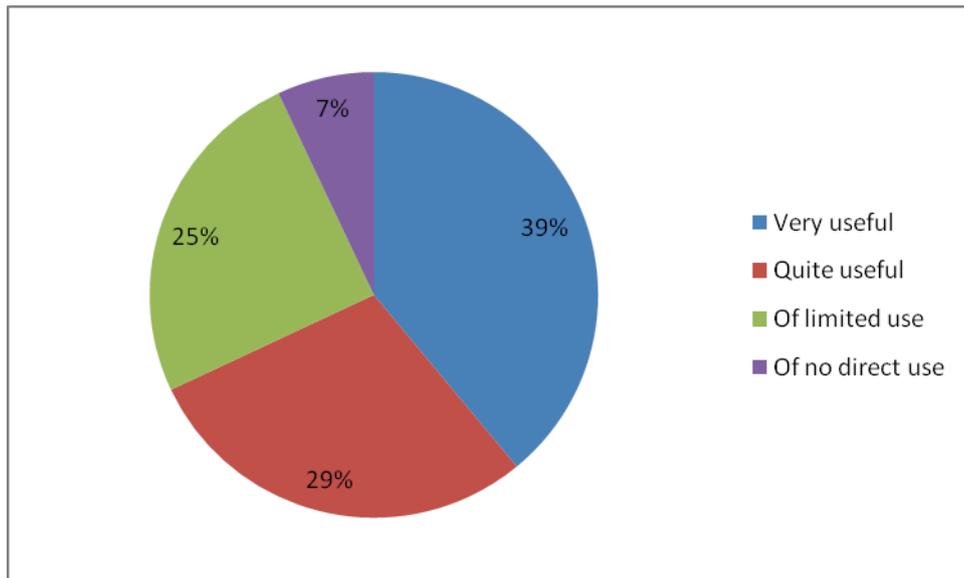
Base: 41 Respondents

2.30 When asked which elements of WIMD they found most useful, respondents gave a variety of answers but it was clear that most of those responding to this open question (24 or 85% of those asked[44]) used not only the overall index but also the domain rankings and the indicators. Some typical comments here were:

'The main indices, individual domain ranks (mainly employment and income), and source data all have significant value in my role' (Welsh Government Research Officer)

'No specific element is more useful - they are relevant for different aspects of work so it is sometimes useful to consider them individually whereas other times, it is useful to look at each domain separately' (Local Authority Policy Officer)

'Quite useful, not so much the overall index, but rather the individual domains' (Third Sector Operational Officer)

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[44] This question was asked only of those respondents who said that the Index was 'very useful' or 'quite useful' to them.

2.31 The majority of web survey respondents also thought that the usefulness of WIMD had increased over time (10 or 24% of respondents) or stayed broadly the same (19 or 46%), with only one respondent (2%) believing its usefulness had decreased over time.[45] Those believing WIMD had become more useful generally attributed this to the release of additional data on the individual domains and indicators (e.g. 'better release of individual indicator results allowing a more in depth analysis rather than the very blunt instrument of the rankings and the combined Index') and to the increasingly wide acceptance of WIMD within the policy community (e.g. 'it's become recognised as a way of doing things').

2.32 Perhaps unsurprisingly, since many of the web survey respondents were in research-based rather than policy-making functions, some 41% (17) of all respondents were unable to answer the question as to the extent to which WIMD had determined or influenced the allocation of funding/resources by their organisation. Of the remainder, a majority responded that WIMD was used in this way (Table 2.6).

Figure 2.6: Extent to which WIMD has influenced funding allocations within organisations
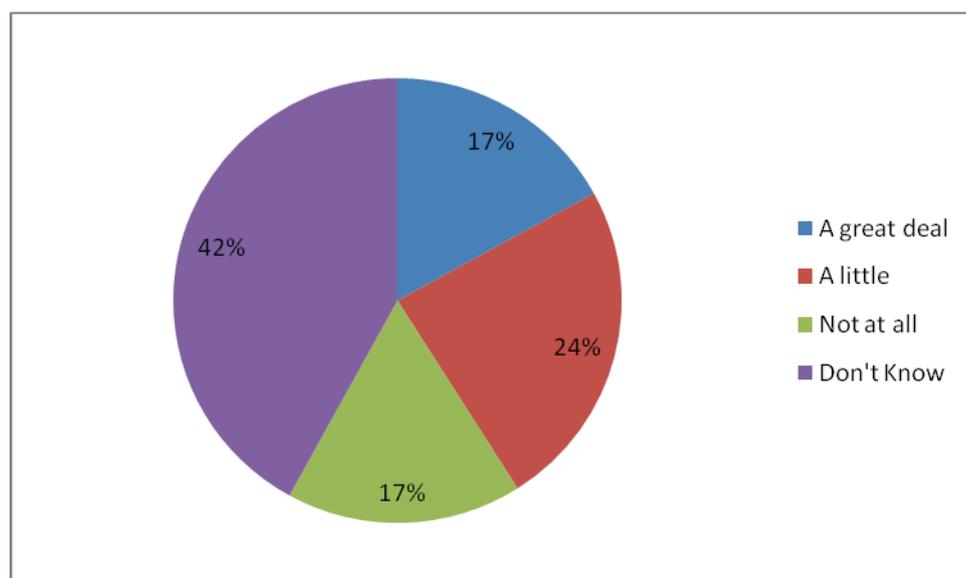
Base: 41 Respondents

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[45] The remaining respondents answered 'don't know' to this question.

2.33 Fourteen respondents answered the open question requesting details of the type of budgets that were influenced by WIMD and in a small number of cases were able to estimate of the scale of resources influenced. These were:

- Delegated SEN budget for schools – several million annually (Local Authority Senior Manager);

- Adult service commissioning - £15 million (Local Authority Senior Manager);

- Many different projects, from small scale youth outreach programmes to large scale housing renewal initiatives (Local Authority Research Officer);

- Deprivation grant of £22 million as part of the local government settlement for unitary authorities in Wales (Welsh Government Operational Officer);

- The entire Communities First budget (Welsh Government Policy Maker);

- Assisted in decisions about the deployment of neighbourhood police officers. (Police Authority Research Officer).

2.34 Follow up telephone interviewees perceived the WIMD to be a valuable resource ('I am not aware of other tools that do something similar') and highlighted the use made of WIMD within Local Authorities to produce ward profiles, to support funding bids, to provide internal briefings and for 'evidencing need'. The WIMD was described as being 'a well branded product', as 'summarising large complex datasets very well', as 'a worthwhile tool' and 'convenient'. One respondent stated that the 'access to services' domain of WIMD was particularly useful for rural areas.

2.3   Impact on Policy and Practice: Facilitating Factors and Barriers

2.35 We have already considered the wide range of examples given by qualitative interviewees and respondents to the web-survey of policy interventions where either the overall intervention or the allocation of

resources is shaped or informed by WIMD. These show that WIMD is used quite widely, and not just within the Social Justice and Local Government Department, which might be expected to have the most active engagement with issues relating to deprivation.

2.36 Of course, the single most widely cited impact of WIMD is on the shaping of Communities First – and it is important to note that Communities First has also to some extent acted as a 'transmission mechanism' for WIMD, for example, with the Higher Education 'Reaching Wider' Partnerships being mandated to concentrate their work on Communities First areas since these by definition were to be regarded as the most deprived areas. The increasing sophistication of the use of the WIMD data – to help inform priority setting within the Communities First Programme as well as the spatial targeting of the initiative as a whole – appears to be an example of the way in which the understanding of how to use WIMD appropriately has increased over time.

