



London and North Thames Local Authority Public Health Research Network Inaugural Conference

Public Health Research in Local Authorities: what is it, what's happening, how can it be improved?

On 26 March 2024, 150 individuals representing local authorities, universities, NHS, Voluntary/Community sector, national and regional policy came together for the inaugural in-person conference at The Wellcome Collection in London.

Informed by discussion with the Local Authority Public Health Research Network (LAPHRN), Steering and Oversight Alliance of the network and a conference steering committee, the conference sought to:

- showcase the range of applied research and evaluation in local authorities across London and North Thames;
- develop opportunities for research collaboration across local authorities in London and North Thames and
- to build networks and career development opportunities for professionals with an interest in public health research.

The themes of the conference were drawn from members and the abstracts submitted. Posters from the abstracts were displayed throughout the venue.



Welcome: Dr Leonora Weil and Dr Jessica Sheringham: Co-chairs of LAPHRN

Dr Leonora Weil and Dr Jessica Sheringham, the co-chairs of the network, welcomed attendees. They described how LAPHRN was established to bring colleagues together across London and North Thames on applied public health research and it was exciting to see that come together during the conference.

Morning keynote: The future for applied research for London/North Thames



Speaker: Professor Kevin Fenton, Regional Director, Office for Health Improvement and Disparities (London) Regional Director of Public Health, NHS London, Statutory Health Advisor to the Mayor of London, GLA and London Assembly

Professor Kevin Fenton gave examples from his research career and experience in applied research highlighting the intersection between research and policy.

He advised that we cannot do the same things that we've always done and expect a different outcome. Instead, he emphasised a need to be agile in research, to focus on real world issues, to have a commitment to understanding inequalities and an ability to work with modellers and scientists across fields that can help us to elevate our work.

Key goals that he outlined to strive for in the position of a public health director for London included:

1. Position London as a global city for health and wellbeing
2. Resolute focus on tackling inequalities – commitment and ambition to not leave any Londoner behind
3. Strengthen the relationship between local government and regional public health proactive
4. As an academic, bring stronger research visibility onto the work were doing – create a regional ecosystem to drive forward the research ambitions
5. Strengthen local relationships within the city.

He highlighted the power and the potential that we have in academic public health as our city is being harnessed and the urgency and importance of the work with a responsibility to share and be faster in dissemination, and ultimately a need to set up an infrastructure for research that lives long beyond us.

Panel Discussion: The future for applied research for London/North Thames



Chair: Dr Somen Banerjee

Panel: Professor Kevin Fenton, Vicky Hobart, Professor Rosalind Raine, Professor Trevor Sheldon

Each of the panellists and the chair shared their own reflections of their experiences of applied public health research, and what could be done better.

Some of the themes that emerged included a need to: diversify researchers and research topics, and keep our eye on the future; provide training for the workforce in local authorities, particularly on how we use research and how we share research; build in evaluation for interventions; for elected members to understand the role of research and being able to support that; support NHS research to include tackling public health issues; A key theme stressed the need for partnership across organisations on this agenda.

Health Determinants Research Collaborations (HDRCs) in London: Learning so far



Chair: Dr Helen Walters

Panel: Sophia Looney (Lambeth), Isla Collee (representing Emily Humphreys) (Tower Hamlets), Charlotte Ashton (Islington), Dr Vaishnavee Madden (representing Maddy Gupta-Wright) (Ealing)

Helen Walter, who was instrumental in establishing HDRCs, introducing the session and noted HDRC funding is not for research but for building the bridge between public health practice and public health research, changing the culture so that LAs are active in research funding.

The four London HDRCs outlined their distinct approaches to building the research infrastructure to address wider determinants of health in their boroughs. They do so through common goals of developing a data infrastructure, achieving culture change and building research partnerships with communities and researchers within and beyond public health.

Each spoke about the challenges of making research relevant to both wider council colleagues and residents within their communities. Council colleagues, whilst interested, are under immense pressure. Therefore, finding the bandwidth to engage in research was tricky.

Some HDRCs have focused on quick wins, and support with direct needs, e.g. evaluation support to build some 'credit', to show the benefits of a research approach. With communities, there's a need to reach individuals that seldom engage, and to acknowledge the tensions between their needs and the needs of the researchers.

