

The
ISSUES
Project

An investigation of the knowledge exchange practices of the end-users of sustainability research.

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Table of Contents

1. Introduction	4
2. Methods	5
2.1 Demographics, sample description	5
3. Results	6
3.1 Types of material used and respected publications	7
3.2 Events and conferences: Reasons for attendance	8
3.3 Awareness of Urban Sustainability research programmes.....	9
3.4 Practitioner approaches to accessing Research.....	10
3.5 What external factors impact on the finding and making use of new knowledge?	11
3.6 What changes to such factors would make it easier for you to make use of new knowledge?	12
3.7 Results not anticipated by the questionnaire	13
4. Discussion	13
4.1 Limitations of the research.....	14
4.2 Conclusions	15
6. References.....	16
7. Appendix	17
7.1 Questionnaire	17

Table of Figures

Figure 1: Percentage of practitioners by sector	6
Figure 2: Day to day role is shaping policy or carrying out objectives informed by policy ..	6

Table of Tables

Table 1: Number of respondents by field	6
Table 2: Number of respected publications mentioned (left). Publications which are read regularly (right).....	7
Table 3: Awareness of different research programmes amongst practitioners.	9
Table 4: How interviewers were aware of research programmes.....	10
Table 5: Numbers of people stating whether as part of their research they would use academic journals	10

1. INTRODUCTION

In the financial year 2008-2009 the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC) funded research to the value of £548 million, and on average UK research councils invest around £2.8 billion in research annually. It cannot be denied that this is a significant sum and funders, researchers and end users all recognise that it is important to ensure the maximum value can be achieved from this investment in research. In fact, research examining knowledge transfer practices has found that research that could be used in policy arenas or by practitioners in the public, private and third sectors often goes unnoticed or underutilised (Nutley et al., 2007). This report seeks to understand the knowledge landscape amongst end-users of urban sustainability research in particular. It does not question the value of the research in question and acknowledges that research is undertaken for a range of purposes, often without the goal of guiding policy or yielding a financial impact.

The traditional route for academic research is of course to be published in an academic journal, and subsequent citation of the research is seen as proof of success in academia. However, this route may mean that the research outcomes stay solely in the realm of academia. Achieving research uptake by a wider audience may be a stated ambition for researchers who wish to get their research used for the public good, to build a reputation in their chosen field, or to enhance their future career or research prospects. Beyond academia there are research demands in many sectors, though these may not be identified as such and can end up being identified as merely 'problems requiring solutions'. These demands may be met by in-house resources, consultancies, or through other means and routes that do not involve academia. With so much research being undertaken there is clearly a missed opportunity for both researchers and potential "end-user audiences" to limit the resources spent on duplicated research by sharing knowledge and research outcomes. Furthermore, in the current climate, the large-scale public funding of research is likely to come under increased pressure to demonstrate its tangible benefit to the wider community and/or the British economy.

The concept presented here, that of the dissemination of academic research into other sectors, is commonly known as knowledge transfer. Knowledge transfer has been given a number of definitions but can be defined here as:

"the system and processes by which knowledge, expertise and skilled people transfer between the research environment...and its user communities in industry, commerce, public and service sectors" (Rural Economy and Land Use programme (RELU), 2007)

The dissemination of academic research into other sectors is not a new problem facing research councils or academia. Indeed, it is well documented in the literature that to achieve a greater return on investment, more effort needs to be put into ensuring that research conducted within academia is disseminated to those in a position to use it. (Rynes et al 2001, Rural Economy Land Use Programme, 2010):

"The reality is that if a scientist doesn't tell anyone about their findings, or if they go about transferring the knowledge in a way that doesn't work, or target the wrong audiences, they might as well not have carried out the research. Money, effort and expertise have been wasted" (Rural Economy Land Use Programme, 2010)

In this study the potential end-users of urban sustainability research are the focus. The broad nature of urban sustainability as a discipline means that these end-users work in a wide range of fields and backgrounds across the public, private and third sectors, and include both practitioners and policy makers. For the purposes of this report the term 'practitioner' or 'practitioners' will be used as a collective term for all the end-users outlined above and all those who may have a stake in the research. An explanation of the methods used and the survey sample is given in section 2. The results of the survey are outlined in section 3, followed by a discussion of the key emergent themes.

