Social Work Research and Continuous Improvement Strategy
2015 - 2020

In Pursuit of Excellence in Evidence Informed Practice in Northern Ireland
Supporting the profession and improving outcomes

SUMMARY
STRATEGY
Accessibility statement

Any request for the document in another format or language will be considered.

**Equality, Human Rights and Personal and Public Involvement**

In the development of the Social Work Research and Continuous Improvement Strategy, equality and human rights were integral to the process. Key sections in the strategy reflect consideration of these issues which are also reflected in the specific priorities identified. The Strategy has also been screened in accordance with the HSCB’s statutory equality duties. The screening outcomes are available as part of our requirement to publish quarterly equality screening reports [http://www.hscbusiness.hscni.net/services/2664.htm](http://www.hscbusiness.hscni.net/services/2664.htm) In the roll out of the Strategy, and in the conduct of any future research activity, account will be taken of the specific needs of groups marginalised in society where inclusive research activity can provide positive equality outcomes.

**The full Strategy is available at:**
http://www.hscboard.hscni.net/swresearch/swrcistrategy2015

**Telephone:** 028 95 363017 or Text phone: 028 95 363017 with prefix 18001 if you wish to speak to someone about the Strategy.

**Email** swresearchcistrategy@hscni.net if you need a paper copy.
Foreword

I am very pleased to present a five year Research and Continuous Improvement Strategy for Social Work in Northern Ireland. This Strategy offers a new and refreshed impetus for us all to move forward collaboratively at a time when delivering social work in the context of wider social care services is taking place in a more complex, uncertain and changing environment.

Social work is an established professional discipline which makes a valuable contribution in helping children, adults and families to take control of and to improve their lives in conditions where their security, safety or ability to participate in civic life are restricted. In Northern Ireland there are currently 5,600 registered social workers who operate within a framework of legislation and government policy relating to children, families and adults and who are governed by the Northern Ireland Social Care Council’s Code of Practice. The Strategy has a particular focus on social work in the Health and Social Care System which is where the majority of social workers are employed. Criminal justice, education, youth justice, voluntary and independent organisations are also important employers of social workers and this Strategy should also support social work research activity in these sectors.

Social workers work holistically with individuals and families and with other professions in many diverse and often very complex social circumstances where there are high levels of uncertainty, stress, conflicts of interest and risk and often in situations where very often there are no clear answers. The value base of the profession is however one that encourages equality and partnership working appropriate to individual circumstances to help achieve independence and allow individuals, adults and their families exercise their human and civil rights. In some instances social workers are required to intervene on a preventative or statutory basis when adults and children who are at risk or need safeguarding from abuse, neglect or exploitation, and possibly need removing from their home.

Improving and Safeguarding Social Wellbeing Social - Work Strategy 2012-2020, Belfast: DHSSPSNI (2012) set out the vision and agenda for action by social work and social workers in improving the social wellbeing of individuals, families and communities, including supporting greater personalisation. We believe that this includes having robust evidence and takes into account the lived experience of service users and carers.
Our aim therefore with the development of the Social Work Research and Continuous Improvement Strategy is to build an organisational culture that recognises and values the contribution of research and evidence and its integration at all levels of policy, commissioning and practice. We want to increase both the quantity and quality of research relevant to Northern Ireland to support both the visibility of the social work profession and better outcomes for service users and carers.

The Strategy has been informed by an extensive consultation exercise. It has the support of a wide range of interested organisations and individuals both internally within the health and social care sector and externally from a diverse range of settings including academia, the voluntary sector, representative organisations, service users and carers and other individuals. The time and commitment offered by everyone in this endeavour is warmly acknowledged. We wish to capitalise on the positive attitudes that exists for this Strategy at this time.

The lesson learned from the development of the Strategy is that all of these stakeholders had a part to play and all, and others, will have a part to play in its implementation if our vision that service users and carers will benefit from social work being a more confident profession in the production and use of research, evaluation, audit and engagement in knowledge transfer partnerships to inform policy making and practice is to be realised.

Fionnuala McAndrew
Director of Social Care and Children
Health and Social Care Board

Health and Social Care Board
A message from Sean Holland  
Chief Social Work Officer

In 2012, when the Social Work Strategy was launched, at its heart was the recognition of the need for social work as a profession to have a stronger research culture. Building a body of social work research is the first step on the road to improving outcomes for those who use and rely on social work services by providing the knowledge and evidence base about what works and what doesn’t work.

Other important steps are needed to embed research into organisational and practice activity if it is to contribute meaningfully to improving and safeguarding people’s social well-being. While there has been significant progress in equipping social workers to be more research-minded, particularly through social work education and training and the increase in access to the knowledge base and research findings through technology, more needs to be done to fully integrate evidence based approaches into service delivery and practice.