Afternoon Keynote: Public Health Research in Local Authorities



Speaker: Professor Lucy Chappell, DHSC Chief Scientific Adviser, NIHR Chief Executive Officer

Professor Chappell described the ways in which the public health funding landscape has changed in the past few years.

This included the investments NIHR has made into public health research infrastructure through [Applied Research Collaborations](#) (ARCs) and the School for Public Health Research, noting the cross-disciplinary opportunities encouraged through the [NIHR Three Schools' Programme](#) for prevention research. She noted the excitement of HDRCs, commenting on both the demand and the rapid trajectory of these.

Her talk encompassed the changing health and public health context, changes in demographics and aging populations and how these changes need to influence research. For example, the unprecedented demand for health services amidst rising cost of living, extreme weather events exacerbated by climate change and pandemics means novel approaches are needed to address these [compound pressures](#). She emphasized the impact of equity throughout this research.

Finally she reflected on ways of ensuring research remains relevant to policy. This needs to take into account the timescales for policy making, particularly as we move towards a new 5-year election cycle, and the importance of achieving an impact through research, commenting, "*I used to think it was enough to get a paper published but it's about what's next.*"

Afternoon breakout sessions

Publishing in peer-reviewed journals

Chair: **Dr Cat Pinho-Gomes**, NIHR Clinical Lecturer in Public Health Medicine, UCL

Speakers: **Dr Richard Pinder**, Director of Undergraduate Public Health Education & Clinical Senior Lecturer, Imperial College London & Honorary Consultant in Public Health Medicine, Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust; Partner, Ethica Health Partners. **Dr Joanne Morling**, Clinical Associate Professor of Public Health, University of Nottingham; Honorary Consultant in Public Health, UKHSA; NIHR CRN East Midlands Consultant and Specialty Lead for Public Health; NIHR CRN National Deputy Lead for Public Health; Co-Editor in Chief of Public Health in Practice

The panel and audience discussed the tensions of publishing in peer-reviewed for local authority staff, considering the time commitment required, possible article processing charges and balancing against other routes to share knowledge and have an impact. For those seeking to publish, some tips from the panel included:

- **Choose the journal carefully:** is this what your target audience will read? Is your research question aligned to the aims of the journal?
- If there is one thing that can help you get to publication, invest in developing strong **writing skills**. It will help you to get past editorial review. Note – writing for peer reviewed journals is usually a team endeavour.
- Be clear in your article about **what is original** about your work (e.g. novel intervention? setting?) and why it's relevant beyond the context in which it was conducted.

Inequalities: Tackling ethnic health inequalities through an antiracism approach in research

Chairs: **Dr Jennifer Yip**, Consultant lead for health equity, science and strategy, OHID London; **Dr Catherine Mbema**, Director of Public Health for Lewisham Council

Presentations from: **Jessica Veltman, Remy Cullinan, Sudaxshina Murdan, Ifra Ali**

The chairs introduced the session with an overview of the policy context for London, describing how tackling ethnic health inequalities through an anti-racism approach started from learning in the pandemic.

The framing of racism as a public health issue means that address it should be core to reducing health inequalities and public health practice. The ensuing presentations from submitted abstracts covered the variations and gaps in London council policies, outcomes frameworks, strategies and interventions to address ethnic inequalities; how evidence is informing strategy at council levels and the role of faith and ethnicity in vaccine uptake.

Housing and Health: research priorities for London & North Thames

Chairs: **Professor Matt Egan**, Professor in Public Health at London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine (LSHTM) **Emma De Zoete**, Consultant in public health, GLA Group Public Health Unit, Both co-chairs of Public Health and Housing Network

Presentations from: **Elizabeth Eveleigh, Claire Greszczuk, Kristoffer Halvorsrud**

The chairs introduced the session by describing the health implications of a lack of quality, security, affordability in housing in which had led to additional annual costs to the NHS in London of £100m. A brief poll of stakeholders with an interest in housing and research suggested there was greatest need for public health research and appetite for collaboration on:

1. Temporary accommodation and homelessness
2. Housing conditions
3. Climate mitigation & adaptation and overcrowding (of equal priority)

Three research projects selected from abstract submissions used a range of research designs (qualitative, quantitative, review) on household overcrowding across three London boroughs. They collectively illustrated that **cross-council strategies on overcrowding are feasible** and can be constructive for mitigating the harm to residents living in overcrowding.

