

Review of Social Research in Department for Transport

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Front Page

Review of Social Research in Department for Transport

A report by Norman Glass, Jane Ritchie, Roger Thomas, Christopher Farrell, Lisa Calderwood

Foreword by Gillian Smith, Head of Social Research and Evaluation Division

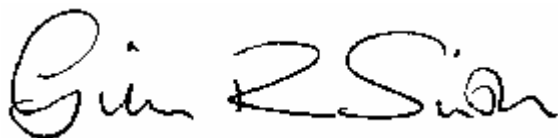
DfT are in the process of implementing a number of changes in the way we plan, manage and utilise science and research evidence. The action plan in the section below briefly sets out progress in implementing some of the improvements. These include:

- Publication of an Evidence and Research Strategy, available on the DfT website, which presents the Department's key evidence needs in an integrated way across all disciplines. The strategy places due emphasis on the need for evidence on social aspects of transport policies and the need to better understand the travel behaviour and attitudes of people and businesses who make use of and are affected by the transport system.
- Delivery of a number of key pieces of social research. For example, research on attitudes to road pricing played a major role in the July 2004 feasibility study report on road pricing.
- Re-definition of the central science and research function and the appointment of a Chief Scientific Advisor with a remit to improve the strategic direction, management and utilisation of science and research evidence.
- Re-organisation of the central social research function in DfT and setting up of a separate division in July 2004 dedicated to raising standards and working with de-centralised structures to develop appropriate arrangements for managing and utilising social research evidence, particularly the need for more specialist input into the process.
- Closer working with key stakeholders, including the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and contractors. This is in order to make better use of externally generated evidence and to build up capacity, bring in new blood and develop new methodologies and approaches. The ESRC for example, are currently giving serious consideration to funding a major programme of social science research on transport and mobility issues.

The review of social research reported here has helped to drive this process of change. The findings are summarised on below. The main ones are:

- The social/ human dimension is recognised as an important part of transport policy and there is a sense that the Department does not know enough about it.
- The Department needs to manage and utilise its existing stock of knowledge more effectively.
- But, some of the existing research is not of sufficient quality to constitute robust evidence of a standard needed for sound policy decisions.
- DfT needs to manage its social research in a more professional way.

One of the issues raised by the review is whether DfT needs to use a wider range of contractors to undertake social research for DfT in order to bring about the high standards that we are seeking to achieve. We will be pleased to hear from anyone interested in finding out more about DfT social research opportunities. Enquiries should be directed to Gillian Smith, Head of SRE, zone 4/16a, Great Minster House, 76 Marsham St, London SW1 4DR (Gillian.Smith@dft.gsi.gov.uk).



Gillian R Smith

Action plan

1. The review reported in October 2003. DfT are in the process of working to implement the findings, whilst recognising that many of the changes will take time to achieve and are dependent on the actions of the wider research community and the Research Councils as well as DfT.
2. Changes since this review reported can be summarised under four headings:
 - a. Re-organisation of the central social research function within DfT and setting up of a separate Social Research and Evaluation Division.
 - b. Publication of DfT's Evidence and Research Strategy
 - c. Re-definition of the Central Science and Research function and appointment of a Chief Scientific Advisor
 - d. Working closely with external stakeholders.

These are discussed in turn below.

a. Re-organisation of the central social research function within DfT and setting up of a separate Social Research and Evaluation Division with a remit to work with the de-centralised structures of DfT to develop appropriate arrangements for managing and using social research evidence.

The review concluded that:

"The quality of the social research currently carried out in DfT, at least based on our sample but supplemented by people's perceptions, is mixed and is worst where it involves collecting data using the core social research methods of qualitative and quantitative research". (para.131).

"DfT almost certainly needs to do more and better social research, and to manage it more effectively. To achieve this it is likely to need more social researchers"

"These (social researchers) will be easier to recruit into an appropriate professional structure, even if they are line managed locally"

"There is a strong argument for having a division led by a Grade 5 social researcher who could act as Head of Profession for Social Research"

In response DfT has re-organised resources to set up a new division - Social Research and Evaluation Division - to provide professional leadership, to improve linkages with the Office of the Government Chief Social Research Officer and with other stakeholders, to co-ordinate activity where appropriate and to commission cross cutting social research (e.g. on attitudinal aspects of road pricing) .

The central division is working with line divisions to discuss arrangements for putting in place arrangements for managing and using social research evidence and in some instances providing support directly from the central division.

b. Publication of the Evidence and Research Strategy

The review of social research found that there is:

an unsatisfied demand for research which emphasises the place of people in the transport system and which uses the methodology of the social sciences (including but going beyond economics and statistics) to provide this (para 131)

The new Evidence and Research Strategy addresses this by emphasising the importance of looking at DfT's evidence needs in a strategic and cross cutting way and is being used to inform the direction of DfT research programmes.

Issues highlighted include the need for evidence on social aspects of transport policy and the need to better understand the travel behaviour and attitudes of people and businesses who make use of and are affected by the transport system.

c. Re-definition of the Central Science and Research function and appointment of a Chief Scientific Advisor

The review found that :

in order to perform effectively the Department needs a corporate commitment to strengthen its knowledge management and not just the provision of social research. (para 133)

.....there needs to be a central research function, however organised, which is responsible for co-ordinating a research strategy; managing the departmental research programme process; making sure that the various research programmes, which will necessarily contain projects spanning the social / technological / economic divide, are coherent and that the interactions between modes and programmes is picked up.

In response, the Department is in the process of re-defining the role of the central function located in a re-vamped and newly named division - Research and Technology Strategy Division. The Department has also appointed a Chief Scientific Advisor - Professor Frank Kelly.

d. Working with Stakeholders

In addition DfT have been working with the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) who are considering whether to develop a major programme of social science research on mobility and transport issues

The review found that the external research base seems to be narrow, but that it was beyond the remit of the review to follow this up in detail.

It is hoped that a key objective of any programme will be building up capacity so that in the future there is a pool of researchers willing to work on transport issues and promote high methodological standards and fresh thinking.

Executive Summary

- The Department for Transport (DfT) commissioned the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) to look at the place of social research in DfT, whether more was needed, whether the quality was good enough and whether the Department had the right skills to do it. We were also asked whether the Department needed more social researchers and how they should be deployed. We did this principally through 26 in-depth interviews with DfT staff and others across Whitehall and a review of 17 research projects.
- Interviews with senior staff revealed a variety of views of what social research was, but a strong sense that the social / human dimension was an important part of transport policy, and some sense that the Department did not know enough about it. The role of social researchers as experts in the methodology and management of social research was not well understood. But there was a clear view that the fundamental question was **about how to provide the right kind and quality of evidence to inform and evaluate policies and their delivery.**
- Many officials are frustrated by their inability to access the policy information they need and by some of the inefficiencies within the process of generating the annual research programme. It would be better to think of the research programme as *one* way of meeting information needs. The challenge is then how to manage the Department's stock of policy knowledge rather than how to manage the research programme.
- Compared with some other departments, DfT is unusual in the way in which its policy environment is affected by both human and technical factors; in its arms-length relationship with many of its stakeholders; and in the extent to which various parts of the Department operated relatively autonomously in policy (and research) terms.
- There is no clear concept of a 'DfT research programme', other than administratively as a collection of submissions at the annual review. Rather it is seen as a series of directoral / divisional or modal programmes - which in turn are perceived to lack any coherence or strategic overview. Co-ordination is perceived to be weak and knowledge about ongoing research, both inside and outside the Department, is limited. In recent years research budgets, unlike in most other departments, have not been under pressure. This is largely because constraints on the available time of departmental research project managers limit what can be done. Ministerial involvement in the research programme is very limited.
- A number of criticisms were made by interviewees of DfT research. Our own review of the 17 social research projects provided to us suggests that many of these criticisms are accurate. **Once projects strayed beyond literature reviews or the eliciting of expert opinion and into social research methodology, the quality of the research projects we looked at tended to decline rapidly** with the consequence that the results could not be said to constitute robust evidence of a standard for sound policy decisions. This seems likely to be due to the fact that many of the projects are managed by people who are unlikely to know anything about research methodology, or to have research management as a high priority. There is a general sense that the external contractor base is limited. This is a widespread problem across government and needs active management.

- Research projects in DfT are managed in many different ways but the majority are managed by policy officials. If research projects are to be relevant and timely they are best *identified*, primarily, by those whose responsibility it is to develop and deliver policy, **but that does not mean they have to be commissioned and managed by policy officials**. The key point is to have a critical mass of people who are skilled in relevant research methods, and specialise in research management. Bedding out such a critical mass is one model which may suit DfT's decentralised ethos. Under such a model there would also be a need for a central function which can, take a strategic view, 'quality-assure', provide professional leadership where necessary, be the ginger group and the cement, make the connections with other government departments' programmes, and be the guardian of the longer-term. In some cases such a central function might also commission research - e.g. on crosscutting issues or where there was insufficient expertise elsewhere.
- DfT almost certainly needs to do more and better social research, and to manage it more effectively (whilst recognising a lot more of what it already does as having a social research component). To achieve this it is likely to need more social researchers. But, above all, it needs to manage its policy knowledge better. One model is to have at least four bedded-out multi-disciplinary Research and Intelligence divisions. These would have a remit to improve the access of policy makers to relevant policy knowledge, as well as to manage the research programme better. The central research and intelligence function should complement these bedded-out divisions, to ensure co-ordination, quality control and other strategic functions. To get to this vision, which is of course only one scenario, will require a top-level commitment, patience and some quick wins.

Introduction and Background

The Remit

1. The Department for Transport (DfT) commissioned the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) to carry out a review of social research in DfT in order to make recommendations about whether and how arrangements for obtaining social research evidence might be strengthened. The key issues to be covered were : quality, capacity and organisation. The key audience was to be senior departmental decision-makers and ministers.

2. We were asked to make recommendations in order that:

- The social research evidence commissioned by DfT is robust and focuses on the key issues and gaps in evidence;
- A sufficient quantity of social research is commissioned, reflecting the policy and operational needs of DfT. In particular that issues are not simply researched from a technical or engineering perspective but also from the perspective of users and potential users of the transport system;
- Policy evaluations are underpinned by robust social research evidence, where appropriate;
- There is a healthy external research community willing and able to carry out social research for DfT;
- The Department makes full use of the evidence that is generated and that the results are disseminated;
- The Department is able to fully utilise potentially useful social research evidence generated outside the Department. A key issue is our ability to assess the robustness of different pieces of evidence - for example, in ministerial briefings and in contributing to policy reviews.

