

Embedded researchers in public health:

A research briefing for future
embedded researchers

Dylan Kneale, Rachael C Edwards, Claire Stansfield
Sarah Lester, Rebecca Goldman & James Thomas

2023

Embedded researchers in public health:

A research briefing for future
embedded researchers

What are embedded researchers and why are they valuable?

- Embedded researchers are researchers who are co-affiliated with a research and policy or practice setting. They are situated (physically and/or virtually) in, and continually engage, with a host practice team for all or a portion of their time.
- Most embedded researchers move from academic institutions (universities) to work within organisations that design policy or deliver services around public health, while maintaining an academic affiliation.
- They aim to improve research activity and use within their host team. This could include building the host's research capacity, co-producing research, and acting as knowledge brokers.

Is an embedded researcher role right for you?

- Becoming an embedded researcher is a rewarding role for most researchers but is not without its challenges. The value that embedded researchers can bring to organisations is increasingly being recognised, and the number of embedded researcher opportunities is increasing.
- Embedded researcher roles are highly varied and provide opportunities to creatively shape research activity in public health decision making contexts. They allow researchers to enhance the impact of research more directly and provide valuable networking opportunities. These roles are well suited to those with a strong mix of research and communicative skills.
- Embedded researcher positions are often exploratory, and the objectives of the role may develop and become clearer once the embedded researcher is in post and has understood the context and needs of the host organisation. Embedded researcher positions can be offered as shorter-term contract-based positions or secondments.
- If you're considering a role as an embedded researcher, we suggest weighing the potential benefits and trade-offs in the context of your career stage and trajectory. Many of the embedded researchers described a mixture of frustrations and joys in the role, but most offered overall positive evaluations of the experience.

“Personally, it’s been a really fantastic development opportunity. I’ve learned loads and I really enjoy the variety it brings into my work and the way that my work with the [research institution] bleeds into all of my other work and means that I continue to work in an evidence-based way”.

What will your first few months as an embedded researcher involve?

- Prior to undertaking much research activity, you will need to become embedded and build trust within your host team. Maximize your visibility through participating in day-to-day activities (e.g., team meetings) and take the time to get to know your colleagues, the challenges they face, and their priorities. Endorsements and introductions from senior staff (e.g., your manager or mentor) can provide an initial level of credibility within teams.
- It is also vital to gain an understanding of the local research context which will help you shape the direction of your role. This knowledge can be gained both informally (e.g., chats with colleagues) and formally (e.g., a survey). To what extent does your team have the opportunity (e.g., time, access to the literature) and capability (e.g., research skills) to engage with research? Do you and your team have a shared understanding of what is meant by “research”? Do your colleagues see the value of research to service and policy delivery and development?

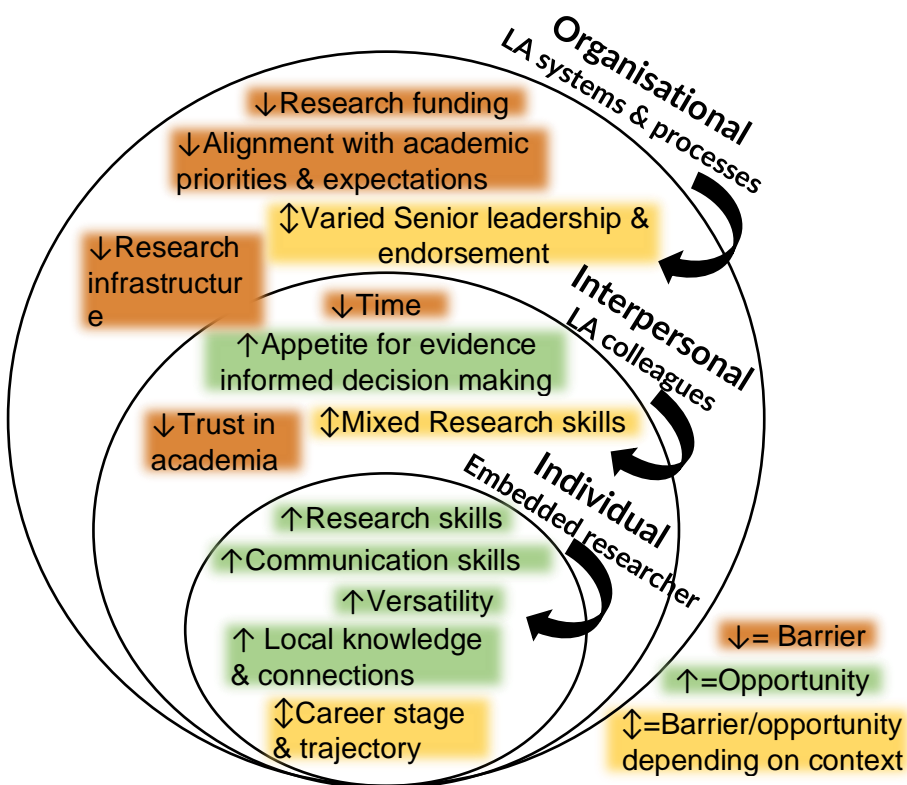
- Keep in mind that some colleagues' prior experience with academia might not have been positive and that you will likely have to clarify the purpose of your role.
- This “embedding phase” can take up to several months and forms the foundation for future success as your role develops.