2.37 Besides the issue of allocation of funding or resources, the web survey also asked respondents explicitly as to whether they believed that WIMD had led to any changes in policy or practice in their organisation. Again, many respondents – 15 (or 36%) were unable to respond (these were predominantly respondents from local government, or 'other public bodies'). Of those that were able to respond, 16 (39 per cent) thought WIMD had impacted on policy or practice, with ten (24%) responding that it had not had any impact. Examples which were identified in response to a follow up question were, however, mostly quite general and linked to operational issues, for example :
- 'Communities First eligibility and further funds allocated to Communities First areas' (Welsh Government Research Officer)
- 'Benchmarking of school performance. Used in formula for resource allocation such as educational welfare officers and behaviour support team' (Local Authority Operational Officer)

- 'Redeployment of officers and resources' (Police Authority Research Officer)
- 'Funding applications made to certain funding pots with limited criteria in relation to deprived areas'. (Local Authority Researcher)

2.38 In parallel with the generally low profile of the Child Index, no more than four of those who participated in qualitative interviews (a minority even excluding those with no direct involvement with children and families issues) were able to identify specific ways in which the Child Index had thus far had an impact. While it informed the Child Poverty Strategy, those most closely involved were keen to emphasise that it was only one of a series of data sources which were used in developing and implementing the Strategy:

> 'I think part of the issue is WIMD doesn't necessarily pick up on the indicators that we are particularly keen on. So when it comes to things like narrowing gaps, we want to look at educational attainment specifically, at the different key stages and to explore the inequalities that currently exist. So, not all of the indicators we're interested in are in WIMD'.

2.39 Similarly, only five (or 12%) of the web-based survey respondents believed that the Child Index had influenced the allocation of funding/resources within their organisation (with only one of these responding that it had influenced this 'a great deal') while only four (10%) said that it had led to any changes in policy and practice.

2.40 In terms of factors facilitating the impact of the main Index, qualitative interviewees highlighted:
- the political driver in terms of the clear commitment of successive Welsh Governments to the social justice agenda, with a spatially targeted initiative, Communities First, being at the heart of this;
- the quality of the information materials available from the Statistical Directorate, including the strong visual presentation of data, which was particularly useful for briefing Ministers and other

key decision makers (though this did not mean that there was no criticism – see below) and the willingness of key staff to take time to respond to respond to questions and queries;

- the increased availability as time had gone on of detailed data related to the indicators and the domains underpinning the Index. Many interviewees stressed that the domain rankings and the indicators were of more practical use to them than the overall ranking.

2.41 As we have seen, these same points were broadly reflected in some of the comments made by web survey respondents on the most useful elements of the Index, in the views of the newsletter and in the broadly positive view of the minority of survey respondents who had attended events organised by the WIMD team.

2.42 Turning to barriers, the qualitative interviewees[46] raised a series of issues and concerns which in their view either limited – or in some cases should limit – the impact of WIMD on policy and practice.

2.43 We have already seen that a number of the interviewees from within the Welsh Government – both policy officials and researchers – had significant concerns about the appropriateness of using WIMD as a way, in particular, of targeting funding on specific spatial areas rather than targeting individuals in need. Thus, two research interviewees worried that many policy colleagues did not appear to appreciate that the distribution of LSOAs was essentially an S-curve (where differences in the rankings between one area and the next were relatively great for the most and least deprived areas but were negligible towards the middle of the distribution) and tended to pick cut-off points for spatial targeting on the flattest point of the curve, which made them extremely arbitrary.

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[46] Including those follow up interviews with respondents to the web-survey

2.44 Indeed, one policy interviewee argued that there was a need for specific guidance to be issued to say 'do not use this to allocate funding'. This interviewee also argued strongly that certain 'deprivation' indicators had very different meanings in different spatial contexts: whereas having two cars might be an indicator of prosperity in a household in an urban area, this was not the case in a rural area where it could just be 'an indicator that there isn't a bus'[47].

2.45 Another interviewee, talking about Flying Start, argued that the decision to target this initiative spatially (drawing largely on WIMD) meant that there was a constant risk of those in genuine need being squeezed out by more assertive middle class families (who existed even in these neighbourhoods) since provision was non means-tested and was available to any parent living within the catchment. Since the Programme provided 2.5 hours of free childcare per week, this had a material value to families where both parents worked, whereas the real targets of the intervention who were strongly likely to be economically inactive were less easily attracted to this.

2.46 Both of these interviewees also argued that the small spatial scale of LSOAs was also potentially problematic, particularly in terms of identifying suitable locations for capital investments to service deprived populations, with the first arguing that it was not possible to undertake regeneration by concentrating investment on 'blackspots… you need to work with the grey spots, where opportunities can be generated' and the second arguing that the size of LSOAs meant that the social composition could change quite rapidly, with, for example, the construction of a relatively modest development of 'executive housing' in a community.

2.47 Indeed, while there was general support for WIMD being built up from LSOA level, almost half of the qualitative interviewees suggested spatial scale was a problem, largely because of the very clear guidance that

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[47] In reality, car ownership is not used in WIMD. But the interviewee used this as an example.

WIMD rankings could not be aggregated. Thus a third interviewee, talking about Communities First argued that LSOAs were just too small as a basis for determining targeting and did not relate to natural communities which people identified, while a further interviewee argued for the importance for having data about relative deprivation available at a range of spatial levels:

> 'I think it's important to recognise that you need [information] at all-Wales [level], you need local authority [level], you need [it at] lower than that because different people will use it in different ways'

2.48 Of course, the question of aggregation is intended to be addressed by the recent publication of underlying indicator data aggregated at different spatial levels.

2.49 As well as the question of the spatial level (or levels) at which the Index operated, a number of interviewees (at least four) also had concerns about the lack of any longitudinal element to the Index: they perceived that changes to its composition meant it was impossible to examine whether changes to an area's ranking over time reflected real change on the ground, at least in the relative position of different areas. Again, in this context, the publication of the underlying data should be helpful, while the fact that the 2011 WIMD will represent an updating of the data using, so far as possible, the same indicators as WIMD 2008, rather than a new Index, will be an opportunity to test out with users the comparative advantages of retaining the same methodology.

2.50 A number of interviewees (at least four) also argued that the fact that WIMD was not comparable with parallel indices in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland was a limitation (though we understand work is ongoing with Office for National Statistics on this issue).

2.51 Interviewees also drew attention to a number of weaknesses in the underlying data, notably in respect of housing which they argued

reduced the usefulness of the Index: it was recognised however that the WIMD team were well aware of these problems. One interviewee felt that the consultative process employed in developing WIMD over the last year had resulted in relatively arbitrary weightings being applied and therefore 'capture by lobby groups'[48].

2.52 As well as what might be thought of as fundamental questions of principle over the role of spatial as opposed to individual targeting and the technical issues over what the Index can and cannot do, qualitative interviewees also stressed continued issues over the ability to communicate clearly to non-specialists the ways in which WIMD should and should not be used as impeding its impact.

2.53 To a large extent, many of the interviewees attributed this to the inherent complexity of the subject, on the one hand, and to the failure of policy officers in the Welsh Government to take advantage of the information materials which were available on the other:

> 'there's lots of detailed guidance – the problem is people don't read it'

2.54 Nevertheless, both this interviewee and others thought that there must be some way of communicating even more simply the key messages about WIMD to a generalist audience. Typical comments here were:

> 'there's still scope to simplify the message… to produce an " idiot's guide" of dos and don'ts'

> 'there needs to be much more emphasis on statisticians being able to translate things into everyday language – how can we use WIMD and how can we apply it? It should be a tool we use to inform our planning and I don't think that has ever come across'

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[48] In practice, however, the weightings for WIMD have been discussed extensively within the Steering Group. See http://new.wales.gov.uk/topics/statistics/theme/wimd/governance/board/101022/?lang=en ?

'a lot of it is about appropriate advice in the document, and almost a briefing note, a how to use it guide… for senior officers, for Ministers, and for various organisations outside that might be using it as a judgement tool… So that we don't get this confusion'.

2.55 While other specific suggestions were less forthcoming, two ideas which were put forward were the importance of ensuring that analytical staff – particularly statisticians - who were assigned to particular departments themselves took ownership of WIMD, rather than seeing it largely as a matter for the WIMD team; and, secondly, the need to consider the core language and terminology (with one interviewee suggesting that neither of the terms WIMD nor LSOA were examples of terminology which made sense to ordinary people).

2.56 Finally, a number of interviewees (at least three) argued that the impact of WIMD could be more effectively assured if there was a stronger control on the way it was used (and misused). Thus one policy interviewee argued that there was a need to toughen up the extent to which the appropriateness of its use was policed by research and analytical services:

'if statistics are misrepresented by Ministers we get a formal letter from the Statistics Authority but there's not the same come back on WIMD'.

2.57 This was echoed by another interviewee who felt that Statistical colleagues were sometimes too supportive to people using the data and not sufficiently robust in pointing out where it was being used inappropriately.