2. METHODS

Semi-structured interviews with a wide range of potential research end-users were conducted to gather the information for this research. It was considered important to capture the views of a wide range of practitioners and in view of time and resource constraints it was decided that telephone interviews would be the best method. All the interviews were conducted by the same interviewer and carried out over a five week period in March / April 2010. The views of 40 practitioners were gathered in this way. 37 of these interviews were conducted over the phone, two were conducted by email and one was completed face to face.

The interviews were conducted around a structured template (see appendix 7.1) but also allowed for additional information to be gathered spontaneously. The template for the interviews was formulated in consultation with the Heriot-Watt ISSUES team and with reference to a previous survey that they carried out 12 months earlier.

Practitioners were identified for interview through various networks of contacts held by the ISSUES team and beyond. There was some focus, making up 75% of the sample, on those currently working within Scotland (public, private and third sector) though the scope included the whole of the UK. Contacts were identified initially through ISSUES staff and through lists of target audiences identified for the EPSRC funded Sustainable Urban Environments (SUE) initiative. In addition, a 'snowball approach' encouraged interviewees to recommend further participants. Introductory emails were sent out to all targeted interviewees giving details of the project, a copy of the interview template and a request to nominate a suitable time. Contacts that did not reply after the first round of emails were then contacted around 1 to 2 weeks later with a follow-up. The overall response rate was 46%, of which only very few declined to be interviewed.

2.1 Demographics, sample description

The proportion of practitioners per sector is presented in figure 1. The largest proportion came from the public sector, at 43%. Interviewees were asked if their main role was either to formulate and shape policy or to carry out objectives informed by policy. Their responses are presented in figure 2.

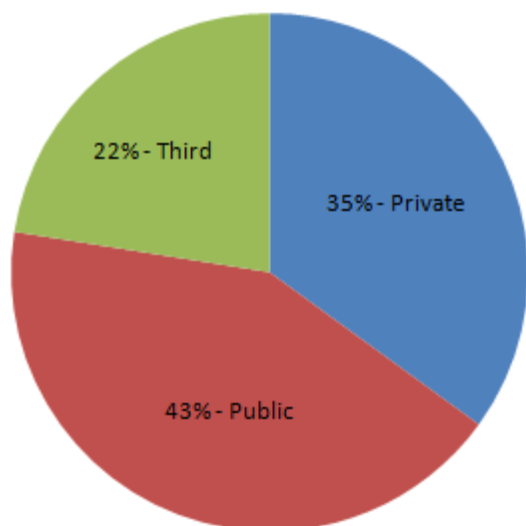


Figure 1: Percentage of practitioners by sector

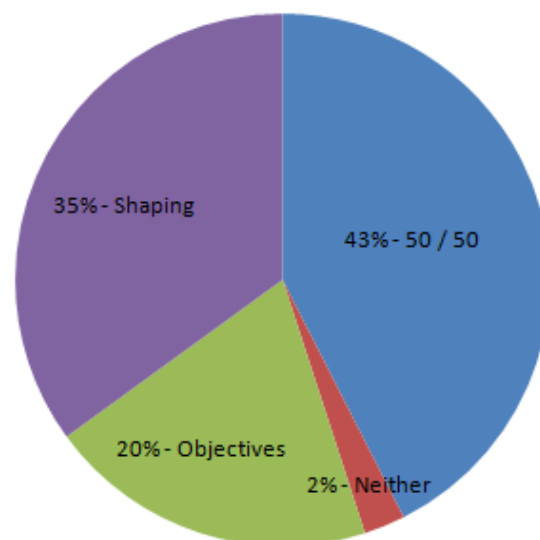


Figure 2: Day to day role is shaping policy or carrying out objectives informed by policy

During the design of the survey a shortlist of practitioner fields was identified. Table 1 outlines these fields and their respective representation within the sample. The largest number of practitioners came from the Planning field. Eleven practitioners stated their field as 'other', seven of whom included the words 'environmental' or 'sustainability' in their job title.

