

Research Programme of significant use to the sector

A 2017 evaluation of the NZ Transport Agency’s (Transport Agency’s) Research Programme shows that it continues to have substantial value to end users in all areas of the transport sector.

The evaluation, conducted by Evaluate Research, was a follow up to a similar study completed in 2011. It assessed three key aspects of the research that the Transport Agency published between 2011 and 2016. Value was defined as how important the Research Programme was considered to be, both for individual end users and the transport sector as a whole.

The evaluation also looked at the factors that prevented or enabled uptake and use of the research, and at how effective the Transport Agency’s Research Programme was, namely, its relevance to end users and the extent to which it aligned with their needs; the approaches to disseminating and promoting the findings, and the value of the research programme overall.

The information from the evaluation will enable the Transport Agency to adopt a learning-oriented and evidence-based approach to how it manages and improves its Research Programme. The Transport Agency also plans to use the findings to evaluate its progress against the New Zealand Transport

Research Strategy, which has the goals of investing in the right research, and ensuring that research inputs and results are visible.

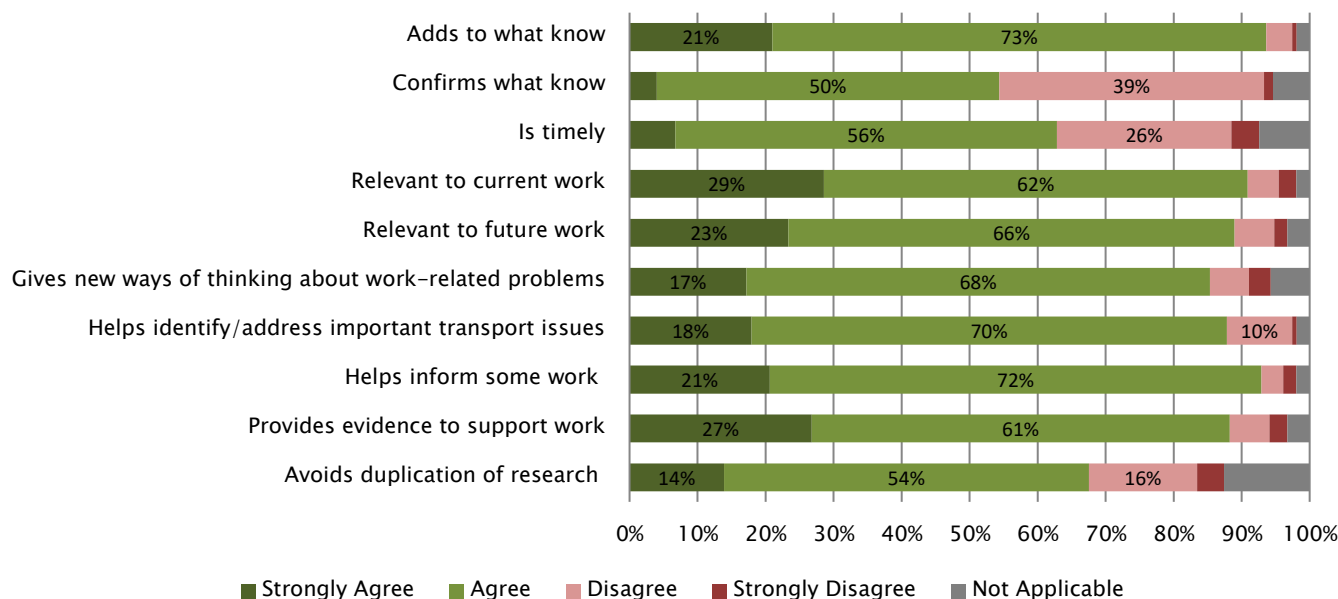
About the Research Programme

The Transport Agency and its predecessors have managed government-funded research about land transport in New Zealand since 1953. On average, \$5 million is allocated every year to the Transport Agency’s Research Programme.