2.58 While the web-based survey does not offer such in-depth evidence as that provided by the qualitative data, respondents did generally highlight a range of similar issues with regards to barriers to impact. Figure 2.6 shows the response to this question (which invited respondents to select

as many of the statements shown as they thought applied). Only six respondents (15 per cent) felt that there were no barriers to the impact of WIMD on policy and/or practice, with the most frequently identified barrier being 'lack of knowledge or understanding of WIMD'. Just under one quarter of respondents (10) agreed with the statement that 'the services we deliver are universal, not targeted just on deprived people' represented a barrier.

2.59 This was also reflected in two of the specific comments made about 'other' barriers:

> 'There is a lack of understanding of what WIMD can reasonably be expected to do despite lots of information on the subject. Also there is more need for debate on when targeting is sensible and when it isn't' (Welsh Government Research Officer)

> 'That rigid targeting on most deprived areas would miss the very many deprived people who live in areas that are not among the most deprived. (Less a barrier than a sensible argument.)' (Welsh Government Policy Officer).

Figure 2.6: Barriers restricting greater use of WIMD to make changes to policy and practice
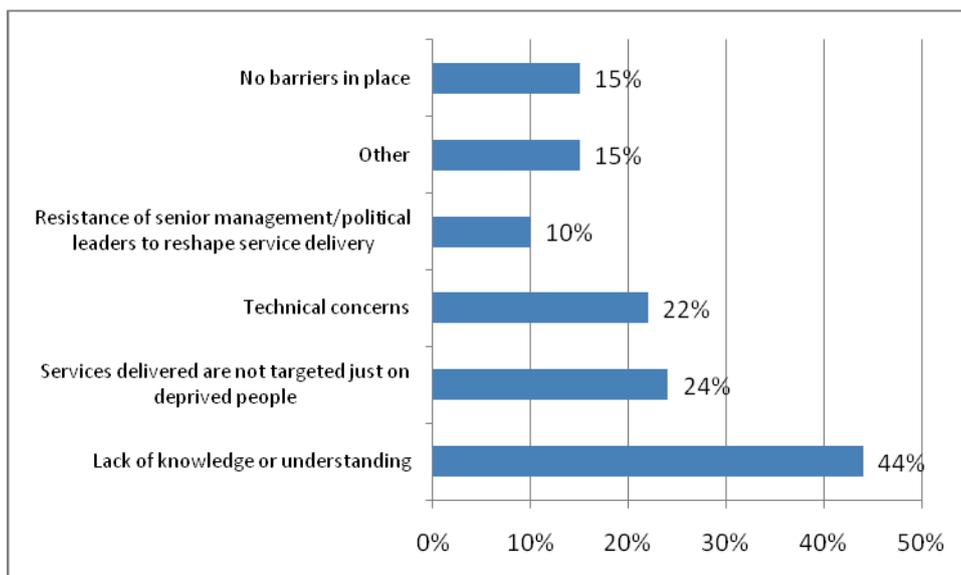
Base: 41 Respondents

2.60 In terms of addressing the question of the 'lack of knowledge or understanding of WIMD', web-survey respondents made a number of suggestions both for making the newsletter more useful and for training and events.

2.61 The more specific comments from the web-survey on potential improvements to the newsletter included:

- 'Concise summaries linking to main articles as there is a lot of information flying about and very little time to read it!' (Local Authority Research Officer)

- '…narrative analysis to accompany figures, together with how the evidence will be used to influence policy direction and performance' (Private Sector Senior Manager)

- 'More user friendly, e.g. less terminology, [using] photos, etc. Feels more like an internal newsletter than public facing one' (Other Public Sector Operational Officer)

2.62 Specific types of event or training which respondents felt would enhance their understanding and use of WIMD and the Child Index, included:

- general training on the use and interpretation of the data (four respondents);

- technical training to provide detailed descriptions of each indicator (two respondents);

- examples of how WIMD has been used by different agencies to plan policies and allocate resources (two respondents); and

- ' A round table debates/discussions on a regional basis with stakeholders drawn from a range of organisations to help inform, advise and raise awareness of issues appertaining to deprivation (not only representation from deprived communities) as there is a perception that deprivation relates only to economic poverty…' (one respondent – Third Sector Senior Manager).

3 Conclusions: Maximising the future impact of WIMD

3.1   It is clear from our – albeit limited – fieldwork that WIMD is generally well known and used relatively widely within the Welsh Government and in other parts of the public sector to inform the development of public policy and to increase understanding of social conditions within local areas.

3.2   Overall, there is a strong appreciation for the professionalism with which it is compiled and disseminated and a view that it is an indispensable tool, even by those who worry that it may sometimes be used as a rather blunt instrument, given the inevitable limitations of any composite Index.

3.3   Many of the users of the Index are clearly relatively sophisticated in that they value the progressively increased access to the underlying domain and indicator data which has been made available by the Statistical Directorate. The recent publication of additional indicator data, aggregated at different spatial levels should go a considerable way to addressing some of the concerns of some users over the fact that the Index and Domain rankings are available only at LSOA level and cannot be aggregated (though the fact that the Index is based on LSOAs is generally welcomed). Even in the context of public spending cuts, it will be important to continue to provide as much of the underlying data to users as is possible.

3.4   The forthcoming publication of WIMD 2011 will also offer an opportunity to consider the case for greater stability in the way in which the Index is constructed. Many of those we interviewed suggested that changes in rankings between the different WIMDs published since 2000 could simply reflect changes in methodology rather than objective changes on the ground and argued that this reduced the Index's

usefulness to users (though equally, interviewees were quick to point out a number of changes which ought to be made to the composition in future). The fact that the Index to be published this August will use new data but will be constructed on the same basis as WIMD 2008 should allow the Statistical Directorate to explore more fully with users (not least through the forthcoming consultation about the WIMD 2013) whether this has advantages which outweighs the disadvantages of not making use of new or different data sources which may become available.

3.5   The evidence from the fieldwork about the effectiveness of the information tools and techniques developed by the WIMD team is perhaps less clear cut. Though a bare majority of the web-survey respondents who used the electronic newsletter thought it was useful, only a small minority appeared to pay great attention to it, while relatively few of this generally well informed group (or of those we interviewed) had taken part in the consultation event or exercise or in the briefings which were held at the time of the publication of WIMD 2008. At the same time, the findings suggest there is considerable scope for better knowledge and understanding of WIMD. While it is difficult to draw definitive conclusions from this about the best information and communication strategy, we believe that:

- the main focus of the communication effort around the publication of WIMD 2011 should be on ensuring that there is very clear core guidance materials on how to use the Index available on the WIMD website: in particular there might be scope for simplifying what are currently a series of 'Q and As' and using non-technical language wherever possible;
- it is essential to ensure that other Statistical Directorate staff working on specific policy areas are both briefed and have ownership of the Index, so that they can act as intermediaries in cascading knowledge and understanding to policy colleagues;

- rather than holding generic dissemination events, there is a case for proactive targeting of the policy divisions within the Welsh Government which are seen as most likely to use (or potentially misuse) the Index and offer targeted briefings to these staff (while continuing to respond to any specific requests which are forthcoming for other subject-specific briefings);
- the electronic newsletter is probably a relatively low priority, given the relatively modest use made of it.

3.6   By contrast to the main Index, knowledge of the Child Index seems quite poor, though this in part almost certainly reflects the fact that it is a much more recent construct. There needs to be a particular effort to raise awareness of the Child Index with relevant actual and potential users within and outside the Welsh Government. This should include a much clearer profile for the Child Index on the WIMD web pages (where little information appears to be currently available).

3.7   Our fieldwork also suggested that there was a very varied picture in terms of the access of organisations to the statistical skills needed to make best use of WIMD. Welsh Government departments and larger local authorities tend to have their own specialist statisticians; smaller local authorities, voluntary and community sector organisations typically do not. The WIMD team has been widely praised for the support it provides, but resources are limited and they cannot be expected to get involved in every detailed project involving WIMD. One possibility may be to create a fund, in conjunction with ESRC and/or HEFCW to enable smaller organisations to work with academic institutions on the analysis of WIMD data, for example through research student projects.