Table 1: Number of respondents by field

Field	Number of Respondents
Engineering	5
Property	1
Utilities	3
Planning	11
Transport	7
Construction	7
Housing	8
Architecture	4
Other*	11

3. RESULTS

The following section outlines the key results emerging from this research. No attempt is made to interpret the results in this section. However, reference will be made to how the results relate to evidence already in the literature. Interviewees will be referred to as the 'practitioner' or collectively as the 'practitioners'. Direct quotations are presented but not attributed to any named practitioner, thereby ensuring that all responses remain anonymous.

3.1 Types of material used and respected publications

These questions sought to understand which publications are respected by practitioners in gathering new knowledge in their field, and also to gauge whether they read these publications on a regular basis. Table 2 (below) displays a summary of these results. It can be seen that a large number of publications are considered respectable sources of information, with 74 unique publications mentioned. On average each practitioner mentioned 2 or 3 publications. The most widely respected publication appears to be the *ENDS* report; however, this still only received 5 mentions. It is clear from the results that there are a huge number of publications in the broad field of ‘sustainability’. The first row refers to the total number of publication mentions across the survey, including multiple mentions of the same publication by different respondents. The number of publications mentioned by each practitioner varied, with some respondents mentioning five publications, others only one.

Table 2: Number of respected publications mentioned (left). Publications which are read regularly (right).

Respected Publications		Read Regularly	
Total publication mentions	102	Total publication mentions	82
Unique publication mentions	74	Unique publication mentions	64
Publications mentioned once	55	Publications mentioned once	54
<i>ENDS</i>	5	<i>ENDS</i>	5
<i>Building Services Journal</i>	3	<i>Building Services Journal</i>	3
<i>Local Transport Today</i>	3	<i>IEMA</i>	3

Table 2 (above) also shows which publications are read regularly and the results were very similar to that of respected publications. Again it was *ENDS* report that is most widely mentioned, though it still only garnered 5 responses. It can be concluded therefore, that the 40 practitioners interviewed for this survey gather new information from a huge range of sources. What these results do not show is the extent to which similar information is being duplicated within these publications.

During the survey many interviewees were asked whether they would go directly to an academic journal when searching for new knowledge. 26 were asked this question in total (that all 40 were not asked is a limitation of this survey that is discussed later). Of the 26, 58% stated they would not go directly to an academic journal, 23% said they would use academic journals ‘rarely’ and only 19% said ‘yes’. Numerous reasons were given for this lack of journal usage, mainly that academic journals are too broad, too ‘academic’ or too difficult to access. One practitioner remarked of academic work: “It is good data that most companies just don’t have. We don’t have the same access that undergraduates have”. This comment illustrates that many people in high level positions do not have the same opportunities and ease of access to academic findings as is commonplace for undergraduate students who are not even working in the field. Another practitioner stated that he might want to use academic work but before he can decide

whether a particular journal is useful for him to use he has to make a payment for it, something which cannot be justified to his department.

A quick check of the process that someone outside the academic sector would go through to view a piece of research revealed download prices of around \$25.00 to \$31.50 (US dollars). Furthermore, the process of identifying and searching for pieces of work can be time-consuming and without guaranteed success. Despite this, one should be wary of making blanket conclusions about the accessibility of academic research. Much of the work from the various SUE programmes, for example, is freely available and some academic journals are free to download under a creative common license.