3. The Department anticipated two phases to this research. The aims of the first phase were to be:

(i) To assess the quality of a sample of social research commissioned by DfT, including completed and ongoing projects;

(ii) To assess through consultation with key stakeholders in the Department whether the focus of the Departments research effort is appropriate (this should explore whether enough social research is being done within the Department, if it is covering the right issues, and whether there are valid reasons for current differences in the amount of social research commissioned in different parts of the Department);

(iii) To identify any areas where social research effort needs to be increased;

(iv) To explore the different processes across the Department through which social research is identified, commissioned and how it is used.

4. The aims of the second phase were to be:

(v) To determine whether and how far social research capacity in DfT needs to be strengthened (this assessment should take into account an assessment of the likely demand for social research evidence in the future);

(vi) To determine the types of skills needed to enable the Department to effectively identify, commission, manage and fully utilise social research evidence;

(vii) To identify options for how social research resources should be organised (e.g. bedded out in policy divisions or located in a central unit), including recommendations on the appropriate balance between in-house research and outsourcing;

(viii) Following on from the above, whether a separate social research programme needs to be set up and how big it should be, or alternatively whether social research should (as at present) be commissioned via existing research programmes.

5. In the event, as this report shows, even though we were only commissioned to carry out Phase 1 we have largely anticipated Phase 2 because much of the evidence needed for the second phase was being gathered in this first phase. It would, therefore, have been artificial not to go on to make recommendations about organisation and capacity given that the evidence was fresh in our minds. *If our recommendations are accepted we do not think there would be a need for a full-blown Phase 2*, although there are still areas that need further examination such as the external research contractor base, where we were asked not to collect evidence from contractors themselves.

Methodology

6. In consultation with DfT officials we agreed that the report would be based on evidence derived from: 22 interviews with officials in DfT; an examination of 20 projects 12 quantitative and 8 qualitative (it was agreed later that 17 of these should be completed projects and 3 ongoing). In the event we have carried out 26 interviews involving 39 people, two of them with 'outsiders' from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and the Cabinet Office; but only 17 project reviews.

Project Reviews

7. A universe of recent 'social science research' projects at DfT was identified for us (in consultation) by the Transport Research Unit (TRU) and was stratified to ensure that the main DfT social research programmes were appropriately represented in the sample. The original idea of stratifying projects into 'quantitative' and 'qualitative' did not work very well in DfT because some projects (such as literature reviews and 'think pieces') did not properly fit into either category and there were many projects that had both qualitative and quantitative elements. After some discussion of which types of project could properly be counted as 'research', it was decided to give all types a chance of inclusion in the sample. Selection of the sample of projects was then done randomly, to avoid any suggestion that they had been handpicked as being good or bad of their kind.

8. Once the projects had been selected, files of documents, including wherever possible *project specifications, research proposals and reports*, were retrieved with the indispensable help of TRU, and inspected by members of the NatCen team. Most of our conclusions result from our scrutiny of those three types of document. Seventeen projects, believed to have been completed, were reviewed. The original intention to include 3 'in-progress' projects was changed because several of the seventeen selected as 'completed' had in fact not reached the final reporting stage. Our review work suggested that reference to the final report was essential to quality assessment. In the meantime we had been asked to do more interviews than originally intended.

9. It was recognised at the outset that the sample of projects was too small to provide more than a dipstick test of the most typical features and the quality of social research conducted by and for DfT. By the same token our findings cannot possibly be used to compare the quality of research across programmes. Nevertheless this part of our study complemented well the interviews, providing examples of points and tendencies that we had picked up from the interviews and giving us a 'feel' for the types of research that are frequent in DfT.

10. The projects were reviewed using a standardised appraisal framework (see Appendix A). The documents inspected to appraise a project included the specification, notes on the tender assessment, the accepted proposal, interim reports, final draft reports or guidelines, published reports and guidelines and contract files.

11. A feature that struck us in screening the universe of social research projects was that ones that involve what we in NatCen would regard as large-scale quantitative social science data collection operations, are quite rare in DfT. However, that perception is partly an artefact because several such operations, including the DfT's National Travel Survey, are not regarded internally as 'social science

research' and by some are not viewed 'research' at all, but as belonging to a separate domain of 'statistics'. We were not specifically asked to look at these statistical surveys.

Consultative Interviews

12. The DfT staff who took part in the interviews came from a range of different divisions and units, spanning three Directorate-Generals. Twenty-six interviews were carried out involving 39 people as follows:

Directors General	3
Directors	6
Divisional managers	9
Research managers and project officers	10
Analytical Head of Professions, researchers and statisticians in TRU, Science and Technology Policy division (STP) and other central units	8
DWP and Cabinet Office	3

13. The interviews were exploratory and interactive in form based on a topic guide (see Appendix B). They were carried out on either an individual basis or with two or three people from the same unit or division together and lasted between 1 to 1½ hours.

14. All the interviews were tape-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. They were analysed using Framework, a matrix based method of qualitative analysis developed by NatCen. The method involves the systematic ordering and synthesis of verbatim material within a set of thematic charts. The charts allow both thematic analyses across interviews and the identification of linkages within.

15. We were provided with background documents on the Department's research strategy and consulted basic source documents such as the Ten Year Plan and associated material. We also had informal discussions with members of the Steering Group overseeing the project. The Steering Group met formally twice.

Social Research and Social Researchers

Making a Distinction

16. It was clear to us from the discussions with DfT officials and the Steering Group that we were being asked to look at two different groups of questions:

(1) Is the Department carrying out 'enough' social research? Is the quality of the research good enough? Has the Department the capacity - internal and external - to identify and carry out the social research it wants and to make appropriate use of it? Does it manage this research well?

(2) Does the Department need more 'social researchers' (meaning by this individuals who belong to the Social Research Officer professional group)? How should it use social researchers? What is the role of social researchers relative to other professionals within DfT?

17. These two sets of questions overlap but they are conceptually distinct: much of what is identifiable as social research has traditionally been carried out by people who are not social researchers and much that social researchers do or can do goes beyond the research programme. So if the answer to the first question was that the DfT needed to do more and better social research and to manage it better, the solution might not be to employ more social researchers but, for example, to give social research a higher profile and more priority and offer better training to existing research managers. Similarly even if the Department were doing the right amount of social research in the right way, it might be that this was more efficiently done through using social researchers than through present arrangements.

What is Social Research?

18. In our interviews with DfT officials we found a variety of views about what social research is and even, from time to time, a certain sheepishness about trying to define it. This is not entirely surprising since there is not a consensus out there either. If social research is research which uses the methods and approaches of the social sciences, and if social sciences are, as the recent Commission on the Social Sciences (2003) says, about "disciplined curiosity about societies in which we all live, leading to the creation and sharing of social knowledge," there is still room for debate about where the boundaries of social sciences are drawn and what constitutes good social science as opposed to bad social science. But the word 'disciplined' is key: in social science as in other forms of science it is not the case that 'anything goes' and there is increasing consensus about what constitutes good research methodology whether in quantitative or in qualitative work.

19. It is interesting to note that the Commission on Social Sciences, which reported under the auspices of the Academy of Learned Societies for the Social Sciences, included both economics and statistics under the heading of social sciences, whereas in government there is a tendency to separate these two disciplines off from 'social research' and, as we shall see, this tendency is reflected in how social research is viewed in the Department.

20. We did not offer our DfT interviewees a definition of social research but rather sought to bring out how people thought of it. Definitions were variable but commonly encompassed either 'people' based research (most frequently behaviours, attitudes, motivations, choices etc of individuals or, sometimes, processes or systems within organisations), or the study of some feature of, or group within, society. In the former context, some people aligned social research with consumer or market research; in the latter context with policy monitoring and evaluation. Generally people found the concept of social research harder to grasp than that of technical or engineering research (which was about things like machines, road surfaces, traffic signals etc).

21. Some people drew a distinction between social research and social statistics although others were clearly of the view that studies like the National Travel Survey (NTS) were social research. Those who did distinguish said things like: statistics are the 'hard evidence' or 'plain facts', while social research asks 'why' or what people 'feel'. Some said explicitly that they saw social research as more

qualitative, others certainly implied this in their descriptions. Also implicit was the notion that social research was somehow at the 'softer' end of methods of enquiry than gathering statistics. It was alluded to as "touchy, feely, girlie sort of research" by one division; another respondent said, rather more critically, that much of the Department sees social research as "pink and fluffy".

22. Some people were of the view that it was both artificial and unhelpful to define social research as a distinct category. This was either because there was resistance to 'putting things in boxes' which could be misleading or lead to false distinctions; or because it was not the most helpful way to 'label' the different forms of research undertaken - or needed - by the DfT. Embedded within the latter perspective was the view that most of the Department's research had a social dimension that could not be factored out. But for exactly the same reason, others said that it was helpful to clarify what social research was so people would realise that this is what they are doing - or need to do - in much of their work. There were calls for greater clarification of the roles of social research - and promotion of those roles - from the centre.

23. For many people, the debate surrounding social research and how it is defined is seen as a secondary issue. Much more important is the need for the right kind of evidence through which to inform and evaluate policy and delivery. This evidence might come from research (engineering, physical, social, etc), economic modelling, statistical intelligence, evaluative research - the important thing was to identify what information was needed and use an appropriate method to acquire it. Such a view is well summed up in the following statement;

"It's quite a convenient thing for people to say "there isn't enough social research"....let's be clear what we think we don't know and do the appropriate research for it, rather than saying we have got to spend half our research budget on social research."

The Demand for Social Research

24. We began our interviews with policy officials by asking about their policy priorities and their relationship to published strategies such as the Ten Year Plan. The Department's role has been changing and it is clear that a key part of the Department's function is to ensure that its transport strategies are effectively and appropriately delivered as well as developed. This means ensuring 'compliance' from a range of organisations and individuals including:

- Other transport agencies and authorities (e.g. the Highways Agency and the Strategic Rail Authority);
- Local or regional authorities;
- Transport providers;
- Trade unions / associations;
- Manufacturers of transport equipment;
- Transport users;
- 'The public'.

25. It is perhaps not surprising therefore that, *without exception*, the policy divisions listed at least one - and often more than one - priority that requires an understanding of people's behaviours, attitudes, practices, decisions etc and / or how to change them; or insights into organisational processes and how they can be made most effective. For example:

- Delivery of improved local transport systems, particularly in terms of reduced congestion and accessibility for people without cars (Integrated Local Transport Division);
- Modernisation of the freight industry so that it is more profitable and socially and environmentally beneficial (Freight);

- Road safety including physical and engineering aspects as well as driver behaviour (Road Transport);
- Influencing stakeholders to provide effective travel information in their own spheres (Transport Direct);
- Stakeholder relations and improving communications with them (Transport Strategy and Delivery).