3.8   Underlying the issues of the way in which WIMD is developed and disseminated, the research has also highlighted a clear lack of clarity or consensus about the role of spatial targeting in policy delivery

amongst officials within the Welsh Government. To some extent, it appears that WIMD is being applied in something of a policy vacuum, which means that it risks being expected to carry more weight in terms of policy implementation than is reasonable. With resources becoming more limited, there is a risk that temptation may exist to use spatial targeting as a way of reducing the costs of public service delivery, even where this might be thought inappropriate.

3.9   While we recognise that this is not something which research staff can themselves readily address, we believe that there is a need for a more explicit debate within the Welsh Government, leading to clear guidelines about where spatial targeting is seen as appropriate and the role of WIMD as a tool to inform decisions about such targeting. Decisions about the future of Communities First may offer an opportunity to start this debate.

3.10   We also believe that, in policy terms, there may be a case for Welsh Government Departments using WIMD more iteratively with other data sources – ones specific to the policy area, or even more qualitative information from those involved in service delivery – than may be the case at present, as other public sector organisations do.

3.11   Finally, particularly in the context of greater clarity about overarching policy with regard to spatial targeting, there may be a case for stronger policing, to ensure that WIMD is not used inappropriately – though obviously, it is important not to decrease use of the Index by becoming overly bureaucratic. There may need to be a clearer requirement that where WIMD is used to justify policy changes or statements, for example being cited in advice to Ministers, the Statistical Directorate is automatically asked to comment.

Annex 2: Learning to Improve Case Study

1. Introduction

1.1 Purpose of the Report

1.1 Old Bell 3 and Consulting Inplace were commissioned by the Welsh Government in January 2011 to undertake a small study evaluating the impact of research within the Welsh Government.

1.2 The context for the research was the recognition that the Welsh Government invests considerable resources in research (both that undertaken by its own analysts and that commissioned from external researchers) and that the challenging environment for public sector spending requires close consideration of ways in which the effectiveness and impact of this research can be maximised.

1.3 The overarching aims of the study were to:
- 'Evaluate the impact of two research projects managed by the Welsh Assembly Government[49] as case studies. (Namely, The Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation and Learning to Improve Evaluation)
- Draw out lessons to support and develop the use of research managed by the Welsh Assembly Government to ensure research funding is efficiently spent and has the maximum impact'.

1.4 For each of the case studies, the objectives were to:
- 'Identify who the user communities for the research findings are
- Identify how the user communities are made aware of the research
- Identify the ways in which the user communities use the research findings, and the extent to which they use them
- Describe the extent to which the studies have impacted on policy and practice

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[49] The former name for the Welsh Government

- Assess the extent to which the studies have impacted on policy and practice, highlighting where studies could have made more impact and good practices
- Describe the process through which any identified impact was generated, including:
  - how and why any impact was generated
  - mechanisms that facilitated impact of the studies
  - barriers to the studies making an impact
- Draw out learning points from the case studies that can assist researchers in ensuring that research is used widely and has maximum impact.'

1.5 The intention was that the research would be qualitative, based largely on face-to-face interviews with key stakeholders and users of the research products.

1.6 This report is one of two case-study reports and considers Learning to Improve. A parallel report presents our findings in respect of the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation case-study and a short final report draws together some of the conclusions from the two case-studies.

1.2 Learning To Improve

1.7 The Welsh Government's 2007 policy statement *A Shared Responsibility*[50] set out its local government policy for the period from 2007 to 2011. Building on the *Making the Connections* strategy and Welsh Government's response[51] to the Beecham review,[52] the policy statement emphasises the importance of:

- Putting the citizen at the centre of policy and delivery (or citizen engagement).

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[50] WAG (March 2007), *A Shared Responsibility: Local government's contribution to improving people's lives* - A policy statement from the Welsh Assembly Government
[51] WAG (November 2006), *Making the Connections - Delivering Beyond Boundaries, Transforming Public Services in Wales.*
[52] Beecham, J., Morgan, G., Webb, A., Martin, S. (2006), *Beyond Boundaries, Citizen-Centred Local Services for Wales,* Report to the Welsh Assembly Government.

- Collaboration between public service providers (including working between local authorities across local government boundaries and partnership with other service providers).

- Effective working between local and central government.

1.8   These three themes are the focus of a long term independent (and largely formative) evaluation of the Welsh Government's Local Government Policy, known as Learning to Improve. The evaluation was commissioned in 2008, after a feasibility study which was carried out by the Centre for Regional and Local Government Research within Cardiff University Business School.

1.9   After a public tender, the contract was awarded to the Centre in partnership with Shared Intelligence, an independent organisation specialising in research into effective local governance and capacity building among local authorities and related stakeholders. The Cardiff University team of four researchers was to lead the research process while a learning and dissemination programme, led by Shared Intelligence, was intended to be a two-way process throughout the evaluation, involving a series of learning events aimed at engaging Welsh Government officials, local authority councillors and officers, and representatives of other public service providers.

1.10   Learning to Improve involves a four year programme of work (expected to conclude in mid 2012) at a cost of around £500,000 which aims to provide ongoing feedback to policy makers to help ensure that policy is 'soundly conceived, responsive, well implemented, and effective'[53]. Learning to Improve is also intended to contribute to the development of a new statement for local government policy and has already informed the development of the 'New Understanding policy statement, released in late 2009[54].

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[53] Invitation to Tender Specification
[54] A New Understanding Between the Welsh Assembly Government and Local Government in Wales, November 2009. This joint statement by the Welsh Government and the Welsh Local

1.11   The specific objectives of Learning to Improve are to analyse:

- The way in which local government policy is developed and communicated.
- How policy is delivered.
- The impacts and outcomes that policy has on the ground.

1.12   The study adopts a multi-method approach whereby the evaluation research (evidence gathering) aspect of the study, led by the Cardiff team utilises primary and secondary research methods, drawing on data from four key sources:

- Existing data sets, reports, and policy documents.
- A repeated All Wales survey - baseline completed in 2009 and a follow-up survey planned for 2011. The surveys are multi-respondent surveys targeted at senior officers and councillors from all 22 unitary authorities across Wales.
- In depth, multi-method case studies focused on the three key themes of the Welsh Government local government policy (citizen engagement, collaboration and central-local relations) and around issues of wider interest and importance.
- In-depth interviews with policy makers and other key national stakeholders as a means of exploring the survey findings from a range of perspectives.

1.13   The first phase of the evaluation comprised a baseline survey of local authority officials undertaken between November 2008 and March 2009 and interviews with Welsh Government and local government stakeholders. This resulted in the First Interim Report[55] of the evaluation, published in July 2009 and which drew conclusions in terms

Government Association set out to explain 'how we will work together to deliver excellent services to our citizens.
[55] Guarneros-Meza, V., Downe, J., Entwistle, T. and Martin, S. (July 2009), *Learning to Improve: An Independent Assessment of the Welsh Assembly Government's Policy for Local Government,* Centre for Local & Regional Government Research, Cardiff Business School.

of the way in which the Welsh Government's local government policy was developed, communicated and delivered on the ground.

1.14   The findings of the Interim Report were disseminated through a series of two-hour workshops targeted at middle managers within the Welsh Government, linked to the Leadership Network of senior officials which are organised by the Welsh Government learning and development team. In addition, research team members and lead Welsh Government officials made a number of presentations to other civil service audiences. For example, the Welsh Government project manager and the lead official from the local government division took the findings to the Welsh Government Business Group, which is chaired by the Permanent Secretary. In January 2011, the findings were presented to the Minister for Local Government, who expressed positive interest and asked to be kept in touch with the research.

1.15   The research team has been in regular contact with the key local government organisations and a small number of presentations of the interim report findings were made to local government audiences. These included a session for Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE), led by the project director, and a presentation to the four group leaders in the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA).

1.16   The second phase involves a series of four in-depth case studies of different policy areas, which were carefully selected to ensure maximum relevance to policy makers and to ensure that they were engaging, relevant and had high impact. The case study research was undertaken throughout much of 2009 and 2010 and gathered evidence through surveys, focus groups, and in-depth interviews. The four case study initiatives are:
- Communities First in Caerphilly and Rhonda Cynon Taf;

- school modernisation in Powys (involving an examination of the primary school reorganisation process in two catchment areas);
- the four regional transport consortia;
- Local Service Boards (LSBs), looking in detail at four LSB projects in three Local Authority areas.

1.17 The case-studies have been completed and will inform a second interim report which is due to be published in Summer 2011. This is also expected to be the focus for a series of learning and dissemination events.