3.2 Events and conferences: Reasons for attendance

Interviewees were also asked about their attitudes towards conferences and other events. As expected, attendance is contingent largely on the relevance of the topic to a particular practitioner's interest and field of work. Evidence from this study suggests that conferences are viewed with mixed attitudes and that their quality varies widely. There were three key aspects of conferences that practitioners viewed as particularly important:

- The quality of speakers, especially in terms of them presenting new material
- The value of networking
- The format of the conference

The main issue mentioned was the quality of speakers. At face value this might appear to be a fundamental criterion of a good conference and would therefore offer little insight. However in the answers proffered this sentiment was expressed on the back of an apparent apathy towards a circuit of conferences that appeared to have been concerned more with profit than content. This concern was raised especially regularly in Scotland where one practitioner stated:

We're finding that there is a bit of familiarity kicking around there. One of our first 'asks' is whether there is anything new there. There appears to be a conference circuit now with a line of speakers who we regularly see. Post devolution Scotland has maybe got a bit of problem around that. One of the most impressive events I was at was last year, there was a poverty [of quality] after 10 yrs of devolution of Scotland, [but] at that one they had speakers from around the regions of the UK and I think a number of us found that actually quite instructive. A distinctly different perspective on the same topics.

This was echoed by another practitioner, stating, "There's a whole batch of events that are 'the eventer crowd'". In relation to the value of the speakers, one respondent noted: "I have been known to go to an event because one person is speaking and I want to hear them".

Networking was another key reason expressed by respondents for attending conferences (RELU 2007). Responses suggested that conferences were seen as business networking

opportunities and a way to ‘keep up appearances’. The opportunity to meet key figures in the industry was cited, as well the opportunity to influence opinion in certain areas.

A third common sentiment to emerge was that if a conference offered an interactive format, with the ability for attendees to participate, then attendance would be more likely. For example, one respondent expressed their preference for “something that was focussed on delivery and action, rather than a talking shop”. One of the interviewees even succinctly summarised all of the three reasons for attending events in their response:

‘I look for an opportunity to promote my organisation or if there was some leading key note speakers. These days I wouldn’t just go for the sake of it as most of it is on the internet anyway. If there was a good seminar, something interactive rather than just a lecture format then that would encourage me.

3.3 Awareness of Urban Sustainability research programmes

This section relates to results of question 6 a): *Are there any research programmes or initiatives that you know of that provide information about urban sustainability relevant to your work?* Analysis of the responses showed that there are a wide range of research programmes in the field of urban sustainability but that knowledge of them is sparse. In total 36 different programmes / organisations were mentioned. As table 1 shows, the umbrella Sustainable Urban Environment programme funded by the EPSRC was mentioned indirectly 5 times. When broken down into exactly which consortia / programmes were specifically mentioned, the total figure is the product of 5 different areas of the programme.

Table 3: Awareness of different research programmes amongst practitioners.

Research Programme	Number
SUE*	5
Aware of programme, but no name specified	4
CABE	2
LWEC	2
Sustainable Cities	2
European Knowledge Network	2
SURF	1
Greenspace Scotland	1

*5 different responses were aggregated as ‘SUE’: SUBR:IM, ISSUES, SUE, SUE-MoT, SUE Gateway.

Of the 40 practitioners interviewed, 23 were able to mention at least one research programme, of which 4 stated they were aware of research programmes but could not

recall the name, while 17 were not able to mention any. When the 23 who claimed awareness of at least one research programme were asked how they came to know of it, the results were mixed. Table 2 shows how 7 practitioners were unable to recall how they came to be aware of the programme they mentioned.

Table 4: How interviewees were aware of research programmes.

How did you come across the research programmes?	Number
Sought	4
Networks	4
Not answered/Unknown	7
Approached	4
Approached and sought	4

3.4 Practitioner approaches to accessing Research

When asked if they knew how to access research relevant to their work, 21 respondents said “yes”. Of these, 11 said they would approach colleagues, 4 respondents said they “sort-of knew” how to access research and 3 respondents stated they did not know how to access research. An interesting finding emerges when this data is cross-referenced with the subset of practitioners who were asked whether they would go directly to an academic journal for research or information. Figure 5 shows the number of people who stated whether they used academic journals or not (left column). These figures are then broken down in to the number of people who knew where and how to access research (right column). For example, of the 15 people who **do not** use academic journals, 7 nonetheless stated they knew how to access research.