“You need that physical presence, and that repeated physical presence, for people to get to know you and trust you”.

Understanding the public health research context

Public health decisions are made within highly politicized environments in which scientific evidence is considered alongside many forms of information including public opinion. Public health practitioners are also operating in a climate of austerity, expected to undertake increasingly more responsibilities within resource poor environments. They often lack access to the literature and basic research infrastructure. Limited engagement with research is often a result of these barriers rather than a lack of desire to be evidence informed.

Figure 1: Nested determinants of research activity in Local Authority (LA) public health settings that shape embedded researcher roles.



How do embedded researchers enhance research activity?

- The activities that you undertake to influence research activity should first and foremost be guided by the local research context including priorities, barriers, and opportunities. Using a logic model can help you identify which activities will be most appropriate and clarify the pathways through which they will influence research activity.
- You will likely spend much of your time building research capacity through, for example, fostering connections across academia and local government, organizing research training sessions, assisting with research projects and funding bids (e.g., providing advice on research questions and methods), or building research infrastructure. Equally, you might spend your time co-producing research with the public health team and wider community. You might also find yourself acting as a knowledge broker or expert in the room on certain public health topics.
- In any of these instances, the role is likely to be highly varied on a day-to-day basis.

“I think it’s my passion for learning that keeps me in this job to be honest. It’s just different every day. You learn something new, every day. And I love that”.

What difference do embedded researchers make in public health?

- Embedded researchers can positively influence research activity. However, measuring change in research activity is challenging and thus it is important to clarify measures of success from the outset. Being an embedded researcher involves continuous learning and documenting reflections can help you understand the processes underlying change, or lack thereof.
- Early **indicators of change in a research culture** could include improvements in your team’s awareness of research opportunities, their interest in research, and their participation in research activities.

“I think we have put research on the table for lots of staff who didn’t really think about it before”.

Embedded researchers have the potential to influence research activity, but achieving widespread change in a research culture is a long-term process. As such, expectations for embedded researchers should be proportionate to the size and scale of the role.

About this briefing: To investigate how embedded researcher roles manifest in public health settings, we undertook a mixed methods programme of research which involved examining published literature and investigating a case study in which researchers were placed into Local Authority public health teams across England. This briefing presents a summary of our findings tailored for current and prospective embedded researchers.

Further resources

- You can read our research report in full [here](#)
- [Follow us](#) on X
- Join the FUSE Embedded Research in Council Network ([contact page here](#))
- Read about embedded researchers in the NHS: [Embedded Researcher Project](#)
- Read firsthand experiences of two embedded researchers in local government: [Dr. Alessia Rose](#) and [Dr. Sharea Ijaz](#)

Funding & funder involvement

This review was commissioned by the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) Policy Research Programme (PRP) for the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC). It was funded through a supplement to the NIHR PRP contract with the EPPI Centre at UCL (Reviews facility to support national policy development and implementation, PR-R6-0113-11003). The views expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and not necessarily those of the NHS, the NIHR or the DHSC.

Conflicts of interest and contributions

There were no conflicts of interest among the research team in the writing of this report. Nevertheless, the authors acknowledge that the funders of this research also funded a scheme of embedded research that was a focus of this research. The research team were supported by an Advisory Group that included some of those who commissioned or designed the scheme under consideration in this report. However, the findings and recommendations reflect the views of the authors, and the opinions expressed in this publication are not necessarily those of the EPPI Centre or the funders or the Advisory Group that supported this research. Responsibility for the views expressed remains solely with the authors.