1.18 The final phase is expected to involve a further four case-studies[56], a second survey of senior local government officers and interviews with key stakeholders within both the Welsh Government and local government. A final report will be published in 2012.

1.19 The project is overseen by a Steering Group, chaired by the lead officer within Social Research Division, which comprises representatives from the WLGA and SOLACE as well as Welsh Government officials.

1.3   Research methods

1.20 This study was carried out over a period of two months (March-April 2011).

1.21 The research involved:
- A brief review of background material on Learning to Improve;
- Face-to-face interviews (using the topic guide at Appendix 1) with:
  - Staff within the Social Research Division and the Department for Social Justice and Local Government with lead responsibility for the evaluation;

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[56] Regional partnership working in North Wales; schools re-organisation in Ceredigion; the role of LSB lead officials; and the development and implementation of the 2009 Local Government Measure.

- o Key staff within the two contractors delivering Learning to Improve;

- o Two local government representatives who are members of the Steering Group;

- o Five other Welsh Government staff with knowledge of the Evaluation, two of whom were members of the Steering Group;

- o Short discussions with a further eight Welsh Government staff (five of them in policy roles and three in research and analytical roles) who might have been expected to have some knowledge of Learning to Improve, but who were unable to speak in any depth about it.[57]

1.22   As the research was taking place towards the end of a long period since the publication of the first interim report some time in July 2009, it proved difficult to identify a broader cohort of stakeholders able to speak with any authority about their views of the actual and potential impact of Learning to Improve. Thus, for example, we were informed by both Welsh Government staff and the local government representatives on the Steering Group that there would be no senior officers from individual local authorities who would be in a position to comment because they were not sufficiently aware of the research at this stage in the project's implementation. We were also advised that it would not be appropriate to seek to interview local authority and other representatives who had been engaged with the case study research, because they would have only a limited view of the overall shape of the project as a whole.

1.23   We are therefore conscious that our findings are based on a narrow range of interviewees, primarily from within the Welsh Government, potentially giving disproportionate weight to the views of a small number of individual informants. Moreover, we are aware that the

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[57] These were all individuals who were also interviewed in the context of the other case study about the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation

perceptions and views of Learning to Improve even of those interviewed could be quite different after the publication of the second interim report and the case studies later this year.

1.4 The Structure of the Report

1.23 In the remainder of the report we present our findings in terms of the case-study objectives set out at para 1.4 above (Section 2) before presenting some brief considerations for the future (Section 3).

2. Findings

2.1 Awareness and User Communities

2.1 As already noted above, current awareness of the Learning to Improve Evaluation appears to be restricted to quite a narrow circle of individuals within the Welsh Government and local government, principally those directly involved through the Steering Group, or (in the case of a handful of interviewees) with the case-studies.

2.2 The Steering Group itself was universally perceived to be highly engaged and supportive of the Study though was said to consist of those closest to the research. In the view of one interviewee it 'brings a good mix of experience and expertise', while another referred to the 'indefatigable' efforts of key steering group members to raise awareness of the study. Several interviewees also praised the work of the Social Research Division in managing the evaluation effectively and making considerable efforts to generate interest across the Welsh Government in the findings and their potential implications.

2.3 In terms of local government, we were told that the exposure of local authorities to the study had been 'limited and sporadic to date' which accounted for the lack of relevant potential interviewees from the local authority sector. Active engagement at a senior level was said by one of the local government interviewees to be negligible:

> 'There aren't any local authority Chief Executives that are actively engaged in this at the moment'.

2.4 Interestingly, however, while Learning to Improve was intended for an audience within both the Welsh Government and local government, local government interviewees argued that the main focus of the study, or at least the work published to date, was on the behaviour and attitudes of the Welsh Government towards local government and was

thus of greater relevance within the Welsh Government than outside it[58]..

> 'The awareness of this project in local government is low, but the focus is on WAG. It's for WAG's benefit. The key audience for this is WAG itself'.

2.5   Other stakeholders also perceived that the audience had largely been internal to the Welsh Government to date, with several arguing that local government appeared to see itself as having a 'watching brief' rather than as a co-owner of the research. Several interviewees noted that while a local authority assistant chief executive had originally been one of the local government members on the Steering Group, the individual had left following a change of job and, though he had now been replaced by a chief executive, this new nominee had not (at the time of our fieldwork[59]) attended a meeting: one said that while superficially this lack of local government presence had seemed to make life easier (because the former representative had been the main member of the group who had challenged the approach to the study), this now seemed a mistake because it had reduced ownership within Welsh local government. Another interviewee with good contacts at senior level in Welsh local government went so far as to say that Local Authority Chief Executives 'see it [Learning to Improve] as totally irrelevant'.

2.6   Within the Welsh Government, several interviewees thought that proactive involvement in the study was limited to the Steering Group itself and to the Local Government division within the Welsh Government, rather than across other departments. One noted that 'we've struggled to get traction outside the Steering Group' and argued that there would be value in having representation from a wider range of departments within the Welsh Government who had interaction with

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[58] WG researchers and the LTI research team felt that the relevance of the study to LTI was likely to increase with the dissemination of the case study findings
[59] We understand that since the fieldwork was undertaken, this situation has been rectified.

local government to attempt to raise awareness of and engagement with the project.

2.7   Another Steering Group member argued that it was a constant struggle – one which Learning to Improve had not yet mastered - to capture the interest of a wider policy community within the Welsh Government:

> 'it's always a challenge. I don't think it's particular to research work though. It's always a challenge, no matter what the issue is to grab people's interest. You just have to find the right thing to pique peoples' interest. You have to make the information relevant. If people are to use it, it needs to be useful for them. I think that's the challenge for all, for everything, not just for research projects really.'

2.8   This interviewee thought that the Steering Group could possibly do more to raise its own profile and thus that of the Study, by means for example, of the Welsh Government intranet, while at the same time recognising that there was a risk of trying to 'oversell' the research at a time when it was not producing new results:

> 'I think the work of the Steering Group is actually being quite low profile and I think maybe we should have made more of that Group in terms of letting people know that a) it exists, b) what it's doing, c) that it's met d) what it's decided... Maybe we could have done more of that'.

2.9   Confirming the view that wider awareness of Learning to Improve was low, a number of Welsh Government officials interviewed principally in the context of our parallel case-study of the Welsh Index for Multiple Deprivation had responsibilities which touched very directly on local government but knew little or nothing about Learning to Improve.

2.10   Thus, for example, a Head of Division with direct responsibility for one of the statutory partnerships convened by each local authority thought it was very surprising that he had not been engaged in any way in the

work programme. He went on to comment, however, that policy officials at his level received a myriad of round robin invitations to briefing events, including about research projects, but he was unlikely to get involved unless specifically targeted.

2.11   Some interviewees were hopeful that the publication of the case-studies and the second interim report would enable a new push to raise awareness of, and engagement with, Learning to Improve. Thus, it was hoped that the case-studies could be a focus for engaging with senior officers in local government on a thematic basis (for example, with Directors of Social Services or Directors of Education). Within the Welsh Government, one interviewee noted that Ministers and senior officials often found it easier to engage with case-studies and qualitative evidence more generally than they did with statistical data. One senior respondent noted that a one of the key Ministers had expressed genuine interest in Learning to Improve during a recent meeting, again indicating the potential for future impact as further research findings emerge.

2.12   At the same time, a small number of interviewees emphasised that it was important to understand that the case-studies were intended to be a means of examining the core issues around the effectiveness of partnership working, citizen engagement and central-local relations, not 'mini-evaluations'. One stakeholder was concerned that in disseminating the case studies they could risk being seen as being about school reorganisation or Communities First whereas the whole point of the case studies was to examine the underlying relationships and behaviours in the context of these thematic areas. Ensuring that the message in this respect was not diluted would need careful handling.

2.2 Usefulness and Use of the Evaluation

2.13   Most of those interviewed (particularly those with insight into the as yet unpublished case-study material) felt that the work undertaken by the

research team was of high quality and intrinsically of value in getting to grips with the complex and sometimes contradictory attitudes and behaviours within the Welsh Government and local government to partnership working. Thus, one interviewee who was not on the Steering Group thought the work of the Cardiff team was 'thorough and impressively serious' while a Steering Group member was 'impressed' by the work of the research team.

