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Establishing Research Ecosystems in Local Government: Ten lessons from the front line of the first year of the NIHR Health Determinants Research Collaborations (HDRCs).

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Health inequalities are where we see differences in health across the population, and between different groups in society, that are systematic, unfair and avoidable (1). They need a long-term systemic response to support people to value their health and wellbeing (2). These social, economic environmental, cultural and commercial factors, known as the wider

determinants of health, are unequally distributed across the UK population (3). This is despite numerous attempts to address them at a local, national and internationally (4, 5).

Both the Marmot review and the Dame Carol Black review highlighted the huge economic costs of failing to act on the wider determinants of health (4-6). Local public health leaders are in a strong position to develop a whole system approach to reducing health inequalities that puts communities at its heart (10).

Thirteen Local Authorities (LAs) were awarded funding by the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) in October 2022 to develop HDRCs. Ten of them as full HDRCs (HDRC Tower Hamlets, HDRC Newcastle, HDRC Doncaster, HDRC Aberdeen, HDRC Bradford, HDRC Plymouth, HDRC Gateshead, HDRC Blackpool, HDRC Coventry and HDRC Lambeth). Three were given a further year to develop their plans and became full HDRCs in October 2023 (HDRC South Tees, HDRC Medway, HDRC Islington). Eleven more full HDRCs were announced in December 2023 and are due to start January 2024 (HDRC Ealing, HDRC Sandwell, HDRC Wakefield, HDRC Southampton, HDRC Rhondda Cynon Taf, HDRC Liverpool, HDRC Somerset, HDRC Cumberland, HDRC Cornwall, HDRC Essex, HDRC North Yorkshire). As in round one there were a number of areas given a year to develop their work further (HDRC Manchester, HDRC Portsmouth, HDRC Torfaen, HDRC Leicestershire, HDRC Glasgow, HDRC Surrey) (11).

The aim of the HDRCs is to embed a culture of evidence-based decision-making within Local Government. The HDRCs will help to stimulate economic growth, particularly in some of the most deprived areas of the country and contribute to the Government's plans to act for the longer-term resilience of the health and wealth of the country (12).

This article examines the key learning from the first year of the wave one HDRCs and give advice to new HDRCs starting their journeys in 2024. Between April and October 2023, the lead author asked for at least one person from each of the LAs and one academic/other partner involved in HDRCs to complete a small survey with open ended questions which took about ten-minutes to complete. The survey was conducted using Jisc online surveys. Data was downloaded and open-ended questions were coded by DNB and KH. All data was downloaded and analysed using an inductive approach (13). Twenty-seven people responded with representation from all the 13 HDRCs.

Below we identify ten key things to consider when starting the journey.

1. Recruit to posts early

Recruitment was a colossal problem for both LAs and universities. Bureaucratic hold ups and slow HR processes hindering progress were apparent as well as issues recruiting staff with the right skills, appropriate expertise and at the right time. The precarious financial climate of

Local Government also needed to be navigated with care, with jobs being created for the HDRCs against job losses elsewhere.

"£5 million funding creating 10+ new jobs has arrived against the backdrop of recent job cuts. We have to be cognisant of this. Developing relationships with teams within the council with similar objectives to HDRC, against the backdrop of funding pressures and job insecurity" (LA)

2. Think about capacity

Capacity proved to be significantly stretched during the first year. Academic colleagues reported working well beyond their intended HDRC costed time to counterbalance the time constraints felt by LAs in recruiting staff. These pressures saw a slowing of momentum, research culture change, relationship building and "buy in".

"We found that the extent to which LA Finance and HR systems struggle to accept and contract out funding, difficulties in back filling people's time" (LA)

3. Consider priorities

The main thing is to expect a slow start and don't underestimate the size of the task at hand. Treat recruitment as a priority and think about job descriptions straight away. Build a cohesive team with strong leadership whose sole focus is on the HDRC, helping to get through the early legal and bureaucratic hassles. Take time to get to know key staff across all sectors and the community, utilising and nurturing relationships.

4. Leadership is vital

Ensure that you have good leadership at both the LA and University. Project management is essential.

"Appoint a competent project manager to help get through legal and bureaucratic hassles; give researchers time to bed in and understand cultures of both LA and University" (University)

5. Create a plan

Create a clear plan, giving individuals time to bed in and understand the diverse cultures of both LAs and Universities. Use the plan to quickly establish priority areas, costing LA and academic staff appropriately. Fully think through each milestone and any potential barriers ensuring to collect baseline data as soon as objectives are set and have robust monitoring processes throughout. But be prepared for fast-paced learning and a constant change of the plan. Be flexible and change your bid/plan as needed.

6. Don't underestimate the size of the job to align organisations

Aligning the needs and motivations of the HDRC within LAs was shown to be a delicate process. Managing expectations was a major task for the first year. Being realistic with timelines whilst also harnessing the motivation and excitement to get going.

"We use the analogy of doing the groundwork on a building site - there is a lot happening that nobody can see at the moment, but soon there will be something that staff, residents and local academics can really see and engage with" (LA)

7. Culture Change

Changing the research culture within LAs was seen to be paramount to the success of HDRCs. It is important to understand current approaches in the LAs. Getting some 'early wins' in terms of research funding is a good thing for staff to see what success looks like and means. It is important to identify "champions" within the LAs to help champion the work.

"It has reinforced my knowledge and the organisational and professional gap between LA officers and researchers, different ways of working and thinking. But I am learning to tackle this" (University)

8. It's not a competition

Some HDRCs are ahead of others in some things and behind in others. Keep to your project plan and enjoy successes whether they are big or small.

"Recognise there is a start-up period and manage expectations" (LA)

9. Community involvement is everything

Ensure that you work with your community partners and that they are part of the team from as early as possible.

"Recruitment of Co-Researchers with lived experience to the project should be the very first thing you do. Think very strongly about how you will make the community members feel valued for their contribution to the project" (LA)

10. Support is imperative

Finally, HDRCs found having other HDRCS to get support from was extremely valuable

"It is a new and challenging concept and way of working for many of us - the peer support has been invaluable". NIHR have also been supportive and flexible in a number of ways which has been helpful" (University)

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