26. **Policy priorities such as these, whilst requiring social investigation, are not always cited as areas of 'social research' need.** All the policy divisions in DfT cited at least one policy priority that will require social research to provide the understanding or intelligence needed to progress policy development. They were mainly cited as evidence requirements, rather than specific research needs, and as such will need further detailing and discussion before they can become feasible research projects or programmes. There were few 'smoking guns' where policy officials cried out for social research as such but that is, in effect, what they wanted. Clearly this is work which needs to be done internally by DfT policy and research staff. But all of these priorities call for information about how 'people' engage with the transport system, whether they are users, local authority planners, transport system managers or employees within the transport industry.

27. Within these priorities, there was much general reference (implicitly or explicitly) to research requirements surrounding the Ten Year Transport Plan. These included, for example: research surrounding stakeholder relations to deliver an integrated transport strategy; the impact of transport on the environment; ways of establishing a credible roads strategy; and the impact of increased capital expenditure by local authorities as part of developing Local Transport Plans. Other research requirements, although linked to the broader aims of the transport strategy, relate to specific modal issues (e.g. better understanding of aircraft emissions on health; balancing public requirements for rail reliability, safety and cost). In addition, there are some research priorities which are responsive to more recent initiatives or crises - for example congestion charging, fuel economy; impact of transport on social exclusion - although again broadly within the overall integrated transport strategy.

28. At an even more general level, there were persistent calls for a better understanding of how people view current transport policy and initiatives; how people's views and requirements impact on travel patterns; and the social impact and consequences of travel behaviours and choices. Alongside this, there was felt to be a need for greater understanding of how to make people act differently in relation to travel, either by understanding more about current motivations and decisions or by exploring responses to the '*hard choices*' that have to be made in transport planning and delivery.

29. Below are some examples of specific areas in which social research was felt to be needed¹ to advance or inform policy planning or implementation:

Roads

- Public responses to potential / alternative road scheme designs.
- Attitudes to different forms of road pricing / charging systems and technologies.

Car usage

- Driver responses to fuel economies / barriers to taking action.
- Unlicensed vehicles - impact of current policies on owners / barriers to change.
- Public responses to taxation for more sustainable methods of vehicle use.

¹ It is quite possible that research on some of these issues was already underway at the time of the interviews, particularly on projects being conducted outside of the main research programmes. Nevertheless this was unknown to the contributors.

Local transport

- Interactions between transport systems and land use and their impact on local communities.
- Factors influencing adverse responses to bus prioritisation measures and how to change them.
- Ways of meeting transport needs of people living in rural communities.
- Greater understanding of patterns of social exclusion related to transport policy and delivery.

Rail

- Understanding of the 'social environment' within which railways operate.
- Causes of / inhibitors to vandalism on railways.

Air

- Impact of aircraft noise on health.

Freight

- Reasons for modes and routes for freight carrying / barriers to making changes.

New technologies

- Responses to / barriers to use of new transport technologies.

Transport use and barriers

- Transport behaviours / decisions within different ethnic minority communities.
- Refinement of behavioural variables used in economic and transport models.
- Barriers to different forms of transport use among specific population subgroups.
- Greater understanding of social exclusion related to transport policy and delivery.

Transport information

- Evaluation of transport information services, their users and their uses.

Policy implementation

- Organisational and procedural responses to policy implementation by regional bodies.

30. It is not clear from our research how many of the topics referred to in this way, where people felt that such information was relevant to their work, are or have been the subject of research projects but it did seem clear that there was little awareness of any relevant research.

31. With few exceptions, people were able to identify examples of issues or problems that required - or were the subject of - social research within their division or directorate. Responses were of two types, depending on the person's breadth of vision about social research:

- Those with a more restricted vision of social research (mainly the traditional high tech divisions) tended to cite fewer and more specific examples of relevance to their work, often leaving aside key policy priorities that were clear candidates for social enquiry. Even here, however, once policy officials spoke about the issues which were important for delivery or policy development it was striking how often 'social' issues such as vandalism, deprivation, access or inclusion were seen as key.

- Those with a wider vision listed numerous areas where social research was needed, usually covering areas of high policy priority. Indeed, as is indicated above, several people in this group saw social research as central to much of the Department's activity, including the behavioural assumptions underpinning economic modelling.

32. There is again a divide in views about whether the appropriate level of priority is given to social research within the Department. Not unexpectedly, the split follows the narrow / broad vision of social research described in the section above. For those who believed that more social research was needed there was a tendency to contrast social research with the Department's traditional reliance in many areas on engineering solutions or use of established economic models. But economics was seen as relying on too narrow a view of human motivation ('Why won't twenty-year-olds use buses - it's not because they can't afford them'), and engineering, in many cases, to address the symptoms rather than the causes. Amongst such people, who saw social research as generally under-utilised and grossly neglected, there were strong calls for a much greater priority to be given to social research right across the Department's research programme.

33. Meanwhile those with the narrower vision see the level of social research as at about the right level (or even a little over utilised) - or see the whole debate as rather irritatingly irrelevant.

34. There are certain divisions that are commonly cited as being neglectful of social research - these are Aviation, Maritime, Freight and Rail. Others are seen as major users of social research - commonly cited as Roads and Local Transport. Mostly the narrow / broad divide groups described exactly mirror these perceptions in our interview data but even here there were examples such as freight where the discussion was full of examples of the need for social enquiry.

35. Our view is that the 'underinvestment' in, or lack of awareness of, social research in DfT reflects a neglect of the interaction between people and transport and the rather narrow conception that many people in DfT have of social research, although this is not a question we put to people in so many words.

36. There was very little support for a separate social research programme. It was thought that this is not a useful way to distinguish a stream of research and that it would be too hard to pigeonhole research as only 'social'.

37. We did not interview ministers and, given that there was a change in junior ministers in the course of the review, views on ministerial attitudes to social research, which were second-hand and not always consistent, are probably not worth recording. But even here there did seem to be agreement that ministers felt that there was not enough cross-departmental research or behavioural research and wanted more information on the delivery and effectiveness of the Ten Year Plan.

Social Researchers and Social Research Skills

38. Practice in the use of Social Researchers - the professional group in the Civil Service - varies across departments. At one end of the spectrum is the Home Office which employs over 200 social researchers and still uses its social researchers to carry out social research, although it commissions most of this from outside contractors. In the middle is what we call the 'mainstream model' exemplified by Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) and the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), where social researchers may do some research themselves but spend the large majority of time commissioning and managing external research and providing research based briefings. DfT, along with the Department for Health (DoH) and the Department for Trade and Industry (DTI) are at the other end of the spectrum in having very few social researchers.

39. In reality the picture is much more complicated and reflects, among other things, history, the nature of the policy problems and the traditional role occupied by various professional groups in particular policy areas. In the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), for example, much of what might be considered social research is managed by economists; in DoH the

statisticians play a much more prominent role. Responsibility for research in DWP, for example, is largely centralised in a division of social researchers, although there are social research teams in other analytical units. In DfT there is a group of social researchers in a central division (the Transport Research Unit (TRU)) but also some social researchers 'bedded out' in the Road Safety division.

40. Although attitudes towards social researchers in the Department were mixed, depending on individual experience, there was a general feeling that research ought to be managed close to the policy front line and some suspicion of central units, although many people appreciated the advice that they got from a central unit, in particular TRU. We discuss proposals for the organisation of research later on but it is clear that, given the Department's relative unfamiliarity with social researchers, there remains a big marketing job to sell the role of social researchers, as well as social research, within DfT.

41. An important part of the skills of applied social scientists, which is what social researchers are, is knowing how to collect information about members of the public, their circumstances, their behaviour, their attitudes and so on. There is a well-developed spectrum of methods for achieving effective data collection, which ranges from in-depth, small scale qualitative research to standardised, quantitative, social surveys based on large probability samples, which are often the province of statisticians.

42. Survey design requires many skills, including skills in the design of data collection instruments such as questionnaires, skills in study and sample design and skills in data analysis. Such quantitative skills will often be shared with statisticians and economists, although typically these disciplines will tend to be less knowledgeable about qualitative research. Equally as important as these scientific discipline-based skills are skills in the planning, management and quality control of field and processing operations on a large scale, and the management of smaller scale projects, so as to ensure that the results arrive on time, to budget and, most importantly, answer the questions that were posed with robust and credible evidence. In most departments it is this combination of skills (including procurement skills) and their ability to bring research findings to bear on policy development and implementation which has given social researchers the pre-eminent role in the organisation and management of the research programme.

Summary

43. We were asked to look at the place of social research in DfT, whether more was needed, whether the quality was good enough and whether the Department had the right skills to do it. We were also asked about whether the Department needed more social researchers and how they should be deployed. Interviews with senior staff revealed a variety of views of what social research was, but a strong sense that the social / human dimension was an important part of transport policy, and some sense that the Department did not know enough about it. The role of social researchers as experts in the methodology and management of social research was not well understood. But there was a clear view that the fundamental question was not about social research or social researchers **but about how to provide the right kind and quality of evidence to inform and evaluate policies and their delivery.**

Back to First Principles - What is the Need ?

Information or Research?

44. Our discussions with DfT officials revealed that there is a considerable demand for information of a social kind relevant to meeting the Department's objectives, even among those who did not feel happy with the term 'social research'. But a recurring theme in all our discussions was a widespread dissatisfaction about the availability of relevant information to support policy development and monitoring.

45. Dissemination of research evidence within DfT, whether internally or externally commissioned, is generally seen as poor. The two main criticisms are its alleged lack of systemisation and of a centralised database.

46. Comments about dissemination of DfT research findings were generally critical of the current methods - or lack of them. A number of problems were identified including:

- Too much dependency on long written reports / too paper-based;
- 'Silo' working such that people don't consider the relevance of their research for other divisions;
- No centralised 'bank' of evidence on specific subjects (which means people generally have to gather together for themselves);
- No centralised mailing list;
- Not all reports get published, even though this is a requirement of the research programme (although not of 'research' commissioned through other routes).

47. Generally, it was seen as a rather haphazard process with no guarantee that divisions would get to hear of relevant evidence unless there was some specific connection. No-one could describe any clear system for dissemination, other than perhaps looking on the web. There was a widespread call for improvement.

48. Ways to improve dissemination were suggested as follows:

- A centralised responsibility for dissemination;
- Circulation of summaries of key findings (in short and accessible form) of all research, preferably collated within specific subject areas;
- Seminars on specific pieces of work (some are already organised and were thought to be well received);
- A newsletter (of the kind put out on housing by ODPM or by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation) which acts as a 'bulletin board' about new research evidence.