2.14   This was not universally the case, however, with one interviewee suggesting that the main finding of the first interim report that different parts of the Welsh Government adopted very different approaches in their relations with local government was less than revelatory.

2.15   There were mixed views, also, of the usefulness of the conceptual model developed as part of the first interim report, which identified different sorts of central-local relationships: partnership; hands-off; competitive and command and control. Some interviewees believed that this had proved (or would in future prove) useful as an analytical tool, while another thought it 'very academic but quite interesting'. Others were more sceptical. Indeed, one argued that the perceptions study had had only limited resonance, because too little effort had been made to ensure that the study used language that Welsh Government officials would recognise and relate to.

> 'They [the research team] got a bit locked into their own terminology and this constrained debate... their model got in the way'.

2.16   In general, interviewees indicated that there was little evidence that the formal outputs from the evaluation had been used to inform policy and practice. A number of ways were, however, identified in which the research to date – including that on the case-studies - had already been of use:

- One stakeholder highlighted the value of the evaluation findings to date in 'reflecting back to us [the Welsh Government] what we'd

anecdotally expected'. The evaluation was therefore seen to be valuable in reinforcing direction of travel, rather than being a tool to influence change:

> 'The LTI is not designed to help on the detailed solutions level. It is designed to address concepts rather than the nitty gritty of the implementation on the ground. So it is more about the validation of direction travelled'.

- The case-study research on Communities First had highlighted hugely variable performance in Communities First partnerships, even within the same Local Authority area. There were seen to be no obvious differences between such partnerships, other than different dynamics within different communities. The research was seen to be of use in terms of informing Welsh Government thinking on how to take forward the initiative post-2012.

- The research had highlighted a lack of understanding of what 'citizen engagement' actually meant. This was thought to have helped the Welsh Government to be clearer in articulating its expectations, not least through the 'New Understanding' published in late 2009.

- One interviewee argued that the case-study research was providing evidence that partnership models were not necessarily the most effective way of delivering certain services and that this might have informed thinking in relation to the Simpson Review[60]. However, the research team was not in any way directly involved or engaged with this key review of the functioning of local government.

2.17   As already noted, a series of workshops were arranged in mid 2009 to disseminate the findings of the Interim Report linked to the Leadership

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[60] The Minister for Social Justice and Local Government commissioned Joe Simpson, from the Local Government Leadership Centre, to undertake the review following a study by the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and his own discussions with front line workers and service providers. The report makes a valuable contribution to the debate on collaboration and strengthening the provision of public services.

Network of senior officials. This was seen by Welsh Government researchers and the Learning to Improve research team as an opportunity to gain access to the senior civil service forum, but in the end this access failed to materialise. None of our interviewees had participated in these workshops (except as part of the team leading the discussions) but the general view was that these were seen as having 'mixed success'. Senior officials interviewed for this study had gained the impression that participants had been interested in the emerging findings of the study and willing to discuss the implications for their areas of work. However, there appeared to be limited follow-through and leadership to build on this initial interest. The perception of the team responsible for dissemination of the findings and encouraging the sharing of learning points was that Learning to Improve did not have a sufficiently high priority within the management learning programmes. This resulted in limited participation by senior officials and mixed reactions from workshop participants.

2.18   In addition to these sessions that were explicitly concerned with learning among senior Welsh Government officials, Learning to Improve researchers and lead Welsh Government officials undertook a number of awareness-raising activities aimed at keeping ministers and senior officials appraised of the study and its potential implications. Learning to Improve was on the agenda of the Management Board on at least two occasions and – as noted above – a meeting was held with the Local Government Minister in January 2011. The study was also discussed at a Welsh Government Business Group meeting.

2.19   More generally, it was clear that there had only been limited success so far in developing an appropriate learning and dissemination programme, particularly in relation to the local government sector. In part this was simply a reflection of the fact that, given the phasing of the research, there had been limited material to disseminate, as well as a feeling that the early findings were of most relevance to Welsh Government audiences. In the context of the first interim report, it had

been agreed in principle that Shared Intelligence could 'piggy-back' on planned events (for example those organised by the Welsh Local Government Association) rather than convene separate meetings to discuss the evaluation findings and their implications, but such opportunities failed to materialise, partly because those organising specific events felt that the material was of insufficient interest to merit inclusion on their already-crowded agendas.

2.20   Nonetheless, some limited dissemination of the interim report findings did take place, involving the key local government representative organisations, SOLACE and the WLGA, and senior members of the Cardiff University research team. Researchers felt that these were useful exercises, with the potential for more 'profound reflection' in the future, building on these relatively conventional 20-minute 'presentation followed by Q&A' sessions.

2.21   Again, some interviewees were optimistic that the case-study reports and the second interim report would have greater potential both to influence policy and practice development in the future and to generate learning and dissemination activities that will be relevant and useful to both Welsh Government and to local authority audiences.

2.22   The Learning to Improve case study reports were in the process of being finalised at the time of writing this report, and have to date been circulated only to the project Steering Group. Indications are, however, that some of the findings have potential to be of considerable interest, for example:

- The Local Service Boards (LSBs) case study report highlights a number of implications for Welsh Government policies. These revolve around, among other things, the role of the lead officials within the LSBs and the preparation and support they receive; the importance of efforts to strengthen local leadership capacity; the potential benefits of partnering between LSBs and the need for a 'joined-up' response from the Welsh Government. These are all

issues that may, in principle, be developed to stimulate learning that involves Welsh Government, local authorities and wider local partners.

- In relation to schools modernisation, a number of questions are raised regarding best practice in relation to consultation with citizens on contentious issues such as school closures. The recommendations suggest the need for more local power within a framework of more clearly articulated expectations set by the Welsh Government, laying the basis for facilitated discussions and learning events that should help to improve policy and practice in a difficult and contentious area.

- The Communities First case study report similarly poses a number of questions regarding, for example, the link between social and economic regeneration; the relationship between partnership structure and performance and the question of whether effective partnerships can be formed in the most deprived areas (the research suggests that they can). Again, these questions appear to form the basis for useful dialogue between local partners and the Welsh Government, which should benefit from facilitation by the Learning to Improve research team.

2.23   The publication of the case studies may therefore lead to a new phase in which Learning to Improve is perceived as being of greater use to policy makers and practitioners than has been the case to date. Our research suggests, however, that it will be important to learn lessons from the mixed success of the dissemination/learning phase following the interim report, in order to maximise the impact of the considerable investment that the Welsh Government has made in this research programme. In particular it will be important to ensure that the Welsh Government, local authorities and wider stakeholders benefit from the considerable research expertise of the Cardiff University team and the experience of Shared Intelligence in helping local authorities and other

stakeholders to share learning between them and develop effective solutions to difficult policy and practice issues.

2.3 Impact on Policy and Practice: Facilitating Factors and Barriers

2.24   Given the evidence of the limited awareness and use of Learning to Improve to date, it is unsurprising that there is little evidence that the evaluation findings have had a noticeable impact on the way that the Welsh Government works with local government:

'There hasn't been any sort of step change'.

'I can't point to any changes to regulations which directly link to what we've done'

2.25   Indeed, several interviewees argued that insofar as there had been any change in the approach of the Welsh Government to local government over the lifetime of the evaluation, this did not reflect the lessons of the first interim report, which these interviewees saw as being that there needed to be a more consistent partnership approach. Examples here included the decision to send in Welsh Government commissioners to run the Isle of Anglesey Council and what was said to have been the 'last minute' introduction of the power to compel mergers of local authorities in the Local Government (Wales) Measure, without consultation with local government.

2.26   To the limited extent that interviewees identified factors which had facilitated impact to date, these revolved around:

- The enthusiasm and engagement of the Steering Group and in particular the research manager;
- The professionalism and reputation of the research team ('they're thought provoking, accurate and objective'); and
- The fact that each element of the research was prefaced by a literature review (looking beyond the Welsh experience) which provided a helpful context for the findings.

2.27   In terms of the barriers which, so far at least, had prevented Learning to Improve from making a real difference to policy and practice, a wide range of issues were raised (albeit each by only a small number of interviewees).

2.28   The first of these was simply the question of the stage which the research had reached and the nature of the initial findings. While many respondents acknowledged that the survey findings were interesting, they did not necessarily form the basis for in-depth learning. As we have already seen, many of the interviewees believed that the evaluation could yet prove to have a far greater impact than appeared to be the case at present, given the imminent publication of more (and arguably more interesting) research findings in the case-studies. Indeed, it might be argued that the completion and dissemination of some case study work earlier in the research programme might have been helpful in generating interest and engagement at an earlier stage.