In an integrated health and social care system social workers also need to be able to make applications and secure funding for research on a stronger footing alongside their healthcare colleagues, to be more research active in the workplace and contribute to the knowledge and evidence base of not only what works in social work, but what works in an integrated health and social care context.

The Department’s funding for the development of a Social Work Research and Continuous Improvement Strategy reflects my commitment to building the capacity and capability of all social workers to use and build the evidence base for practice in Northern Ireland, to engage in research and research-related activity and to build a culture of continuous learning and improvement.
A strong research and evidence base underpinning practice and service provision is an important hallmark of any profession. It promotes credibility, trust and confidence in the profession and at the same time enhances the skills, expertise and ability of social workers in meeting the needs of service users.

I therefore very much welcome this Strategy in providing the road map to take this challenging agenda forward and congratulate all those involved in its development. It is a first for Northern Ireland and represents a landmark in the on-going professionalization and professionalism of social work.

I believe it will contribute to the development of a vibrant research culture for social work and help embed research and evidence based approaches as an established and integral part of service delivery and practice which will benefit those who use our services.

Sean Holland
Chief Social Work Officer/Deputy Secretary
Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety
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Introduction

This document is a summary of the five year Research and Continuous Improvement Strategy for Social Work in Northern Ireland from 2015-2020. It supports the promotion of a culture of evidence informed practice, quality, service and user outcomes and the delivery of research, evaluation and audit across services.

Research is essential to both the development of new knowledge and to innovation; evaluation ensures learning is captured and that service user and carer views are included, and audit is the cornerstone of ensuring that we deliver high quality person centred services and sustained improvement. Each source of evidence overlaps and feeds each other and together forms a platform from which to plan and deliver services and improvement.

The Strategy reflects the commitment shown by the social work leadership; the Chief Social Work Officer of the Department of Health and Social Services (DHSSPS), the Director of Social Care and Children of the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) and Executive Directors of Social Work in the five Health and Social Care Trusts (Trusts) who requested and supported its development. It has a particular focus on social work within the statutory health and social care sector which is where the majority of social workers are employed. Criminal justice, education, youth justice, voluntary and independent organisations are also important employers of social workers and this Strategy should support social workers in relation to activity in these sectors. The Strategy should be read in conjunction with key government policies that set the strategic direction for social work services and the evidence agenda in different sectors and settings.

From the outset it is recognised that this is a step change and changing the culture will not happen overnight. We believe that setting a number of strategic priorities will contribute to building a strong foundation that allows research and knowledge exchange for future generations. A number of incremental steps are necessary to build on this foundation. By necessity the Strategy retains a degree of flexibility to respond to rapid changes in the world of social work in the context of wider social care provision.
The principle behind the Strategy is that the development and use of research and evidence should increasingly be driven and owned by health and social care with opportunities for discourse and knowledge from a critical perspective and independent of the sector. The approach proposed is one that encourages the fostering of reciprocal relationships between the producers of research and evidence, and those who need to use it by applying it to practice. The users of research and evidence include: policy makers, managers at commissioning and provider levels, practitioners, other researchers and service users and carers. This Strategy will support the creation of opportunities for all, relevant to needs, to build confidence to engage with and influence research, evaluation and audit activity.

**OUR VISION**

Our vision is that service users and carers will benefit from social work being a more confident profession in the production and use of research, evaluation, audit and engagement in knowledge transfer partnerships to inform policy making and practice.

**AIM**

The aim is to build a research minded organisational culture. This culture is one that recognises the important and necessary contribution that undertaking, understanding, critically appraising and applying evidence makes to improving outcomes for service users. This should be supported through a well-developed knowledge transfer process in making sense of what is best practice in services.

**PURPOSE**

The purpose of the Strategy is to demonstrate, both internally and externally, organisational commitment for the promotion and support of social work research, evaluation and audit activity across the wider context of social care service provision. The Strategy will provide confidence that decisions taken at policy, commissioning, service development and practice levels are evidence based, with research evidence worthy of particular attention in the generation of new knowledge.
Who is the target audience?

The immediate impact will be on social work professionals which in 2015 equated to 715 trainees and just over 5600 professionals who have responsibility for designing, commissioning managing or providing services and empowering service users and carers. The majority (70%) are employed in the statutory health and social care organisations primarily within Health and Social Care Trusts, 47% in Children’s Services and 32% in Adult Services. A number are also employed in management posts. The remainder of social work professionals are employed in a range of practitioner and management posts across other statutory and voluntary organisations.