49. Acquiring knowledge about transport research produced outside of DfT was generally said to be difficult and rather a 'hit and miss' affair, heavily dependent on the connections made by particular expert staff members. Again, the perceived lack of any centralised digest of research evidence or regular medium for reporting meant that people only got to hear about new research either by word of mouth or by reading about it in the press or transport magazines. This was not felt to be satisfactory and a more systemised process was needed. Suggestions for this included newsletters or centralised sources which people could visit when they wanted an overview of research evidence (internal or external) in a particular field. The feasibility of setting up a transport-wide database (of both internal and external research) was questioned in terms of both the resources needed to compile and maintain it and the extent to which it would be used.

50. A second theme to emerge from our discussions was a tendency to see the research programme almost as an end in itself - "in the beginning was the research programme" - rather than as part of a more general information problem. The issue was one of putting together and managing the research programme, which was often seen as a chore, rather than as a means of acquiring helpful information.

51. These two issues taken together - poor dissemination and the research programme seen as just another annual chore - were causing frustration among those who wanted information but could not find it easily; and scepticism about the value of research, with low priority being given to the management of research in some cases.

Managing Knowledge

52. Our assessment is that this frustration arises because the Department has not focussed enough on managing knowledge as a resource.

53. Information is required for a variety of purposes. Some of this is *contextual* - In what parts of the country is the population increasing / falling? How is the level and distribution of incomes changing? What proportion of the population is projected to be in work in ten years' time? What is the trend in car-ownership among young people? Other information is more specifically related to *policy development* - what works in congestion charging? What new forms of traffic management are opened up by recent technical developments in in-car systems? What programmes seem to be successful in reducing vandalism and anti-social behaviour on public transport?

54. Information is also needed for *monitoring* the impact or delivery of programmes - Is congestion being reduced? What progress has been made on the road programme? Is bus patronage growing? Are pollutant emissions being reduced? Another sort of information is *evaluation* information - Has a particular piece of new planning guidance had the desired transport effect? Has the Home Zone policy worked in terms of reducing accidents or other desirable impacts? What are the costs and benefits of a particular light rail development?

55. All of this information is important for delivering ministers' policy objectives, but not all of it has to be derived from the research programme. The research programme is only one part of a larger 'knowledge economy' consisting of management information, statistics, policy research, market research, modelling data, operational research, engineering research and so on.

56. Most of this information already exists in the Department or out there - 'new' research, as embodied in the research programme (or research programmes), should be thought of as a flow adding to this stock. Managing the stock should be given as much (if not more) importance as managing the flow.

57. At present, however, for institutional reasons, much more management time is given to the procedures for *adding* to the stock than for making intelligent use of the existing stock. What is required is an attitude which attaches as much importance to identification, collation, interpretation and dissemination of existing knowledge as it does to the acquisition of new knowledge through the research programme.

58. The approach recommended in DWP, for example, is to take the various Public Service Agreement (PSA) objectives and for the research branch, working with other analytical professionals and the relevant policy divisions "to identify....what information is required to achieve those objectives and whether we've already got it or whether there are gaps".

59. One of the ways of filling those gaps may well be through using the research programme to commission this work, but some gaps may be more efficiently filled through improvements to existing statistical series or through the acquisition and more intelligent use of management information (collected both by DfT and its collaborative agencies and providers). With this way of working, the research programme is the *last* resort not the first; and it emerges from a process which has ensured that there is as little re-invention of the wheel or duplication as possible, so that every research project is a wanted research project.

60. Knowledge management is, however, more than looking at existing gaps and rushing to fill them. It is sad but true that well-designed research, the sort that is likely to answer convincingly the policy research question, will often take time and is very unlikely to coincide with ministerial timetables. The temptation in those circumstances is to rush for the 'quick and dirty' on the grounds that some information is better than none. But whereas it is true that research that is not timely is useless (at least in the short run), the converse is not true - research that is timely is not necessarily useful. Sometimes it is better to know nothing than to know something that is wrong (and spend large sums of money being misled).

61. The solution is to take the long-term view. The manager of research in DWP referred to that Department's "very mature evidence base" by which he meant that there were few really new policy research topics on which no research evidence existed. Knowledge management with a longer-term view will ensure that there are people who make it their business, over the years, to develop the policy-oriented knowledge base both through the Department's own research programmes and through constant contacts, interactions and two-way traffic in ideas with outside experts in relevant policy fields.

62. Within such a well-structured picture of the Department's knowledge needs, agreed as a three year rolling programme with policy directorates and ministers, these aims were, in DWP, typically advanced by mixed research groups made up of economists, social researchers and other experts. Of course, emergency demands for research will still occur and need to be responded to, but this should be easier against the background of a mature, well-digested and well-understood evidence base.

Summary

63. Many officials are frustrated by their inability to access the policy information they need and by some of the inefficiencies within the process of generating the annual research programme. It would be better to think of the research programme as *one* way of meeting information needs. The challenge is then how to manage the Department's stock of policy knowledge rather than how to manage the research programme.

How is DfT Different?

Three particularities

64. Before examining the current social research programme and how research is currently organised in DfT, and making proposals to improve the research and intelligence function in the light of this appreciation of the 'knowledge economy', it is worth examining how DfT differs from other departments both generally, and when it comes to social research.

65. One important difference is that the work of DfT spans *to an unusual degree* the human and technological and this is reflected in the Department's research programme. It would be perverse not to recognise that, at the level of practical research skills and knowledge, experimental testing of the abrasive qualities of road surfacing materials has little in common with exploring the psychological barriers to elderly persons' use of public transport. Nevertheless, there is a wide range of DfT policy research areas, such as road safety, for example, where technologists must, can, and often do communicate successfully with social scientists. In this way it is very different from a department like the DWP, for example, where research is almost exclusively social or the environmental part of DEFRA, which is predominantly scientific and technical. Its nearest equivalent may be the DoH.

66. DfT has to have a capacity to understand both the technology and the implications for people and the interaction between these two. In addition economics has always played an important role in DfT thinking.

67. The implication of this is that the Department needs a way of managing its research and intelligence function which is not solely 'social', nor scientific / technical, nor economic, but integrates information from these various perspectives so as to focus on the policy problem.

68. The second respect in which DfT differs from some other departments is that, in important areas, the Department is not the primary deliverer of systems and services. It has either given these over to be delivered by competitive (or at least commercial) private organisations, which are regulated at arm's length or the programme is delivered by local authorities and agencies.

69. One upshot of this is that, in some areas like rail, for example, the Department appears to have very deliberately decided to cut itself off from much of the data and information which an outsider might think it required to monitor and promote its ministers' policies. At the very least, it is highly dependent for such information on the commercial judgement of private organisations and must make the best use of whatever information the private organisations and other arms' length bodies happen to collect, or can be persuaded to collect. A further consequence of this is that in important areas it may also have lost the 'intelligent customer' function to acquire the information it needs and to interpret it skilfully. Since it is still held responsible for the success or failure of the policies, it appears to have responsibility without the research power it needs to do its job.

70. Finally, there is the issue of whether it is possible to talk about a 'DfT' research programme. We were constantly struck, in our interviews, by the way one part of the Department did not know, or indeed in many cases appear to care, about what was going on (in research terms at least) in other parts of the Department. Whether this is reprehensible or simply unavoidable is not part of our remit; but the practical consequence is that a single (social) research division to cover the whole department would simply not correspond to the way in which the Department currently thinks of itself and operates.

Summary

71. Compared with some other departments, DfT is unusual in the way in which its policy environment is affected by both human and technical factors; in its recent move to a very arms-length relationship with many of its stakeholders; and in the extent to which various parts of the Department operated relatively autonomously in policy (and research) terms.

The Research Programme

72. We have now looked at the demand for social research in DfT and the role of social researchers and suggested that these need to be set in a wider context of the way in which DfT provides itself with policy information; we have also looked at what is special about DfT. It is time to turn to the way in which research is carried out.

Formulating the Research Programme

73. What is very striking, from our interviews, is that there is no clear concept of a 'DfT research programme' other than administratively as a collection of submissions at the annual review. Rather it is seen as a series of directoral / divisional or modal programmes - which in turn lack any coherence or strategic overview.

74. The way in which the annual call for research ideas and projects is handled appears to vary across directorates and divisions. The main differences relate to

- *The seniority of staff involved:* some divisions involve a wide range of programme managers in putting forward ideas, in other areas it seems to be more centrally decided at a senior level.
- *The extent of consultation:* some divisions consult quite widely about future research areas. This may be internally with other divisions in the Department; or externally with related authorities or agencies, transport operators, academics etc.
- *The involvement of TRU / STP:* some divisions will consult STP or TRU whilst preparing ideas for the programme, others make no reference to this.
- *The need for rationalisation:* the extent to which divisions have more research ideas than they can cope with is variably mentioned. In cases where they do, some have divisional meetings to agree what to prioritise, in others this seems to be left to more senior staff.

75. The main advantage of the current system is seen as being that research is generated by those close to policy so that it is relevant, meets current needs and is not academic. The main criticisms are:

- That quick-fire generation within divisions creates compartmentalisation of research and programmes that are short term and reactive;
- That the process is variably handled and 'unsystematic';
- That there is sometimes a feeling of 'filling the research budget' rather than focussing on priority strategic research needs;
- That this can lead to ill thought through projects or 'half baked ideas'.

76. In the comments of senior staff, in particular there are concerns that the divisionally-based bottom-up generation of the programme, means that:

- The programme is seen as fragmented, comprising 'a mass of individual projects' belonging to different programmes which lack any coherence;
- There is a perception of a lack of any strategic thinking about issues which are relevant to the Department as a whole and the impact and perceptions of its central policies - in this context, the recent attempts by TRU to view the programme more strategically were welcomed by some;
- Insufficient attention is thought to be given to longer term / future policy concerns;

- There is an inadequately sorted mixture of existing research being rolled forward from one year to another and new research ideas being put up for approval, giving ministers no guidance on how to steer the research programme to meet their own policy priorities. (More recently we are aware that ministers have been given the opportunity to comment on the strategic direction of the programme).

Co-ordinating the Process

77. Clearly a highly decentralised process of this kind requires some form of co-ordination. The Department already operates one possible model in the Directorate Research Committee which oversees the largest research programme (over 200 projects spanning both Integrated Local Transport and Transport Strategy directorates²). But there were doubts about the effectiveness of this committee because:

- The 'sift' of projects that it carries out is based on very limited information - and occurs too late in the process;
- It was very difficult to keep everyone in touch with what was happening across the directorates through the work of one committee;
- The committee is not sufficiently challenging - it needs a smaller group to make sure ideas are sound and workable propositions for research and are properly prioritised.

