The Centre for Policing Research and Learning at The Open University is committed, through its Police Knowledge Fund grant, to six enquiry visits. Here we set out the purposes and approach of enquiry visits, so that the Consortium can start planning and undertaking these.

Enquiry visits have been used in local government and in the prison service in various ways. Peer review is used in a range of organizations to help improvements through external challenge. Enquiry visits are particularly focused on what the visitor organization learns and uses.

Enquiry visits are designed to create and share knowledge about evidence-based practice by bringing together two types of policing practitioner along with academics. Each visit would involve practitioners who have pioneered or who work with an interesting or exemplary practice on a particular policing issues along with practitioners who wish to adopt or adapt that practice in their own organization. The academics engage in the visit by challenging the visit to be questioning and to draw out key learning.

How enquiry visits work and what benefits they create

A lead academic, with advice from partners, sets up and orchestrates each enquiry visit. The enquiry visits, lasting in most cases one day, may be to other police organizations, or they may be to organizations in other parts of the public service, or in the private or voluntary sectors.

The exemplary or interesting practice may occur at one or both of two levels:
- The practice itself (e.g. a new way of tackling wellbeing in the workplace; an improved custody procedure)
- How the organizational change or innovation was implemented (e.g. mobilising support; dealing with opposition; overcoming early mistakes)

A visit (rather than a talk or a presentation) can be valuable to both host and visitor. For the host, research shows that receiving visitors who ask questions can help the host organization to articulate and reflect on what is distinctive and useful to other organizations about what they are doing (Hartley and Rashman, 2007). Visitors create a mirror for the organization, enabling it to see itself more clearly (Nicolin et al, 2011). This might be particularly valuable to any change champions or evidence-based champions in the host organization.

For the visitor, having a close-up view of the innovation or high quality improvement and being able to talk to pioneers or implementers can produce useful ideas and experiences to take home. A visit enables the acquiring of tacit knowledge – knowledge which can be hard to articulate but which is highly valuable if change is to be successful (Nonaka, 1995; Hartley and Rashman, 2007). Sharing experiences, seeing operations in practice and hearing about the highs and lows of bringing about the change can help visitors to plan their own improvements with a greater realism of the barriers to be overcome and the opportunities to be realised.

Again, this may be of particular interest to change champions or evidence-based champions. Enhancing skills in bringing about change is a valuable part of enquiry visits.

Change and innovation through enquiry visits

Enquiry visits do not aim to not only collect but also use new ideas in the home organization so attention to "re-entry" is also important. Research tells us that using exemplary practice from elsewhere is only rarely "copy and paste" but is more likely to involve adaptation to local circumstances (local culture, local communities, local resourcing; local other procedures which may be disrupted with the new idea) (Hartley and Benington, 2006). So, thinking about "adapt not adopt" is often important. The academics will work with the visitors as they work out what is feasible to introduce in their own organization and what needs adapting and how.

This will take place after the enquiry visit itself.

Enquiry visits may be concerned with:
- Learning how to improve existing policies, practices or procedures (Example: Calderdale Council visited Blackburn with Darwen Council when it wanted to learn how to improve its schools)
- Learning how to innovate in policies, practices or procedures (Example: Doctors at Great Ormond St Hospital visited Formula One racing to adapt concepts in the racing car pit-stop to the transfer of patients from the operating theatre to intensive care).

So, the host organization may be similar or quite dissimilar in its sector or work. The key issue is how can learning be taken and applied from that host organization.

A framework of knowledge creation and transfer in organizational settings

Research with all English local government over a decade has summarised how learning and knowledge about exemplary or innovative practices are shared. This is explained in a framework (Hartley and Rashman, 2007; Rashman et al, 2009), and a diagram of this is shown below.

There are three key elements:
- The qualities of the host organization which enable it to recognise, articulate and share its exemplary or innovative practice
- The qualities of the visitor organization which enable it to recognise, adapt and use knowledge from a different context and organization
- The enabling processes of trust, respect for diversity and challenge which enable the organizations to share ideas and knowledge (including tacit knowledge)

These are embedded in a policy context of the Consortium which encourages sharing and learning between Consortium partners.