Table 5: Numbers of people stating whether they would use academic journals as part of their research

Do you use academic journals?	Do you know where and how to access research relevant to your work?
No (15)	Yes (7) No (3) Colleague (5)
Yes (5)	Yes (5)
Rarely (6)	Yes (3) No (2) Colleague (1)

It should be remembered that these particular results are based on only 26 respondents (from the total sample of 40) as only these 26 were asked about their use of academic journals directly.

Many practitioners were confident in stating their ability to access research relevant to their work. When this data is cross-referenced with those who also stated whether or not they went to academic journals an interesting pattern appears. Nearly half of those who stated they did not go to academic journals also stated they knew where and how to access research relevant to them. Five practitioners stated they went to academic journals, each of whom also went on to state that they knew where and how to access research relevant to their work. This relationship will be explored further in the discussion.

3.5 What external factors impact on the finding and making use of new knowledge?

Practitioners were asked to describe the external factors that influence their ability to access and make use of new knowledge and to keep up-to-speed with new developments. The data gathered here was qualitative in nature, with some common themes emerging from the responses. One of these was that there was too much information, and another concerned the accessibility of academic information.

It was felt amongst some practitioners that there is far too much information out there: "New knowledge is more prevalent than it's ever been... there is a continuing stream of it." The amount of information put out in relation to the sustainable urban environment field was considered vast, and the concern amongst practitioners is not just the quantity but also the *quality*: "It's a large and fragmented area. There are a lot of people trying to muscle in and stake out their sustainability credentials but [there is] scepticism as to their motives as they are usually trying to sell you something." This was reiterated by another practitioner who stated that there is "a lack of credible peer-review, of people flagging up things that are actually good." These quotes are all from different practitioners and echo an apparent common sentiment: that there is too much information in the field. This is summarised in one further quote:

If I can be honest there is just so much out there. At times you can feel absolutely swamped with the volume of research, new knowledge, information that is available. At times if you're looking for something it can be very difficult to trawl and find your way through the luminous mass of information of research that's there. I don't have an awful lot of time to do general reading; if I am it tends to be quite specific. That can be a challenge at times. There's only so much Google can do for you.

The second hindrance on sustainability practitioners to keep up-to-speed with new knowledge is the barriers to accessing certain information and the time involved in searching for it. The following series of quotes outline this point:

“Accessibility [is an issue] and quite often I need practical info and some of the academic stuff needs us to do more work. I’m lucky that I know some academics so I know who to phone up.”

“You have to pay for it before you can decide if it’s what you’re looking for.”

“The availability of info, it’s out there but you have to be a member to get to it.”

“Time and cost. Actually having access to information at a low cost is quite important. The time spent searching for it is also an issue.”

“Time pressure. Just being able to get your hand on the right piece of information at the right time. The sheer scale of the amount of info that might be relevant so we using various online platforms to facilitate this”

These sentiments do not apply exclusively to academic information but to a range of sources that are locked away. The general agreement is that there is lots of information out there (even too much) but that it can take up quite a bit of time to find it, and when that information is located it is often out of reach.

3.6 What changes to such factors would make it easier for you to make use of new knowledge?

This question provided some interesting ideas as to what changes practitioners would make to better enable the process of acquiring new and reliable information. Four main themes emerged from the responses to this question. These were

- Better access to academic information
- Employers / organisations dedicating more time and emphasis to the acquisition of new knowledge
- More grounded academic research that is of relevance
- A system bringing together all academic information in one place to ease searching.