78. TRU's role in co-ordinating the programme is generally welcomed. But even with this much needed centralised input there is criticism that the programme has to be put together "at breakneck speed", due to lack of resources and forward planning. There is insufficient time to scrutinise the individual submissions and not enough background to judge their worth.

79. There were concerns about people's ability to know what research was going on in the Department. Generally it was felt that mechanisms for internal communication about research were limited and "not as good as they should be". It was said to be hard to keep in touch with what was going on in other parts of the Department, unless there was some specific reason for liaison or there was some joint initiative in hand. There was a lot of collective knowledge in people's heads, but very little time to go and find out what was happening elsewhere. There was a sense that the Department was, in some cases, missing out on opportunities for synergy in research because there was insufficient co-operation between divisions in projects being undertaken (for example the link between charging and local transport and traffic management studies). This strongly suggests the need for a central function to spot such interactions.

80. A further difficulty arises with sources of social enquiry commissioned outside of the research programme, through consultancy budgets. This leads to a further lack of co-ordination - one interviewee, for example, was able to identify a number of different ways in which the attitudes of DfT stakeholders are monitored. In some cases work does not appear in the research programme and there is no clear record of what is being done - or how much is being spent on it. Consequently there was a potential for overlap between such work and the research and statistical programmes. Also normal 'research' conditions do not necessarily apply, such as the requirement to publish, and, as such, it was described as a "very grey area" that needs rationalisation

81. Satisfaction with knowledge of what research was going on outside was also variable. Some divisions had good professional networks, but there were problems in knowing what was going on in local authorities and there were problems of knowing about unpublished work produced by some of the operators. The process of knowing what was going on seemed random and haphazard. Similarly, there was some knowledge of related research in other departments, but much of this was informal

² NB: this research programme has now split up

and there was a sense that it should be made more formal. It was recognised, however, that joint initiatives were not always easy to manage.

Research Budgets

82. What is very striking in DfT, compared with other departments with which we come into contact, is that there appears to be very little pressure on departmental research budgets as a whole and the distribution of research budgets between divisions and directorates is relatively uncontroversial. A number of people commented that a lack of money had never placed a constraint on the research they needed to do or that their research budget was rarely fully used. There seem to be at least three reasons for this:

- **The amount of research that can be done is limited by staff time and resources**, not budgetary constraints. This was mentioned recurrently right across the Department;
- There are a number of other sources that can be used to collect the evidence required. These include funds for specific initiatives (e.g. Transport Direct; the modernisation fund; research on the congestion charge); or separate budgets for things like consultancy, demonstration projects, statistics etc;
- The departmental budget has remained stable despite the lack of resources to manage the research.

83. It was also said that acquiring funding for research projects in-year was not a problem because delays in commissioning or slippage meant that there was usually spare cash around. This may then be appropriated to support research commissioned at short notice, not necessarily with poor justification, but outside the main programme and not subject to whatever strategic principles and priorities have informed it.

The Role of Ministers

84. Ministers have to approve the annual research programme and have a final veto on whether individual projects are carried out. They make these judgements on the basis of project summaries, with a common pro-forma supplied by TRU. They receive a large number of submissions at one time, and the perception was that the summaries, however cogently presented, gave ministers very little to go on. Perhaps for this reason the response of ministers was often reactive, in terms of saying what they did not approve of rather than identifying issues to be researched. There was some suggestion that it might be possible to make the process more incremental, excluding projects where there were already commitments, so that there was more of a sense that ministers were making decisions (which is usually what ministers like to do).

85. It is interesting to compare this process with the arrangements in DWP. At the time of interview, a junior minister chaired the Analytical Services Committee, which drew up a three-year research strategy. Against this background, in December, members of the central social research division liaised with individual policy customers to identify their new research requirements. These requirements were then prioritised at a directorate and then at a group level. The programme was then put to the Analytical Services Committee, chaired by the junior minister, to consider it against the department's strategic priorities and cross cutting issues. Finally the draft programme was put to individual policy ministers for approval. DWP has, of course, more ministers than DfT but it may be worth pursuing this idea for greater ministerial involvement further.

Summary

86. There is no clear concept of a 'DfT research programme', other than administratively as a collection of submissions at the annual review. Rather it is seen as a series of directoral / divisional or modal programmes - which in turn are perceived to lack any coherence or strategic overview. Co-ordination is perceived to be weak and knowledge about ongoing research, both inside and outside the Department, is limited. Research budgets, unlike in most other departments, are not under pressure.

Review of Social Research in Department for Transport

This is largely because constraints on the available time of departmental research project managers limit what can be done. Ministerial involvement in the research programme is very limited.

Quality of Research

87. The principal source of evidence on the quality of DfT social research was the 17 research projects that we examined in detail. These were drawn from across the full range of social research carried out within the Department and we are very grateful to TRU for providing us with these materials. But we also asked about quality in the course of our interviews and these responses are summarised immediately below.

DfT Perceptions

88. The quality of research commissioned by DfT was thought to be mixed. This was felt to be because:

- It depended heavily on individual programme and project managers, who themselves differed in their skills and experience;
- It was as good as the specifications that were written, which varied in quality;
- It was affected by short time scales and small budgets;
- The contractor base is limited and therefore research commissioners cannot always get higher quality organisations and agencies to do the work needed;
- Formalised systems, based on agreed criteria, for ensuring quality are very limited.

89. Steering groups were suggested by some people one of the ways to ensure quality although they were not always in place.

90. The main criticisms of research quality were

- Poor fieldwork response rates;
- Inaccessibility of reports, particularly when their results were intended for parts of the transport industry;
- Too much description and not enough analysis and interpretative commentary;
- Qualitative research of a limited quality;
- Concerns about specific contractors;
- Poor documentation of research methods and how research was done.

Analysis of Projects

91. The 17 projects we looked at varied in content from literature reviews and expert 'think' pieces through to projects which required the collection of new data using either or both of qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews and quantitative methods such as surveys. The quality was highly variable - one was excellent, the rest ranged from good to poor or very poor. In some cases the final report was not available yet and overdue.

92. In general DfT specifications were characterised by saying what outputs are wanted but rarely what methods were expected to be used to achieve these. There is nothing wrong with allowing tenderers preparing proposals some room for manoeuvre and creativity, but leaving the design entirely to providers has the consequence that tender assessment involves the comparison of very different research 'packages'. Whether for this reason or for other reasons technical / methodological appraisal is limited.

93. DfT evaluations of research reports have a similar orientation in that they are 'assessed' on features to do with delivery of objectives / outputs rather than on technical / methodological merit. This is the

principal weakness of the research commissioning process in the Department - there is no developed concept of *technical* research quality as the key determinant of validity, reliability and precision of results. This may be, in part, because, typically, social research projects in DfT are managed by administrators, with little knowledge of social research methodology and a number of more pressing areas of business to attend to, which take precedence over the management of research, but we did not have sufficient evidence to draw a definitive conclusion about this.

94. In general, timescales for projects - both those suggested in the specifications and those submitted by contractors - were very short when compared with similar projects we have seen from other departments, and our own assessment of what would be required to carry out reliable research. There is an unavoidable trade-off between quality and speed and DfT appears to veer towards one end of the spectrum. In these circumstances it is unclear whether one should be unsurprised that some projects overrun or suspicious of those that do not!

95. There can be an element of vicious circularity here. A research specification is put out saying what outputs are wanted but not saying how they are to be achieved and specifying an unrealistically short timetable (and by implication, a small budget). Suppliers bidding for the job get the message that something quick, cheap and dirty is what is required. They may be quite capable of doing a thorough, high quality job given the time and the money, but they need the work, so they submit a proposal that is vague on technical detail but strong on deliverables. This in turn sends a message to the specification originator, who lacks adequate research training and experience to form an independent judgement, that what she or he asked for must be quite reasonable.

96. There were a number of examples of good projects which were technically and intellectually impressive and well presented and which efficiently addressed the research problem; but in general this was not true when it came to collecting new data whether through qualitative or quantitative methods.

97. Seven studies using qualitative methods were reviewed. The qualitative approaches involved were very varied and included documentary analysis; semi-structured or unstructured interviews; focus groups; on line discussions; content assessment of telephone interactions; case studies of various kinds; and workshops. Most of the studies also incorporated other research methods including literature reviews, analysis of pre-existing statistical evidence and use of structured questionnaires. Not all of the studies had reached final reporting stage although, for all but one, an end draft report was available.

98. Of the seven studies reviewed, one was assessed as excellent the rest ranged from good to poor. The studies at the top of the range were characterised by one or more of the following:

- Effective use and documentation of pre-existing knowledge;
- A design that was well matched to the aims and objectives of the study;
- Clearly stated criteria for evaluation among those that had an evaluative purpose;
- Thoroughness of execution, particularly at the sampling and data collection stages;
- Well written reports in terms of both accessibility and richness of information;
- Imaginative use of the research findings to inform policy or best practice guidance;
- Well targeted dissemination.

99. Among all but one of the studies there were some notably weak features. The most significant of these were:

- Inadequate documentation of the methods used, without which it is hard for readers to assess the evidence base from which the findings were derived. The most deficient documentation surrounded the basis of the sample design and methods of selection; and the conduct of, and framework for, carrying out qualitative analysis.

- Poorly executed analysis such that the qualitative data was often presented as endless lists of quotations with some intervening commentary rather than as a synthesised digest of context, structure or content. As a consequence, there was serious under-utilisation of many of the primary functions of qualitative research - for example:
 - Little amplification of *why* and *how* events / views / experiences etc arise or of factors that underlie, or have influenced, perspectives. Explanatory evidence of this kind is usually a central reason for using exploratory and investigative interviews rather than more structured forms of data collection;
 - Virtually no examination of diversity or typologies within the sample, showing how the study populations divide or are positioned on key issues. One of the main contributions of qualitative evidence is to show the multiplicity or complexity of perspective rather than simply providing a single (or the most dominant) story;
 - Insufficient attention to context such that the circumstances or features that characterise a contributor - or their local area or organisation - are unclear or unknown.
- A low degree of interpretative commentary identifying the 'meaning' that might be attached to the displayed qualitative evidence. The lack of this is particularly noticeable where the analysis is unsophisticated and the text is packed full of verbatim material. Where such commentary does appear, it is not always easy to detect whether the statement expressed is coming from the respondents or the researchers.
- Most of the 'qualitative' studies had quite elaborate designs, involving more than one stage, multiple methods of data collection or both. In the main, the value of these complex designs was not fully optimised. This was either because there was no clear linkage between different parts of the design or because the data collected from individual components was under utilised. It is possibly not a coincidence that perhaps the weakest study reviewed was the most complex (and also the most expensive) of the qualitative set.