Some common priorities identified across table discussions where research and policy community could work together included:

- Identifying, acting on evaluating the effectiveness of local levers to improve health related to housing conditions
- Using a collective voice to advocate for national policy changes to increase the supply of affordable housing

Demystifying public health/ local authority research systems

Chair: Dr **Dalya Marks**, Associate Professor, MSc PH Programme Director, at LSHTM & PH Strategist, Camden & Islington PH Department

Speakers: **Dr Sarah Sowden**, Senior Clinical Lecturer & hon Consultant in Public Health, Newcastle University & Office for Health Improvement and Disparities, North East and Deputy Director of the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) [Research Support Service Specialist Centre for Public Health](#); and **Hilarious (Harry) De Jesus**, Research Delivery Support Manager, Clinical Research Network, North Thames

Presentations from: **Billy Hopkins, Joia de Sa, Austen El-Osta, Thomas Mills, Alexandra Levitas**

The session covered the new and existing structures to support research in and with local authorities, which included:

- The **Research Support Service National Specialist Centre for Public Health** was established by NIHR in 2023 to provide around **governance and ethics support** and increase capacity and capacity for public health research. Through its **national research design advice**, it provides specialist public health advice on research design and funding applications (NIHR or other funders) for both small and large grants at all stages to give applicants the best chance of success. It will also fund a

number of **grassroots awards** to enable local authority staff to explore if research is something you're interested in (look out for calls in the summer)

- The **Research Delivery Network** (previously the Clinical Research Network) that supports the **implementation of funded research**. They have a remit to deliver studies not only in traditional NHS settings like GPs and hospital but to deliver where the people are, including through an **agile research delivery team**, which is a centralised, regional workforce, composed of research practitioners and people with experience delivering research or clinical studies.

Presentations from submitted abstracts demonstrated the diverse the ways in which individuals, organisations, [NIHR PHIRST](#) evaluation teams and cross-council networks are supporting the instigation and delivery of local authority-based research.

Working with Communities

Chair: **Professor Angela Harden**, Professor of Health Sciences, Division of Health Services Research and Management, City, University of London

Discussant: **Professor Maria Kett**, Professor of Humanitarianism and Social Inclusion in the UCL Institute of Epidemiology and Healthcare

Presentations from: **Emily Ahmed, Ginette Hogan, Mariah Cannon, Mimi Coultas**

Presentations from submitted abstracts illustrated a range of ways in which local authorities were seeking to involve communities in understanding lived experiences, co-producing strategies and interventions.

Some common challenges – framed at the start by the chair – included the tensions of differences between top down and community priorities and making sure action arises when we speak to communities on the ground. Some of the practical issues to community involvement were also discussed, including workable reward and recognition policies. There was appetite for a community researcher network across London.

Food and Hunger: what can we learn about the role of research in shaping council policy?

Chair: **Dr Julie George**, Honorary Associate Professor, Institute of Health Informatics, UCL; Training Programme Director, London School of Public Health Speciality Training, NHS England – London

Discussant: **Dr Mark Spires**, Senior Research Fellow at Centre for Food Policy, City University

Presentations from: **Priyanka Patil, Rachel Benchekroun, Natalie Lovell, Fariyah Choudhury, Ayanna Griffith**

Presentations from submitted abstracts illustrated the range of ways in which local authorities were seeking to develop and evaluate interventions to address food insecurity in their boroughs, particularly in educational settings. Discussion explored the implementation, equity and uptake of nutritious school meals, and the links between food strategies and other strategies across the council.

What did the delegates think?



From the first evaluation responses submitted in the week following the conference, you told us the conference was “inspiring” with many commenting on its inclusivity.

The main driver to attend the conference was to network with colleagues, and most reported this expectation was exceeded, with several also commenting they intended to follow up with colleagues doing similar work as a result of attending the conference.

Some delegates noted they didn’t have the opportunities to present their research or form new collaborations as much as they would have liked. There were helpful suggestions for future meetings, and an interest to get involved or attend future events.

We will contact all those that sought more information or offered to get involved in organisation in due course.

Acknowledgments

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