It was felt that there are many barriers to the use of academic knowledge. Reflecting some of what had already been mentioned in their responses, many practitioners stressed at the end of the survey that they wished for the barriers preventing their use of academic knowledge to be lifted. As presented in the previous section, one practitioner remarked “You have to pay for it before you can decide if it’s what you’re looking for”. The practitioner had identified some academic research that could potentially be useful to them but was unable to be certain of this based on the limited information they had access to (specifically, a journal article abstract). An option to purchase the academic article was presented to them. However, the risk that the article would not be relevant and thus be a waste of money to their company prevented them from pursuing the research further.

The second theme to emerge was that of time, and the lack of it, afforded to practitioners for research / information gathering for its own sake. Each practitioner making this point referred to the business pressures that prevent such time being given but they nevertheless felt that such time would be valuable if it could be found. One practitioner stated how they use their own annual leave as time for reading up on their field and further learning. Another remarked that work patterns in mainland Europe tend to allow for greater time for information gathering for its own sake, saying that colleagues of his on the continent appear much more versed in using academic information and have the time to read academic articles in their day-to-day roles. The desire amongst practitioners here was for greater time to be found in their roles for the acquisition of new knowledge.

The third point raised was that of the abstract nature of academic work, which respondents described as too theoretical and not grounded enough to have a practical purpose. Academic research was found to be fairly interesting when it could be accessed but that being interesting often did not equate to being usable. A desire for more grounded work was expressed, with greater use of practical examples.

The fourth point, and by far the most frequently mentioned, was a desire for a central index of *all* academic work that has been undertaken and is being undertaken. Not knowing where to search for academic information was a common feature of the responses, a factor that exacerbates the time issues mentioned above. If all academic information was on one central website which could be easily navigated according to user-defined fields then practitioners' use of academic information would likely increase. One practitioner stated that they had once attempted to find information on the research programmes a university was carrying out. To do this they had gone to the university's website and searched for a few minutes but gave up after being repeatedly directed to information on student recruitment.

3.7 Results not anticipated by the questionnaire

Another theme to emerge was a sense of exasperation amongst practitioners at the term 'sustainability'. It was often cited as too broad and incoherent, and lacking a clear message. This is perhaps borne out by the vast number of different publications cited as 'respectable'.

People at times struggled to name any research initiatives on urban sustainability. Those that were mentioned came after a period of reflection from the respondents.

4. DISCUSSION

The number of publications cited as both respected and read on a regular basis highlights the wide scope of the urban sustainability field. This is echoed further by the wide range of urban sustainability research programmes mentioned and the lack of any particularly common responses. These questions were asked to ascertain whether there were any key publications that should be targeted by researchers in order to increase the dissemination of their work in the sustainability field. It is clear from these results that there is no single source at which to aim.

It is clear also that academic journals/ research are not considered an integral part of a practitioner's approach to keeping up-to-date or finding information relevant to their work, giving further evidence for the existence of a gulf between academic findings and their uptake by industry. A range of barriers exists to make the uptake of academic information a cumbersome and costly process for practitioners. Practitioners are, by and large, discouraged from accessing academic work, often being required to pay for an article before knowing whether or not that article may be useful. Where companies or organisations have access to academic journals, time constraints placed on practitioners allow them to focus only on the current demands of their projects and offer little scope for the transfer of knowledge. With time at such a premium, practitioners are hindered further by the sheer difficulty of finding relevant academic information in the first place, whether that be through a university website, a search engine, or another facility. Also, with such a welter of publications on sustainability it can be difficult for practitioners to locate the most significant research developments, and information gleaned directly from academic sources is in danger of being crowded out.

There are also concerns about the quality of the information in the public domain. Although academic research is put through a vigorous peer-review system and can be viewed as relatively reliable information, other more widely-available content requires the individual practitioner to establish the credibility of the information. This must be seen as a concern given the apparent distaste amongst the practitioners for the term 'sustainability', which is seen as too wide-ranging, overused and at risk of losing its meaning. Whilst this point may not be directly related to 'knowledge transfer', it is perhaps an incentive for those involved in academia to re-double their efforts in disseminating their work and making it more widely accessible in order to salvage the credibility of the 'sustainability' field in which they work. Without the presence of academic rigour, the field of sustainability runs the risk of becoming discredited.