100. Where survey methods were used they were either quota samples or the sample selection did not make even this minimal attempt at representativeness. Quota sampling is substituted for probability sampling to make fieldwork quicker and cheaper. It does this by allowing the substitution of 'easy-to-interview' individuals for elusive or reluctant individuals, thus avoiding the cost of pursuing the latter. Actual response rates are typically very low, usually below 20% of the appropriate population, where this can be defined. The quota targets impose some control on the demographic composition of samples, but types of person who are hard to interview (e.g. busy people, constant travellers, the socially active) are always under-represented, generating uncontrolled bias in survey estimates. This is well understood and, in our experience DfT must be the only government department with a large social research programme which uses quota samples. Because of their low response rates and inherent biases, quota samples are a poor basis for serious policy research and analysis. In other departments quota samples are rarely found except for media tracking research where achieving a representative sample is regarded as less important.

101. Taking two concrete examples: in one study two samples were taken - one of residents and one of visitors to an area. For the sample of residents there was no indication of how the sample size was determined or how the addresses and adults were selected. Although information was provided to indicate how the sample of visitors was drawn, it did not provide any details of steps that were taken to ensure that it was representative. In another a household survey of just under 1500 people (sampling method not described) was carried out boosted to include 250 members of a sub-population. No technical information was provided by the contractor about the household survey, so it is not possible to know the coverage of the sample, the response rates or whether a quota design was used. No questionnaire is reproduced, nor is it clear how the fieldwork was carried out. Such a survey is almost certainly worthless for generalisation purposes and appears to suggest that the research project manager had no real idea of what is required to conduct a meaningful household survey to reasonable standards and accepted the proposal to use whatever method was cheapest.

102. Without good information about such things as the sampling method used or the sorts of questions asked it is virtually impossible to know whether the results are meaningful. Generalisation depends on representativeness - a sample contaminated by bias is answering a different question from the one intended. Without knowing how questions are framed it is impossible to judge whether they are addressing the issue the survey is set up to answer.

103. It was not always possible to divide the projects rigidly into qualitative and quantitative as several projects used both methodologies. This is a perfectly reasonable approach to many research problems but it was not always clear that the research managers understood the difference between these two methodologies and what can and cannot be derived from them in terms of qualitative insight or quantitative generalisation.

104. In the weaker qualitative studies there was a lack of any cogent interpretative comment, whilst, in the studies involving empirical field research, commentary tended to be policy-relevant but not cogent, because of the lack of any research quality indicators.

105. In summary, once projects strayed beyond traditional transport methodologies (e.g. traffic measurement, pollution monitoring) or expert reviews of the literature, into social research methods the quality of the research projects we looked at tended to decline rapidly. It was not clear to us whether customers, in particular cases, realised how poor the research quality was.

External Research Base

106. There was fairly widespread agreement that the contractor base (whether independent, commercial or academic) was 'narrow' in the transport field and to some extent limited in the types of research it offered. Several people spoke about the same institutions being repeatedly used for DfT work, with little success in attempts to broaden the base.

107. Although some of the contractors were felt to provide consistently high quality work, others were felt to be more variable depending on who was assigned to do the work. This was particularly so for the larger agencies where there was less guarantee of allocation to individual researchers of tried and tested capability. There was also a problem that because of the limited base, capacity to undertake research, particularly by those of known quality, was not available because of prior commitments to other work.

108. While many of the regular contractors had well established track records in traditional methods of transport research, there was said to be less experience in 'social' research and in policy evaluation.

109. It is difficult to tell whether if the demand for social research from DfT was of a higher quality there would be a greater number of contractors, especially academic contractors, but we suspect that there would. Something of a vicious circle, as we suggested above, may be operating.

110. DfT is not alone in perceiving a shrinking base of external contractors. Both researchers in DWP and those familiar with research in ODPM registered a similar problem. They had made attempts deliberately to attract individuals and organisations with little substantive policy knowledge, but with good methodological reputations. A reduced base of suppliers is bound in the end to lead to higher prices and reduced quality so it is an issue which needs to be actively managed at a corporate level.

111. One might obtain further - and quite possibly different - insights here by interviewing a sample of DfT's research suppliers, but that was not part of our terms of reference.

Summary

112. A number of criticisms were made by interviewees of DfT research. Our own review of the 17 social research projects provided to us suggests that many of these criticisms are accurate. **Once projects strayed beyond literature reviews or the eliciting of expert opinion and into social research methodology, the quality of the research projects we looked at tended to decline**

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rapidly with the consequence that the results could not be said to constitute robust evidence of a standard for sound policy decisions. This seems likely to be due to the fact that many of the projects are managed by people who are unlikely to know anything about research methodology, or to have research management as a high priority. There is a general sense that the external contractor base is poor. This is a widespread problem across government and needs active management.

Organisation of Research in DfT

Commissioning and Management of Research

113. There seem to be at least six different models for commissioning and managing 'research' (as opposed to statistical and economic enquiry) within DfT.

114. By administrative project managers in policy divisions:

- (i) with close involvement of TRU (occasionally STP), particularly at the commissioning stage (e.g. writing specs, identifying contractors, selection of contractors);
- (ii) with external specialist help sometimes bought in, either through external consultants or, in one case, a part time academic on secondment;
- (iii) with panels or ad hoc advice from related agencies or 'industry' specialists;
- (iv) more or less autonomously although with occasional liaison with other parts of DfT;
- (v) by specialist research staff within policy divisions (Road Safety);
- (vi) by TRU or STP either for selected projects or major programmes which cross cut several divisions.

115. The majority of DfT research projects appear to be managed through models i-iv although the largest programme Transport Strategy / Integrated Local Transport (TS/ILT) is a hybrid because of its size.

116. Some divisions feel quite secure about their administrators holding the research management function - they see the skills required as no different from those needed for other policy-related work. But others have some serious reservations about research commissioning and management lying in the hands of non-specialist staff for the following reasons:

- A shortage of staff with appropriate research management skills and experience;
- A lack of understanding of technical and methodological issues among project managers;
- The lack of training given to those who manage - they mainly learn through experience. There is some reference to an internal course on research management which is seen as being limited on technical research matters;
- The lack of specialism in research management such that some project managers are expected to spend only a small proportion of their time on research, the rest being policy related (this varies considerably across divisions - some project managers spend as much as 50% of their time on research, others 10% or less);
- The low priority given to research management in some divisions such that policy-related work holds prominence (even if they are theoretically expected to give research management more attention);
- The low calibre of some of the staff assigned to research;
- The relatively high turnover among project managers which means experience and continuity are lost.

117. All of this is felt to give rise to:

- Insufficient staffing resources for research such that some projects never get off the ground;
- Some research being inadequately managed, with interventions not made at strategic points;

- Poor quality outputs from some research projects.

118. Of course where project managers have a longer experience of managing research or where this is a significant part of their responsibilities, many of these issues may be less damaging because those responsible have acquired some of the necessary skills.

119. In general, most large departments that carry out social research seem to follow the pattern of working up research plans jointly between specialist researchers and those responsible for developing and implementing policy. If research projects are to be relevant and timely they are best *identified*, primarily, by those whose responsibility it is to develop and deliver policy **but that does not mean they have to be commissioned and managed by policy officials**. Policy-relevance should arise from the process of identifying shortages of information and from policy officials being closely associated with the research through, for example steering committees. But defining the research method and procuring, managing and presenting the research does not have to be done by policy officials.

120. The DWP pattern, for example, is for a central group of social researchers to kick off the policy round and assist policy officials in working it up. This keeps ownership where it belongs, with the policy divisions. But, once the research need has been identified, researchers with skills in social research methodology then specify and commission the research, and manage it such that it is delivered to time and to budget, and most importantly, so that it answers the research question convincingly.

121. Social research and research project management skills are of course not the only skills required. Our DWP colleagues indicated that researchers in DWP need not only methodological skills but also the political interpretation and awareness skills, as well as influencing and negotiating skills.

122. All of this argues, at least in the DfT case, for the option proposed by our Cabinet Office interlocutor, who had previously worked in ODPM and as a research manager:

"You need a nucleus of researchers to maintain competencies and standards but sufficiently close to policy makers in terms of line management and physical proximity to have close interaction and exchange of views. They need a 'tacit' knowledge of what is needed - this makes a research programme much more attuned to directions of policy. If they lose this link, even if the research is of high quality, they will become irrelevant to policy makers."

Central Support

123. Central support for research (as opposed to statistical or economic advice) lies with TRU and STP. Not surprisingly, perhaps, most of our interviewees had some difficulty in understanding the respective roles of these two divisions, although their methodological specialisms are different (i.e. STP: broadly scientific research - TRU: social research and policy evaluation).

124. Some found the help they have received from TRU invaluable, both in assisting with design and commissioning, advising during the project and helping out with problems when they arise. There was also strong commendation of TRU's policy evaluation adviser where there had been some direct involvement. For others, however, TRU was perceived as not having the right technical expertise to give appropriate advice; as unable to help with digests of relevant research; or as too concerned with the promotion of social research.

125. Our judgement is that, with a department as decentralised as DfT, there is a particular need for a unit at the centre which will:

- 'Quality-assure' the research that goes on (certainly in the case of social research);
- Spot the connections between divisional or directorate research plans, identifying enduring research themes and building evidence around them;
- Promote synergies and cross-cutting research and maintain contact with related research programmes in other departments and in the wider research world;

- Be the guardians of the Department's research strategy, including the vexed issue of maintaining and improving the external contractor base;
- Take a strategic overview of the whole research programme.

126. A further important role is that of long-term horizon scanning. This is already one of STP's roles and could be developed further. One drawback to a system which puts the responsibility for research very close to the policy front-line is that it can over-emphasise the urgent as opposed to the important. A number of our senior interlocutors commented on the need for longer and more visionary 'horizon-scanning' research to help develop transport policies for the future. Four particular needs were identified:

- A review of relevant research evidence collected to date (from all sources) on different main policy themes so gaps can be identified. This has particular relevance to assessing the impact of the Ten Year Plan;
- Evaluation across, rather than within, transport modes so that issues of integration can be more effectively reviewed;
- The need for continuous research (or study series) to monitor attitudes (and in some areas, behaviours) and how they change over time or in response to new initiatives;
- Some assessment of the environments in which transport might be operating in say 20 years so that longer term planning can be developed (e.g. whether the relationship between GDP growth and transport demand will remain constant, how will travel behaviours change, whether rail will still be the green option?).