Since 2010, the Transport Agency has selected the topics to be researched, based on the prioritised research needs of various transport decision makers, including itself and the Ministry of Transport.

Since the 2011 evaluation of the Research Programme, the projects commissioned have tended to be of a more significant nature, and have been completed in a more timely fashion, than in the past. During the five years covered by the latest evaluation, the Transport Agency published 142 research reports as part of the programme.

How research meets end user needs (n=168)



Evaluation approach

The evaluation included qualitative interviews with Transport Agency staff with responsibility for particular research topic areas, and with transport researchers. It also included a literature review, an online survey of research end users based in New Zealand, and follow-up telephone interviews with a selection of the survey respondents. Respondents were drawn from local and central government, the Transport Agency and other Crown entities, professional bodies, education and training organisations, and private sector research and road contracting companies. Within these organisations, respondents held an equally diverse range of roles.

Research relevance and use

The evaluation assessed how well the research aligned with end users' needs, and its relevance to both their own work and to the New Zealand transport sector as a whole. Most respondents reported that the research 'usually' or 'sometimes' met their needs. However, overall, respondents considered the research very relevant to the New Zealand transport sector.

The evaluation findings indicate that researchers' interests and needs for transport research are diverse. The majority of respondents (85%) said they accessed reports relating to two or more topic areas. This may be due to a research interest that covers more than one topic area: for example, research relating to economic analysis can be discussed within a public transport context.

Respondents were also asked how the research met their needs. The majority of respondents 'strongly agree' or 'agree' that the research adds to what they already know; is relevant to, and helps inform their current or future work; gives them new ways to think about issues; and helps identify or address important transport issues.

Respondents also reported they were more likely to use the research to learn something new and share it with others, rather than using the research to inform such things as policy and specifications.

The three main factors that support respondents using the research are its relevance to their work, knowing where to find the reports, and the availability of succinct summaries and conclusions from the full research. These factors were similar to those identified in the 2011 evaluation.

The biggest barrier to respondents using the research was a lack of time to read the full reports.

Research dissemination

The evaluation also examined how respondents accessed the Transport Agency's communications about published research reports, and how useful and easy to access they found the various channels used.

Despite most of the research reports being published on the Transport Agency's website, most respondents said they found out about new research either through the Transport Agency's regular email notifications, entitled 'Recently published reports', or its quarterly hard-copy publication NZTA research, both of which are sent out to subscribers. Less than half of the respondents found out about the research directly through the website.

Overall, respondents thought the Transport Agency's dissemination of information about the Research Programme could be improved by making it easier to find, easier to access in terms of the way information is presented, and by making it clearer how research might be applied. Specific recommendations included:

- improving the usability of the website, so there is improved visibility of the research and access to the research
- providing more opportunities for research-related events such as the Transport Knowledge Conference and Transport Knowledge Hubs.

An assessment of the programme's value for money proved challenging, partly because of the lack of an agreed definition of value. Any attempt to assess the programme's value would need to take into account a range of factors. These include the extent to which the research is used; and whether cost savings are made as a result of the research, either due to the introduction of an innovation or because work is not undertaken, as research shows it is not necessary.

The report concludes there are opportunities for the Transport Agency to build on the ideas discussed in the research, and explore the various mechanisms by which the Research Programme's value might be measured. This would enable ongoing systematic monitoring and evaluation of the programme.

There is a spreadsheet listing all published Transport Agency research reports, searchable by several criteria, available at: <http://www.nzta.govt.nz/planning/programming/research.html>. The link to the spreadsheet is in the second paragraph under the heading 'How can I find research reports?'

Also, PDF versions of all Transport Agency research newsletters are available at <http://www.nzta.govt.nz/resources/nzta-research/index.html>.

Notification emails are sent when Transport Agency Research Programme reports and NZTA research newsletters are published. Email NZTAresearch@nzta.govt.nz to subscribe.