2.29   The second was what was perceived as a lack of what might be termed 'rooted' ownership of the study. Despite the strong advocacy of the Steering Group, many interviewees suggested that there was a lack of wider 'buy-in' from outside the Local Government Division within the Welsh Government. We have already seen that local government interviewees suggested that they saw the evaluation as principally being intended to inform the Welsh Government, rather than local government behaviours. One interviewee suggested that had the WLGA made even a small financial contribution to the costs of the study, this might have ensured a greater engagement.

2.30   Within the Welsh Government, there was a perception that there was at present no real champion for the study at a senior level: the Permanent Secretary was perceived as having been interested in the first interim report but the fact that it was 'bounced' several times off the agenda of the Leadership Forum was seen to be a signal that it was

not regarded as a high priority. Several interviewees suggested that civil servants were sensitive to such signals.

2.31   Several interviewees suggested that a part of the reason for the apparent lack of strong and widespread ownership lay in the origins of the commissioning of the evaluation. This was seen to have been driven through very largely by one key policy official, who had commissioned the feasibility study and was personally strongly committed to the research but who had left their post shortly after the project had started. Research colleagues at the time were said to have been less convinced of the merits of commissioning such a large study, with one interviewee arguing that the feasibility study 'was really very weak' and questioning whether it provided a sufficiently rigorous basis on which a large research contract should be let. While the new lead officers on both the research and policy side appear to have been highly engaged and professional, making considerable efforts to generate interest and engagement across the Welsh Government, the fact that the initial instigator of the research was no longer involved in its management is likely to have affected its overall impact.

2.32   The problem of ownership was also related to the unique nature of the issue of local government relations, which was seen as cutting across a very large swathe of the Welsh Government. One interviewee argued that the nature of the relationship between central and local government was so all encompassing that no-one below probably the Permanent Secretary could really own it.

2.33   A third set of issues which were highlighted related to the overall design of the study. As already noted, one interviewee (who had insight into the commissioning process) felt that the feasibility study – which argued in favour of one large overarching study rather than a succession of more focused pieces of work evaluating specific programmes or aspects of local government policy - did not lay a sound basis for the study, and several others were sceptical as to

whether such a 'blockbuster' approach to evaluating the local government reform agenda was appropriate.

2.34   Moreover, several supporters of the overall approach to Learning to Improve nevertheless noted that by focusing on the three themes, the study was inevitably quite 'high level', 'intellectual' or 'conceptual' which made it quite challenging for practitioners. One strong advocate of the approach wondered nevertheless if there had not been a naivety in accepting at face value that Welsh Government Ministers really were interested in these high level and rather abstract ideas of facilitating collaborative working, central-local partnership and citizen engagement rather than more specific initiatives. This same interviewee also noted that the original brief had not contained a particularly clearly defined set of research questions (though this was said to have had the fortunate by- product of forcing the research team to define relevant questions for each stage of the research by undertaking a literature review).

2.35   A number of interviewees also argued that, in hindsight, there was an issue over the relationship between the research process itself and the learning and dissemination programme. In practice, it was argued, it might have been recognised from the outset that the inputs on learning and dissemination should be more clearly weighted towards the end of the project, once there was significant material to draw upon. By focusing a major dissemination push on the first interim report – which was built only on an initial survey (which did not have a particularly high response rate), a small number of stakeholder interviews and desk research – the project risked squandering its capital with senior decision- makers rather than building momentum. Dissemination and organisational development could only really start to happen once there is a substantive research evidence base in place and this was only just starting to happen (with the production of the case studies).

2.36   This was related to another key issue in terms of the design of the evaluation - the appropriateness of the extended (four year) timescale,

with the first case-studies only appearing nearly three years after the research was originally commissioned. Around half of the interviewees were concerned that – even though formally there had been no major overhaul of the policy framework for local government since Learning to Improve was commissioned – beneath the surface, the policy agenda and concerns of both Ministers and Welsh local government had moved on considerably. One interviewee for example was of the view that whereas in 2007 – 'a time of plenty' – Local Authority Chief Executives could afford to be concerned about rather arcane questions of how to improve the culture of relationships between different Welsh Government, in 2011, facing major spending cuts, they were more concerned with bread and butter issues of 'how do we get through this?'.

2.37   Another echoed this view, arguing that it was over-optimistic to expect that the policy landscape would stand still long enough for the research process to yield sufficient benefits, and that in practice, the policy environment in terms of central-local relations was very different now to how it had been at the time the research was commissioned – with Ministers much more willing to talk about structural changes to service delivery (as evidenced by the Simpson Review).

2.38   In similar vein, two other interviewees argued that ideally the research programme would have been 'a lot shorter, sharper and more succinct. It's too long drawn out'.

2.39   By comparison to the barriers arising from fundamental issues over the design of the research, there were fewer issues raised about the implementation of the project.

2.40   There were different views about the extent to which Learning to Improve was sufficiently flexible to adapt to and absorb changes in the external environment. Some interviewees argued that there had been considerable scope for flexibility over, for example, the selection of the

case-studies, with the research team showing considerable willingness to respond to current policy interests. A number of others nevertheless felt that the Welsh Government was locked into a process which could not be sufficiently adapted to current needs.

2.41   With regard to the learning and dissemination aspects of Learning to Improve, a number of interviewees argued that there was scope for more of an 'action learning' approach than had been used to date. Several stakeholders argued that there was a need for a clearer focus in dissemination events on how participants were going to apply what had been learnt from the research. One argued that this meant well facilitated, thematic and policy based workshop sessions, asking the questions 'what does this mean for you?' and 'what do you need WAG to be doing differently?' To have real value, these sessions would need to have key local government and Welsh Government officials involved – disseminating in an integrated way – rather than separately so that the discussion added value to the research process. It is important to stress that the fact that this had not happened was not necessarily the fault of the research team: this appears to have been the original intention, but for many of the reasons outlined in this report, it has proved difficult to date to implement in practice. In particular, the apparent lack of priority given to the study by local authorities and across the Welsh Government (beyond the Local Government Division) has limited the extent to which interactive, practice-focused learning sessions could be organised.

2.42   Another stakeholder argued for an even more interventionist approach, where the Steering Group and the research team should proactively work with willing parts of the Welsh Government to help shape their relations with local government, drawing on the evidence emerging from the evaluation:

        'there's no reason why we can't be working with a Directorate
        General … and say: pick a project, a big policy you're about to
        work on, we'll work with you to help you implement these

> findings, because this research is an on-going thing… This gives us the opportunity to apply it, review it and refine our work.'

2.43 A number of interviewees argued that this sort of more interactive approach might be easier if there was closer integration between the two teams delivering the contract.

2.44 Finally, a number of interviewees raised more fundamental issues around the receptiveness of policy makers within the Welsh Government to research in general. While several interviewees argued strongly that the Welsh Government had made considerable strides in terms of its commitment to evidence-based policy making, it was also recognised that policy decisions were informed by a wide range of considerations, including political values and principles:

> 'You have to be realistic. If you were a purist all policy should be evidence led but in the real world, where you have politicians, policies happen and then sometimes the evidence has to catch up with them'.

2.45 One, however, argued that there were issues in terms of the capacity or commitment of policy colleagues to engage with and be consumers of, evidence. Certainly in the field of local government policy there was said to be an overriding concern with managing day to day problems and fire-fighting immediate issues ('having to get on and do things'), and little time for policy makers to sit back and reflect.

2.46 More seriously, this same interviewee argued that there was reluctance on the part of civil servants to challenge received ideas of how policy goals should be achieved. While it was completely understandable that Ministers wanted to set clear policy goals (the 'what'), in the Welsh context, Ministers often had a strong attachment to how these should be achieved. There was little if any space for civil servants to challenge whether the policy techniques adopted were actually appropriate to achieving the policy goals. Thus, in this interviewee's view, the

appropriate focus for a fundamental evaluation of Welsh local government policy would have been whether the 'voice, not choice' agenda was actually effective in delivering higher quality local services, but this opportunity had been missed.