In view of the multi-dimensional nature of social work and social care the outworking of this Strategy will also have wide reaching impact on a range of other statutory, academic and research organisations, voluntary and community sectors and service users and carers.
At a glance

What we wish to see from the Research and Continuous Improvement Strategy:

- The development of a regional research active culture that builds a body of robust research evidence and knowledge relevant to Northern Ireland;
- The establishment of a mechanism in partnership with others to determine and review research priorities linked to funding that are driven and owned by the Health and Social Care sector;
- Greater collaboration between academic, other research and evidence providers and practice settings in order to identify and respond to existing evidence gaps;
- A better understanding of the barriers to evidence informed practice and a means to tackle these;
- An increase in the exchange, dissemination and use of research and evidence that is accessible to the end user;
- Better engagement and involvement of service users in the whole research process including research, evaluation and audit;
- Greater attention to how we define and measure outcomes of social work interventions and services; and,
- The development of improved quality services.
Where we want to get to

This section outlines a range of strategic priorities with an outline of what we hope to achieve. The ‘At a Glance’ section summarises the expected outcomes. It is recognised that this is a step change in the culture.

Actions to support the implementation of the Strategy will be phased and targeted. Some measures will be easy to implement, others will take longer.

**Strategic Priority 1**

To improve outcomes and experiences for service users, carers and society through attention to research and evidence informed practice to enhance individual and societal wellbeing at policy, commissioning and practice levels.

What we hope to achieve

- Senior managers will support a whole system approach that promotes a culture of research mindedness and evidence informed practice;
- Decisions about policy, commissioning, service developments and practice will be informed by evidence from research, evaluation and audit;
- Research and evidence will be embedded into and aligned with other mainstream accountability processes related to planning, decision making, governance and supervision;
- A continuum of training including critical appraisal skills, research methodology and processes will be in place at qualifying and post qualifying masters and doctorate levels;
- A continuous learning culture will be fostered whereby managers recognise the importance of social workers seeking out, critically appraising and applying the best available evidence as an integral part of their role in planning and decision making.
Strategic Priority 2

To ensure the body of research and evidence is easily available and relevant to social work in Northern Ireland supporting an overall model of continuous improvement and excellence in commissioning, planning and practice.

What we hope to achieve

- A mechanism will be established, in partnership with others, to determine review and manage research and evidence priorities on an annual basis including identifying the need for new empirical research, systematic reviews of evidence and better utilisation of existing data sets;
- Social work representation on strategic research decision making bodies, including the HSC R&D Division will be strengthened;
- Greater influence in decisions regarding funding calls will be exerted to better reflect and target social work research priorities;
- Linkages and partnerships with Higher Education Institutes and other Centres of Excellence will be developed and maintained to foster mutually beneficial alliances and collaborative working in research related activity;
- The capability of social work staff will be strengthened in the procurement and commissioning of research related activity ensuring clarity of ownership, intellectual property and publication rights.

Strategic Priority 3

To increase investment in research, evaluation and audit activity.

What we hope to achieve

- The current level of investment in research, evaluation and audit activity in Northern Ireland will be identified and monitored in order to capitalise on its impact on decision making and its contribution to identifying research priorities;
- The quantity and quality of research applications will be increased to secure funding from HSC R&D Division and from other funders for research related activity to be undertaken by social workers;
- Funders will be lobbied to influence funding decisions about investment in high quality research relevant to Northern Ireland.
Strategic Priority 4

To increase the engagement, participation and visibility of social workers in partnership with other professionals, in research, evaluation and audit activities.

What we hope to achieve

- Senior managers will support and facilitate an organisational culture whereby social workers will be encouraged to be research minded;
- A local research champion infrastructure will be established to support and drive the research and evidence agenda across the range of social work services;
- Targets will be established for investment in the education and development of social workers (policy, commissioner and practice levels) in research methods and critical appraisal skills;
- Organisations will build the capacity, capability and confidence of social work staff to engage in research and evidence related activity and education and learning and adopt approaches to measure if investment is producing evidence informed practice and critical appraisal;
- A variety of supports will be in place to encourage and facilitate practitioner based research and evidence activity in the workplace including technical support and partnerships with Higher Education Institutes and other Centres of Excellence, locally, nationally and internationally, and engagement with other professions;
- Greater attention will be given, including better use of technology and existing networks, for making research and evidence more accessible to those who need to use it;
- Opportunities will be created to celebrate and communicate success;
- Opportunities will be created to recognise, value and maintain the skill base of those practitioners who have acquired academic credit for research by utilising these skills in the mentoring, the supervision and provision of teaching inputs on recognised courses, for the benefit of other practitioners wishing to engage in research activity;
- Organisations will build the capacity of staff for greater dissemination of research locally (including within organisations), nationally and internationally using a range of innovative technologies;
- Dialogue between and within organisations to consider the best approach to implementation and knowledge transfer responsive to local needs will begin.
Strategic Priority 5
To promote and support a research infrastructure within Northern Ireland which recognises the distinct features of the Social Work Profession whilst ensuring any research related activity complies with research ethics and governance standards.