127. A further, but related, need is for there to be a strong advocate for the 'long-term', who can put the case for building up what the DWP called "a mature evidence base", so that sound evidence is available the next time the issue arises even if it is not available in time on this occasion - an investor in the future.

Summary

128. Research projects in DfT are managed in many different ways but the majority are managed by policy officials. If research projects are to be relevant and timely they are best *identified*, primarily, by those whose responsibility it is to develop and deliver policy, **but that does not mean they have to be commissioned and managed by policy officials**. The key point is to have a critical mass of people who are skilled in relevant research methods, and specialise in research management. Bedding out such a critical mass is one model which may suit DfT's decentralised ethos. Under such a model there would also be a need for a central function which can, take a strategic view, 'quality-assure', provide professional leadership where necessary, be the ginger group and the cement, make the connections with other government departments' programmes, and be the guardian of the longer-term. In some cases such a central function might also commission research e.g. on crosscutting issues or where there was insufficient expertise elsewhere.

Proposals for Change and Reorganisation

129. In any policy analysis the easier part is deciding what's wrong and where you should be; the tricky bit is working out how to get there from where one is now. We set out first the analysis, then the 'vision' and finally try to come to grips with the transition.

The Analysis

130. We began this project seeking to answer two sets of questions:

(1) Is the Department carrying out 'enough' social research? Is the quality of the research good enough? Has the Department the capacity, internal and external, to identify and carry out the social research it wants and to make appropriate use of it? Does it manage this research well?

(2) Does the Department need more social researchers? How should it use social researchers? What is the role of social researchers relative to other professionals within DfT?

131. We have concluded that:

- There is in the Department an unsatisfied need for more research which emphasises the place of people in transport and which uses the methodology of the social sciences (including but going beyond economics and statistics) to provide this.
- The quality of the social research currently carried out in DfT, at least based on our sample but supplemented by people's perceptions, is mixed and is worst where it involves collecting data using the core social research methods of qualitative and quantitative research.
- Comparing the size of the Department's social research programme (~ £10m) with similar departments we do not believe that the Department has sufficient people with social research skills to commission and manage such a programme, although it may not necessarily be making inappropriate use of the limited number it has. Its external research base seems to be narrow, but we could not follow up the reasons for this in the course of this project.
- The principal advantage to the way the Department currently manages its research programme is that it is located close to the policy front-line. But the drawbacks are that in stressing timeliness and policy-relevance at the expense of research quality, it may in many cases not be achieving any of these because research management is given a low priority in the administrative pecking order.
- The Department needs to manage its research (including its social research) better. Social researchers are professionals who specialise in most other departments in government in the job of managing research programmes but this could also be done competently (and is done) by other analytical professionals such as economists and statisticians. The work of statisticians and economists also needs to be thought of as part of the social research available to the Department. In the DfT case, the importance of scientific and technical issues in policy also needs to be borne in mind.
- Most of the limited number of social researchers in DfT are in the central unit and some are bedded-out in Road Safety division. We think this is a homegrown solution which needs to be built on.

132. These are the narrow answers to the questions we were posed. But, in the course of this research, we came to the conclusion that there was a wider problem with which people in DfT were wrestling, and within which the issues of social research, the social research programme and the role of social researchers were embedded. This was the problem of how to access the knowledge and information needed to deliver ministers' objectives. Sorting out the quantity and quality of social research would help, and managing the programme better would also help, but the real pay-off would come from a sense that the knowledge and information policy officials need to do their job is easily available or accessible or could be made so. **Not just research management but knowledge management.**

The Vision

133. Our recommendation is that in order to perform effectively **the Department needs a corporate commitment to strengthen its knowledge management and not just the provision of social research**. Any such reorganisation needs to take into account the (implicitly) federal nature of DfT and, in particular, the very different requirements of different parts of the Department. In such a decentralised context one model could be a set of perhaps four distributed research and intelligence divisions which could take as their template the current arrangements for Road Safety division. These divisions, located within the relevant commands, would contain a mix of skills but their function would be to provide the directorates, or perhaps (in the case of Rail, Aviation, Maritime and Freight), the Directorate General, with a comprehensive research and intelligence function. This would ensure along with the management of the particular research programme, that relevant managers were kept informed of developments in research and information within and outside the Department, and were able to access easily the contextual, management and policy information they required.

134. These dedicated branches would, in addition, provide advice and support in accessing, using and acquiring *new* information and research. The divisions could contain social researchers, engineers, economists and statisticians - **the principal requirement would be a familiarity with research methodology and research commissioning, a dedication to research management, and an ability to access and present information to policy customers and managers in a clear and relevant manner**. This model seems to us likely to be more effective than the model now found in most parts of the Department where research and intelligence is regarded as simply a part (and often a not very important part) of an administrator's job. Nevertheless such a model would require careful professional management to ensure that it continued to do high-quality work and was able to attract good people, given that the number of professionals in each division would be likely to be small.

135. In addition to these distributed divisions there needs to be a central research function, however organised, which is responsible for co-ordinating a research strategy; managing the departmental research programme process; making sure that the various research programmes, which will necessarily contain projects spanning the social / technological / economic divide, are coherent and that the interactions between modes and programmes is picked up. The Centre would also need to ensure that the connections between DfT programmes and other departmental programmes are recognised and that there is an element of joint planning. This centre would be responsible for taking forward the corporate commitment to better knowledge management and for maintaining standards of excellence in research and intelligence through training, professional development and sharing of information.

136. The Centre too needs to be convincing, in both social and technical domains, and may contain a mix of disciplines, but there is a strong argument for having a division led by a Grade 5 Social Researcher who could act as Head of Profession for Social Research. Taking the corporate commitment to knowledge management seriously **is likely to lead, over time, to an increase in the number of social researchers**; and these will be easier to recruit into an appropriate professional structure, even if they are to be line-managed locally. There is also a need to ensure quality in social research since there is a real danger that bedded-out professionals go native and begin to water down the quality of social research to accommodate policy pressures.

137. Of course this is not the only model and, within the broad principles outlined here, many other possibilities could be worth exploring and may be appropriate at various stages of development.

The Transition

138. Any transition path depends crucially on the starting point and the local circumstances and possibilities of an organisation. As outsiders we would be foolish to be prescriptive about the means and stages of transition because, despite our intensive visit to DfT, we cannot know about the organisational, personnel and budgetary dynamics and ecology which will, in practice, shape the speed and features of the transition path. How to get there is clearly best decided by DfT management.

139. We will confine ourselves therefore to some general principles.

- A decision to improve radically the information and knowledge tools available to policy makers is a major step and requires that there should be a corporate commitment from the top. Without that it will tend to be regarded as part of a power play by professionals to increase their own importance. Top management needs to own it and drive it.
- Whatever the merits of a knowledge management strategy it is going to take some while to get there, certainly if there is a need, as we think there is, to recruit more social researchers (as an indication, the DWP with an annual budget for social research of about the same order as DfT has about seven or eight times the number of social researchers). There will be a need to make do and mend in the mean time with arrangements which take account of what is feasible in the short term. But given the bits and pieces of time that administrators currently devote (usually inefficiently) to research management it is not certain that there would need to be an overall increase of staff as this process works itself out.
- The strategy could do with some quick wins. A newsletter which publicised and explained the Department's own research and captured the significance of relevant external research would be a relatively straightforward first step. There is an ODPM model to draw on. It would signal a corporate wish to take the information needs of policy makers seriously.
- The principle of knowledge management - giving people more information about, and easier access to, the full range of information relevant to their areas of expertise; and beginning to formalise the Department's collective intelligence and memory - is a sensible one. It should not necessarily be confused with 'capital letters' Knowledge Management which has become, in many cases, an over-hyped solution in search of a problem. Considerable improvement can be made in an ad hoc way without going the full hog into a vast department-wide ICT system. A first step is to give the local and central research and intelligence divisions the objective to make measurable improvements each year in access to information and in the creation of relevant policy research networks. DWP has this role as one of the objectives of its social researchers.
- The Department's social research standards appear, from a review of 17 projects, to be often quite low, with too many examples of weak design and execution. The Head of Profession for Social Research needs to have the remit and sufficient clout, even within a decentralised structure, to fight to make those standards higher.

Summary

140. DfT almost certainly needs to do more and better social research, and to manage it more effectively (whilst recognising a lot more of what it already does as having a social research component). To achieve this it is likely to need more social researchers. But, above all, it needs to manage its policy knowledge better. One model is to have at least four bedded-out multi-disciplinary research and intelligence divisions. These would have a remit to improve the access of policy makers to relevant policy knowledge, as well as to manage the research programme better. The central research and intelligence function should complement these bedded-out divisions, to ensure co-ordination, quality control and other strategic functions. To get to this vision, which is of course only one possible scenario, will require a top-level commitment, patience and some quick wins.

Annex A - Standardised Framework for Project Reviews

Title of project Reference no. Programme Project officer			
Contractors	Institution(s)		
Objectives - summary of purpose / aims Policy stage	Formulation	Implementation	Evaluation
Outputs from study	Final report -title Other outputs at end of study Interim outputs Presentation dates Interim papers / reports -titles		
Length of study period	Start date: Expected completion date: Actual completion date: Length of study period: Reasons for extensions / non-completion:		
Cost	Original estimate: Budget revisions: Reasons: Level of increase: Total value:		
Advisory arrangements	Steering group membership: External advisers: institution and role:		
Study methods	Brief description of methods used: Reason for any modifications to methods:		
Specification and proposal			

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Project management and progress	Contract variations - dates and why occurred: Observations drawn from project files (note any special commendations or problems arising) Project officer's observations
Findings	How credible are the findings? Has knowledge / understanding been extended by the research? How well does the study address its original aims and purposes? Scope for drawing wider inference - how well is this explained? How clear is the basis for evaluative appraisal? (if evaluation)
Design	How defensible is the research design?
Sample	How well defended is the sample design? Sample composition - how well is the eventual coverage described?
Data Collection	How well was the data collection carried out?

Analysis	How well had the approach to and the formulation of analysis been conveyed? How well has the analysis been carried out?
Reporting	How clear are the links between data, interpretation and conclusions? How clear and coherent is the reporting?
Reflexivity and Neutrality	How clear are the assumptions / theoretical perspectives / values that have shaped the form and output of the study?
Ethics	What evidence is there of attention to ethical issues?
Auditability	How adequately has the research process been documented?

Annex B - Topic Guide

Topic guide for Phase 1 interviews and Round 2 interviews (June 2003).