3. Considerations for the Future

3.1 Introduction

3.1   It is clear from our – albeit limited – fieldwork that Learning to Improve has **so far** failed to have the sort of significant impact on thinking about future local government policy in Wales that had been hoped or that might have been expected given the scale of resources devoted to this key piece of long-term research.

3.2   It is crucial to recognise that this may be largely a question of timing, with our research taking place towards the end of a long period of fieldwork and evidence-gathering leading up to the publication of the case study findings. The view of key stakeholders may be very different in six months time, once the second interim report has been published and used as the basis for dissemination and learning events.

3.3   Nevertheless, our fieldwork does highlight some important issues which can both inform the plans (particularly in terms of dissemination) for the final 12 months of the Learning to Improve evaluation and the design of future large scale evaluations.

3.2 Learning to Improve: Going Forward

3.4   **Dissemination**: The success of dissemination activities from the case studies over the next few months will be critical to maximise the value of Learning to Improve. The case studies are seen as a source of more substantial evidence of what is working and what is not and provide the potential to link the research findings to concrete, 'live' policy issues that should be of concern and interest to Welsh Government officials (and indeed, Ministers), local authority officials, councillors and local partnership organisations. Given the wide range of potential participants and the current pressures on time and

resources, the format of the dissemination sessions needs to be flexible, perhaps entailing on-line discussion groups[61] as well as physical meetings. Organisations such as the WLGA and SOLACE should, in principle, be important conduits through which local authorities can identify key policy questions to be addressed, although we share the view of some of our interviewees that dissemination activities should try to bring together local government and Welsh Government stakeholders, preferably in a participative way (see para. 3.6). The Welsh Government and the research team can play a key role in pro-actively suggesting specific and cross-cutting policy questions arising from, and illustrated by, the case-studies which need discussion (e.g. if the success of partnership working depends more on behaviours and attitudes than on structures or processes, how (if, at all) can these be nurtured or promoted?; how to maximise the benefits of 'voluntary' inter-authority co-operation?; how to balance the citizen voice with financial imperatives?).

3.5 **Building on the academic strengths of the study**: one of the key features, and a major potential strength, of the Learning to Improve study is the fact that it is being undertaken by one of the UK's (and indeed Europe's) leading centres of research into local government and governance, led by an eminent professor with a considerable reputation for his work. The dissemination partner, Shared Intelligence, also has an excellent reputation for its work across the UK, and good contacts with researchers, practitioners and policy-makers. This type of partnership (incorporating the Welsh Government as research commissioners and partners) has the potential to inform policy and practice not only in Wales, but across the UK and beyond. Clearly the Cardiff University team is in the process of putting together articles for leading journals, but a further possibility is that they might be encouraged to convene a conference, with a target audience across

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[61] This was not specifically suggested by interviewees; however in our opinion establishing on-line forums would be a useful way of disseminating findings and discussing their implications, with limited impact on the increasingly scarce time and budgets of local authorities

the UK and possibly beyond, to discuss the main themes of the research and the emerging findings. Such a conference should bring together researchers and policy-makers and, where appropriate, encourage joint papers and presentations by academic researchers, Welsh Government researchers and policy-makers and local government leaders. Such an event would serve to celebrate the quality of the research being commissioned in Wales, the partnership between central government, local government and academia and explore in depth the implications of the findings for Wales and for other countries. An important by-product would be that the profile of the study would be raised considerably among target groups for the dissemination and learning process.

3.6 **On-going action learning**: the initial research design for Learning to Improve anticipated that an on-going action learning element would be built into the research/evaluation methodology, involving work with both the Welsh Government and local government stakeholders. For a number of reasons this does not appear to have been the case to any great extent to date. The remaining four case studies together with the follow-up survey and interview work present an opportunity to adopt a more participative approach to the research process, learning lessons as the work goes on, rather than waiting until the dissemination stages to do this.

3.7 **Senior Engagement within the Welsh Government:** To some extent, at least, there has been a lack of real ongoing ownership and championing of the study at the more senior levels of the Welsh Government, which in part reflects the perception that the results to date have been somewhat meagre. The case study findings and associated dissemination activities (if organised and promoted effectively – see 3.4 above) should provide considerable impetus to ensure that the study moves up the agenda and provokes serious discussion and debate at senior levels.

3.8 **Steering group representation**: While the Steering Group has clearly been strongly engaged and supportive, our fieldwork suggests that representation from a wider range of departments within the Welsh Government who have interaction with local government might both spread awareness of, and engagement with the project, and provide more challenge to the research team. It would also be helpful to increase the representation of local government interests on the Steering Group, in particular to strengthen the 'practitioner' representation, perhaps drawing on the local authorities and partner organisations that have been involved in the case study phase of the research.

3.3 General Lessons

3.9 Learning to Improve was (and is) an ambitious programme of research, undertaken over a relatively long time period, using considerable resources and utilising the services of two leading research teams to address a range of key issues relating to local government policy in Wales. In principle, such an approach might be taken in relation to a range of other policy areas (e.g. learning and skills, education, health, transport, economic development) although resource constraints might affect any future commissions. Nonetheless (and bearing in mind that Learning to Improve is still ongoing) we can pinpoint a number of lessons that will help to ensure that the Welsh Government gains maximum impact from any similar initiative:

3.10 **Early wins**: Learning to Improve struggled to make an impact in its early phases (which arguably have lasted nearly three years) mainly due to the limited volume of hard evidence coming out of the study. While this is an issue with most research projects, our recommendation is that research design should incorporate the need to ensure that at least some findings with the potential to engage and enthuse research participants are likely to emerge at an early stage. In the case of Learning to Improve, our feeling is that one or two small-scale case studies undertaken during the first year of the study would have gone a

long way to convincing relevant stakeholders that the research programme had the potential to address key issues that are current and real.

3.11 **Flexible research design**: It is clearly challenging to commission long-term research projects, given the speed with which the policy environment can change. The Learning to Improve research programme has a degree of flexibility built in, for example in relation to the case study element of the research; nonetheless our view is that even greater flexibility would be helpful in future studies of this type. In particular, we believe that a rolling programme of research with regular reviews (say every three months) for any project lasting more than, perhaps, 18 months would be a sensible approach. In such long term research projects, the research steering group representatives should pay particular attention to changing policy and organisational factors in considering whether and how the research programme should change course. The interests of the contractor should also be considered in this process and changes should be made on an agreed basis within the context of a broad strategic research plan.

3.12 **Ownership:** Policy officers within the Welsh Government have traditionally moved jobs and indeed Departments relatively frequently and one issue with Learning to Improve appears to be that the key instigator of the research moved away from the policy field shortly after the research had been commissioned. In our view, this highlights the importance of structuring commissioning processes so that they ensure there is a wider collective understanding of, and 'buy in' to major programmes of research on the part of the Department which is the main policy customer. It is also important that where research staff have concerns over the methodology proposed that these are fully taken into account in the design process.

3.13 **Stakeholder engagement**: there are no magic formulae to ensure that stakeholders are engaged in and learn from research of this type,

however well designed and implemented. Meetings, workshops etc can be time-consuming and expensive, particularly in difficult financial times. However, it is essential that stakeholder engagement at strategic and operational levels is built into the research process as far as possible. Meaningful consultation with intended target groups at the design and commissioning stage would be useful, as would a two-tier system of research governance, with a strategic project broad (or equivalent) and an operational steering group made up of organisations directly involved in the study. From the point of view of the Welsh Government it is important that project boards and steering groups contain representatives from the Social Research Division as well as all relevant policy divisions/departments. As far as possible the chosen representatives need to be enthusiastic about the project and prepared to promote it across the organisation.

3.14   **Make the most of academic-policy interaction**: not all research of this type will be undertaken by academic researchers, but it might be expected that academic groups will often be involved in some way. The involvement of academics has the advantage of ensuring high research standards, although academics may be less close to immediate policy concerns and may differ from policy-makers in relation to the dissemination process (academic researchers tend to be focused on producing articles for peer-reviewed journals, for example). It is important, therefore, for Welsh Government representatives to work closely with academics to ensure that they are fully appraised of the key policy and practice questions. This will help to ensure that academic researchers can bring to bear their intellect and their wider knowledge of the literature and research agenda to ensure maximum benefits for the policy-making process. The idea of building in research-policy-practice focused conferences or seminars is also a useful one to help generate mutual understanding and effective communication.