In terms of the best formats available for the dissemination of work, it is no surprise that online content receives the greatest uptake. There is also a lot of evidence supporting the use of informal networks of contacts used to gain information, whether that be through the general sharing of information or a direct call to colleagues 'in the know' for an answer to a question. Greater publicity for academic work could be brought about by utilising existing respected websites and other online facilities and by the use of email newsletters. Using these techniques in conjunction with more traditional methods, such as attending conferences and maintaining networks of contacts across sectors, could have a great impact upon knowledge transfer. This evidence supports the notion that conferences are seen as much as a networking opportunity as a space to gain new knowledge.

4.1 Limitations of the research

The research would have benefited from certain modifications to the questionnaire. The main limitation occurred in having to go back and explicitly ask each practitioner whether they would go directly to an academic journal when seeking to acquire new knowledge. The reason for this was that it was thought the questionnaire in its present format would elicit the answer to this question indirectly, without the need for direct questioning. This proved not to be the case.

4.2 Conclusions

The research has sought to understand the knowledge landscape amongst end-users of urban sustainability research. Qualitative interviews were conducted amongst a sample of 40 practitioners from the field of urban sustainability, the results of which have been outlined and discussed above. The key findings of the research are that end-users (practitioners) in urban sustainability are overloaded by information, of which only a small proportion is from academia. The many barriers between the practitioner and the academic research, coupled with the sheer volume and ease of access to non-academic information, means that academic research is overlooked and barely considered in the end-user research process.

In their acquisition of new knowledge, end-users predominantly use online formats from a wide range of publications / sources. If one key publication were to be identified it would be ENDS. However, it still represents a minority of the sample.

Some key recommendations from this research related to increasing the uptake of academic research amongst urban sustainability end-users are as follows:

Academic research should be indexed and available from a single place. Respondents suggested a central landing website for all research which could then guide practitioners to their own field of interest

Practitioners should be involved further in the inception stage of research

Academics should contact practitioners in their field as a means of establishing networks and increasing the chances of being asked to offer information

6. REFERENCES

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7. APPENDIX

7.1 Questionnaire

The ISSUES Project: New Knowledge Survey

Your Name and Position:

Name of Company or Organisation

Contact email and phone number:

Section A) Where do you get new information from?

- 1) a) Are you in the public, private or third sector?
b) Would you describe your job as mainly shaping policy or as carrying out objectives informed by policy?
c) Please indicate your field (please tick all that apply):

Engineering		Planning		Housing	
Property		Transport		Architecture	
Utility		Construction		Other:	

- 2) How do you generally acquire new knowledge? Please tick the four sources that are most important for you.

Books		Email newsletters		CPD	
Circulars		Prof. Associations		Colleagues	
Websites		'Word of mouth'		Consultancies	
Other:					

- 3) a) Which publications are respected in your field?
b) What do you actually read on a regular basis?
- 4) a) What do you need to find at events? What compels you to attend events?
b) Have you had any experiences or work arrangements that encouraged the transfer of knowledge?? How effective did you find these?
- 5) a) Do you belong to any practitioner / research partnerships?
b) If so, can you suggest how these could be made more useful?

Section B) Your interaction with research

- 6) a) Are there any research programmes or initiatives that you know of that provide information about urban sustainability relevant to your work?

b) If so, how did you come across these (did you seek it out or was it sent to you) and how was it used?

c) Please provide an example of how activity has changed in your field as a result of research. What were the drivers behind this?

- 7) Do you know where, and how, to access research relevant to your work?
- 8) When you come up against a problem / research need, within what sort of timescale do you need information or solutions?
- 9) a) What external factors impact on your finding and making use of new information or knowledge
(for example, legislative requirements, client requirements, risk factors, time take)?

b) What changes to such factors would make it easier for you to make use of new knowledge?
- 10) Can you suggest other organisations in this field that we could approach for interview that may have views on how to improve the benefits to practitioners from research work?