(The topic guide for more senior staff in our Round 1 interviews was somewhat shorter and concentrated more on the demand for social research rather than the research management process)

Introduction

Introduction of researcher / NatCen

Purpose of Review

- Aim: to review arrangements for obtaining social research evidence in DfT and make recommendations about how they might be strengthened
- Three main areas of focus:
 - procedures and arrangements for identifying gaps and priorities for *social research*
 - capabilities and arrangements for generating, commissioning and managing research studies
 - quality and use of research evidence and how it is fed into policy

Conduct of Review

- Series of interviews with key staff within the Department concerned with generating and organising social research
- Review of recent studies to examine research process and quality
- Report at end of Phase 1; Phase 2 to produce recommendations and how might be implemented

Confidentiality and protection of anonymity

Permission to tape record

For NatCen team:

Continuing attention throughout to:

What is working well?

Where are there problems / why do they arise?

Ways of overcoming problems / changes suggested

Examples to illustrate

Profile of Interviewee

1. Background Information

Responsibilities / role in DfT

Staff they are responsible for

Overview of directorate and divisions within, including their own

Overview of key areas of policy / operational interests

Whether has a direct involvement in generating or managing research; if so, how

Length of time in post / in DfT

Roles / experience of other government departments / divisions

The Right Research: Research Priorities and Programme

2. Policy Requirements / Priorities for Evidence and Research

Policy priorities

- What are the key priorities at present within their areas of responsibility?
- How do interdepartmental priorities get set / included? - recent examples
- What is their involvement in this process?

3. Generation / Co-ordination of Research

Generation of research

- How is research generated?
- Who is involved?
- What impacts on this?
- How are ministers involved? - how well does this work?
- How do they co-ordinate with the key agencies / authorities operating within their domain; how effectively does this work?

Formation of the research programme

- How do evidence / information requirements get introduced into the research programme?
- What is their personal involvement in this process?
- Are procedures / processes effective? - successful / limiting features
- Any suggestions for change?

Competing priorities

- How do competing priorities get resolved?
 - *within* key policy areas / Directorates
 - *between* different policy areas / Directorates
- Examples of how competing priorities get resolved
- How well does this work? - effective / limiting features
- Any suggestions for change?

Duplication of coverage

- How is duplication / overlap in coverage avoided?
- How well does this work? - effective / limiting features
- Any suggestions for change?

Departmental research programme (9 programmes)

- Knowledge of Department's annual research programme - how conveyed?

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- How are final decisions about annual programme decided? - views about
- Personal role in decisions about final programme. - any difficulties encountered?
- How are ministers involved?

Externally commissioned research

- Knowledge about research commissioned outside DfT (e.g. in academic community)
- How do they keep in touch with this type of research - if at all?
- What resources would they use to find out about what is commissioned outside DfT?
- How effective is this and how might it be improved?

Omissions and low priorities

- Whether any significant gaps in the current research programme - what are they?
- Why do gaps in the programme occur? - how could this be overcome?
- Whether themes / areas which get too little attention in research programme - which? How is this manifest?
- Reasons for lower attention - how might be overcome?

Review of research programme

- How does research programme get reviewed / updated?
- How much flexibility is there to respond to new / changing evidence / research requirements?
- How well does this work? - effective / limiting features
- Any suggestions for change?

Longer term horizon scanning

- What are the processes / procedures for establishing future priorities / longer term requirements for research?
- How far ahead are plans made?
- How well does this work? - effective / limiting features
- Any suggestions for change?
- What role does research play in policy formation?

4. Research Budget

Determination of budget

- How is total research budget determined?
- How well does this work? - effective / limiting features
- Any suggestions for change?

Budget allocations

- How are decisions about budget *allocation* determined between programmes / projects?
- How well does this work? - effective / limiting features

- Any suggestions for change?
- Are there themes / types of research which absorb disproportionately high amounts of the research budget? Which? Why?
- Potential for / obstacles to change
- How do budgets differ?
 - Research budget vs. consultancy budget
 - What impact does this have on perceptions of research?

5. Role and Priority of Social Research (*emphasise to interviewee that we now want to focus particularly on social research*)

Definition of social research

- Concept of social research - how defined by them? by Department?
- How distinguished from other forms of research / other forms of statistical or intelligence gathering?
- How appropriate / useful are the distinctions? - other ways of operating?

Coverage of social research

- What are the main areas / issues covered by social research within their policy domains?
- Whether social research is covering the right kinds of issues - are there important gaps?
- What areas need more emphasis / attention?

Priority given to social research

- Whether emphasis / value placed on social research within DfT as a whole is sufficient - obstacles that arise - consequences
- How might the priority given to social research be changed?
- Are there imbalances across different Directorates / policy areas in priority given to social research? - where do main imbalances occur? Reasons?
- What changes, if any, are needed?

Ministerial views on / requirements for social research

- How do ministers view the value of social research? - reasons
- Are there policy areas where ministers want more social research? - which? Reasons? How can they best get ministers to engage with the issues surrounding social research?

Other commissioned social research

- How does social research commissioned by Press Office fit into above process?
- How does social research done by consultants fit into above process?
- Are differences in process / procedures appropriate?
- Recommendations for change

Right Process: Organisation, Management and Conduct of Social Research

6. Commissioning Social Research

Commissioning process

- Once subject areas / themes are agreed, how do individual studies / projects get commissioned? - who is involved?
- Does process vary? - how / why does it vary?

Explore for the following, if not already established

- Who is involved? how / why varies?
 - Deciding on key objectives / requirements
 - Deciding on overall design / approach
 - Writing specification
 - Deciding if in house / out of house research
 - Choosing contractors to tender
 - Evaluating proposals / choosing contractor to undertake
 - Choosing contractors
 - Setting up contract

Appraisal of variations in commissioning process

- Overall, which are most effective arrangements for commissioning / establishing research studies? - reasons

(If 'depends' on type of project, establish the key distinguishing features and why they matter)

- Why are most effective arrangements not operated more widely?

7. Managing Research

Research management process

- Once projects are commissioned / established, who is involved in managing the research?
- How is contact / relationship with the research team maintained? - how is their activity monitored?
- Does the process vary? - how / why does it vary?
- What are the most effective arrangements? - reasons
- Why are most effective arrangements not operated more widely?

Steering / advisory arrangements

- Arrangements for steering / advisory groups for monitoring on going studies
- Do the arrangements vary?
- What are the most effective arrangements? - reasons
- Why are most effective arrangements not operated more widely?

Troubleshooting

- What are the main problems that arise in the management of social research?
- How do problems that arise get dealt with? - who is involved

- Does the process vary? - how / why does it vary?
- What are the most effective arrangements? - reasons
- Why are most effective arrangements not operated more widely?

Central support

- Are there areas / issues where research support is required from the centre / TRU / STP? - what kinds of issues?
- What is their understanding of the central function?
 - What roles do TRU and STP play?
 - How do they differ / duplicate?
 - What impact does this have on their perceived effectiveness to directorates?
- When is research managed within the directorate / division and when by TRU / STP?
- Is there sufficient resource available to give this support? - what are the difficulties / obstacles?
- What changes are needed?

Social research programme

- Views on whether there should be a separate *social research* programme (or whether should be integrated with other research as at present)- reasons?
- How would a separate programme be of benefit?

8. Research Resources and Skills

Internal

- Whether Department has the right mix of skills and resources for commissioning and managing the social research programme - What further resources / other skills are needed?
- What skills are needed for project management?
 - Who should take on this role?
 - What skills do they lack / need to improve upon?
- Whether any difficulties attracting people with right skills / capabilities - reasons - how might be overcome?

External

- Whether Department has an appropriate contractor base for its social research requirements - reasons
- Is contractor base stronger for some types of research than for other? - reasons - why this is so?
- Ways in which contractor base / research community (for social research) might be strengthened - how this might occur?

Links between / liaison with professional groups

- How are links between different professional groups maintained (e.g. statisticians, economists, researchers etc)?
- How well does this work? - effective / limiting features

Balance of in house and external research

- Views on balance between in house / externally commissioned research
- Changes suggested

Dissemination and use of research - with particular focus on social research

9. Dissemination of Research Findings

Dissemination of DfT research

- Thinking about the dissemination of new *DfT* research findings **within** the Department - how effectively does this work?
 - Successful / limiting features
 - Suggestions for change
- And thinking about dissemination **outside** of the Department (*to other government departments- to other interested agencies and individuals*) - how effectively does this work?
 - Successful / limiting features
 - Suggestions for change

Dissemination of external research evidence

- How do they keep in touch with **external** research evidence, not commissioned by DfT? - how well does this work?
 - Successful / limiting features of dissemination process
 - Suggestions for change

10. Use of Social Research

- How does social research evidence get used? - examples
- Whether social research evidence is used to fullest potential in informing policy directions and changes - what are the obstacles?
- To what extent does externally commissioned social research in relevant areas get used? - how satisfactory is this?
- Suggestions for extending use of social research evidence

Quality of Social Research

11. Quality of Social Research Evidence

- Views about overall quality of social research evidence generated for Department
- How does it vary? - causes of variation
- What are the main problems? - why do they arise?
- How is this assessed? - by whom?
- What is effective / limiting?

Conclusion

12. Anything Further

- Anything to add / important issues not covered

Annex C - DfT Research Programmes (as of Oct 2003).

In September 2003 DfT reorganised the overall structure of its research programmes. In the main, this has involved splitting up the large Transport Strategy / Integrated Local Transport programme into smaller, more focussed programmes.

The organisation and budgets are provided below.

Research Programmes 2002-3	Budget £(m)	Research Programmes 2003-4	Budget £(m)
Transport Strategy / Integrated Local Transport	9.84	Transport Analysis, Strategy / Delivery, Mobility and Inclusion	3.8
		Integrated, Local & Regional Transport	5.2
		Roads Policy	0.1
Road Safety	4.62	Road Safety	4.7
Transport Environment & Taxation	0.8	Transport Environment & Taxation	0.8
Vehicle Standards & Engineering	7.98	Vehicle Standards & Engineering, Vehicle Technology and Standards	7.9
		Transport Technology and Telematics	0.7
		Road User Charging	7.1 (over 3 years)
Civil Aviation	1	Civil Aviation	3.3
Freight Logistics	2.06	Freight Logistics	1.7
Rail	1	Rail	1
Transport Security	1.67	Transport Security	1.4
Cross-cutting & responsive	1.25	Cross-cutting & responsive	1.5
Maritime & Coastguard Agency	0.74	Maritime & Coastguard Agency	1
Highways Agency	10.98	Highways Agency	12