

Saving social policy and practice



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The NSPCC has recently joined a consortium of information professionals who created the UK's leading database of social policy and practice resources. As the consortium celebrates 10 years, the NSPCC's **Hazel Wright** and consortium partners tell the story of how the database has evolved.

IN the current climate of public sector austerity and the drive for further integration of health and social care, it seems as though the need for access to evidence-based policy and practice has never been stronger.

Twelve years ago, a meeting was held at CILIP HQ to discuss the idea of setting up a specialised UK social and public policy and care database. It was called by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) UK Centre for Evidence Based Policy and Practice (EBPP) after their experienced information scientists realised that most academics conducting systematic reviews had little or no idea of the range of UK databases available to them.

It was the first step towards creating the Social Policy and Practice database for evidence and research in health and social care.

The systematic review

For many researchers working in the field of evidence-based, or informed, policy and practice, the systematic review is seen as the gold standard.

The idea of evidence-based practice and synthesising knowledge from multiple studies has been around since the 1970s. In the early 1990s, criticisms of the traditional literature review led to a more rigorous systematic method being widely adopted.

Medicine was the pioneer of the systematic review with the Cochrane Collaboration being established in 1992 and public policy following with the Campbell Collaboration in 1999. Today systematic reviews of evaluated literature are considered the cornerstone of evidence-based practice.

Once a research question has been set, the first step of a systematic review is searching the literature. To be a true reflection of existing knowledge every systematic review requires the most comprehensive identification of existing research.

A systematic review will only ever be as good as the pool of knowledge upon which it draws.

Common problems

Systematic review methodology is continually being reviewed and refined. Reviews of the review process commonly identify the need to look beyond the major databases to more specialist collections, to source grey literature and to look beyond geographical borders

The concerns raised by the EBPP's information scientists in 2003 echo these findings and contribute to a range of issues familiar to information professionals.

- Undocumented or unstructured search strategies.
- The widespread belief that the internet is a comprehensive database of knowledge that can be searched.
- Confusion between gateway services and individual databases – 'I searched Athens'.
- Reliance on databases that only cover peer-reviewed journals.
- Reliance on US-produced databases that only cover US peer-reviewed journals.
- Limiting searches to databases the researcher is familiar with or has access to.
- No knowledge of UK databases.
- No knowledge that other databases exist.

The journey to a new resource

EBPP's initial meeting at CILIP in July 2003 was attended by the heads of ChildData, AgeInfo, Planex and Acompline. With the Social Care Institute for Excellence's Care-data database also on board, these five database providers agreed to pool their resources and create the first national social science database embracing social care, social policy, social services, and public policy for all sectors of the research and practice community.

By January 2004, the EBPP were approaching suppliers to see if there was any interest in helping to support a consortium of information providers to package their individual datasets. The combined



We're proud to have created a new, unique resource to contribute to the knowledge base for social research, policy and practice.

collections would cover not only peer-reviewed journal articles but also include society magazines, books and grey literature (such as government reports, independent research institute or organisation or think tank publications) and academic working papers.

The proposal was met with great enthusiasm by the sector. Many suppliers were looking to expand their coverage of the social sciences. They recognised a gap in provision and valued the unique opportunity to create one major UK database from a collective 200,000 references already in existence.

It was Ovid Technologies, with enthusiastic support from its marketing team, who took up the challenge of converting data from the five databases into one.

By February 2004, sample data was with Ovid for conversion and by March contracts had been signed. The new Social Policy and Practice database was launched in November 2004.

The strengths of consortium working

Bringing together these organisations was relatively simple.

They were all striving to provide the right information to their staff, members or customers. They all also had a professional drive to share their focused collections with the wider world of researchers contributing to knowledge and information of social science and influencing policy and practice.

Merging their collections and working together to create a more comprehensive resource would help achieve both aims. It would broaden the range of information available to their customers and create the first UK social policy and practice database.

Bringing together these organisations' databases was not so simple.

These specialised databases produced in the UK were built to meet the needs of different (usually non-academic) users and to operate with limited budgets. The varied approaches to field structure, indexing, and abstracting made the merging of data a challenge.

This is where the benefits of consortium working were clearly felt. The ongoing relationships between members allows for discussion on how best to gather, store, catalogue, retrieve and weed information in a database.

Through developing best practice and troubleshooting problems together, we have improved not only the Social Policy and Practice database for users but also improved our own individual collections.

All whilst remaining independent and focused on our individual specialities.

Who's who

The five pioneer databases of Social Policy and Practice have evolved and developed since the launch in November 2004.

Acompline from the Greater London Authority stopped contributing to SPP in 2012 and Idox expanded its coverage



The SPP Consortium: a professional drive to share their collections with the wider world.

to compensate. SPP still contains items contributed by the GLA up to this point. The collection is particularly rich in grey literature and ranges across social care, health care and social policy with emphasis on London and the south east of England.

Planex from Idox Information Service has grown from an emphasis on planning and social policy in Scotland and the north of England to a comprehensive source of evidence and research for the UK public sector. It covers all forms of documentation and the coverage of grey literature is exceptionally strong.

AgeInfo from the Centre for Policy on Ageing is the only specialist database on ageing and older age issues in the UK. All forms of literature are included with a particular strength in reports from independent research institutes. Subject coverage includes welfare and health care, carers, disability, employment, housing, retirement, finance and pensions, and community and residential care.

Social Care Online from the Social Care Institute for Excellence was launched in 2005 and incorporates the former Caredata and Electronic Library for Social Care content. It is the UK's largest database of research and information on all aspects of social care and social work. Core subject areas include people with social care needs, adults, children and families; care services; safeguarding, dementia, mental capacity, disability, and end of life; social welfare policy and legislation; social work and the social care workforce.

ChildData from the National Children's Bureau (NCB) covers the literature on children, young people and families, including research, evidence and evaluation, policy and practice, and statistics and legislation. Topics include disability, early years, education, health and wellbeing, play, social and family policy and social care, and youth justice.

New additions

The NSPCC joined in 2015, bringing its collection of resources focused on child abuse, child neglect and child protection. The NSPCC library is Europe's largest collection

of publications dedicated to safeguarding children. It includes journal articles, books, academic papers, leaflets, reports, audio-visual material, websites and digital media on all subjects that help researchers, policy makers and practitioners protect children from abuse and neglect.

SPP now boasts over 400,000 references to papers, books and reports and about 30 per cent of the total content is grey literature.


SPP has been identified by National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) as a key resource for those involved in research into health and social care.

The future

We're proud to have created a new, unique resource to contribute to the knowledge base for social research, policy and practice.

Through our continued commitment to working in partnership and understanding the needs of our users we aim to provide the UK's most comprehensive database for social policy and practice and ensuring the UK is achieving the best evidence-based practice.

To find out more about Social Policy and Practice (SPP) database for evidence and research in health and social care or to get a free trial please visit www.spandp.net

For more information about our experiences of working in a consortium please contact us website@spandp.info 

References and further reading

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