What we hope to achieve
• Engagement with the HSC R&D Division will ensure that the regional research infrastructure is proportionate for the different types of research activity;
• Work with existing HSC R&D Governance and Ethics Committees will ensure there is both practical assistance and accessible information to support social work staff in negotiating and navigating the research and governance infrastructure;
• Engagement of social work in the mechanisms in Trusts for research governance and evaluation governance and the development of research and evaluation activity.

Strategic Priority 6
To ensure the experience, practice wisdom and knowledge of frontline staff, service users and carers is used to inform proposals for commissioning and investment in research, evaluation and audit activity.

What we hope to achieve
• Social workers, in partnership with service users and carers, will engage in research, evaluation and audit activity as a regular mainstream feature
• Routine and systematic collection and analysis of service users views and experiences of service interventions will be undertaken to support continuous improvement of services;
• Greater involvement of service users and carers will be facilitated in identifying and measuring outcomes.
Strategic Priority 7

To ensure that any research, evaluation or audit activity promotes the principles and practice of personal and public involvement and equality and human rights.

What we hope to achieve

- Appropriate structures will be identified for creative networking and engagement with service users and carers, including those from marginalised communities, to provide opportunities for influencing the research and evidence agenda and managing expectations;

- Mechanisms, including the provision of training, will be in place for the engagement and involvement of service users and carers to enhance Personal and Public Involvement in the outworking of the Strategy.

- Engagement will take place with researchers to develop ways to overcome challenges in Personal and Public Involvement. This will encourage and support more co-research activity whereby service users and carers play a partnership role in research activity rather than being perceived as passive recipients;

- Research related activity will demonstrate consideration of equality and human rights issues.
Key stakeholders in relation to the Social Work Research and Continuous Improvement Strategy.

- Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety
  - Office of Social Services
- Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA)
- Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) Directorate of Social Care and Children
- Public Health Agency (PHA)
- Patient Client Council
- Health and Social Care Trusts Belfast, Northern Southern, South Eastern and Western
- Northern Ireland Social Care Council (NISCC)
- Community and Voluntary sectors who provide services on behalf of the statutory sector
- NI Guardian Ad Litem (NIGALA)

A number of other stakeholders including:

**Service users and carers**
Academics, Other research providers, Voluntary community and independent sector and Knowledge Exchange Organisations
Success factors

• The establishment of a mechanism in partnership with others to determine and review research priorities that are driven and owned by the sector itself and linked to funding;

• The development of a regional active research culture that promotes the importance of robust evidence;

• Greater collaboration between academic and other research providers and practice settings in order to foster reciprocal relationships and partnerships working to identify and fill existing evidence gaps;

• Work that helps understand and tackle the barriers to evidence informed practice;

• An increase in the exchange, dissemination and use of research and evidence that is accessible to those who need to use it;

• Better engagement and involvement of service users in the whole research processes; and,

• Greater attention to how we define and measure outcomes of social work interventions and services.
REFLECTION 1
Do you need to ensure that the services you commission are based on the best available evidence of what works?
Would you like to ensure that the services you deliver are based on the best available evidence of what works?
Would you like to understand research and appraise its quality?
Would you like to be able to sort the empirical evidence and studies on social policy that are most relevant based on an answerable question?
If you answered yes to one or more of the following questions this Strategy applies to you!

REFLECTION 2
In what ways do a systematic approach to data searching and critical appraisal compare favourably with the traditional ways of keeping up with evidence which included activities such as; asking colleagues, seeking advice from an expert or reading an article in a book or a journal?

REFLECTION 3
Evaluating practice helps you to know whether or not what you are doing works. It may show a positive impact or it might show that what you are doing is having little impact. What are the steps you would need to take to demonstrate what works in your practice area?

REFLECTION 4
Some equality categories have been researched more than others. Can you think of any ways in which the lack of information about some other marginalised groups increases chances of inequality in social work services?

REFLECTION 5
Service users and carers are able to offer different perspectives about outcomes from those of policy makers. Can you think of some of the challenges and opportunities that might exist for researchers and different groups of service users and carers in engaging in the different research processes?
Conclusion

The Research and Continuous Improvement Strategy has set out the vision and the priorities of the social work sector in order to build an organisational culture that recognises the importance and contribution of research and evidence. Ultimately it is about increasing the quantity and quality of research and evidence relevant to Northern Ireland which will inform policy and practice decisions. It will support professionals in responding to the diversity of needs in the population to provide social work and social care services based on the best available evidence of what works and what does not work. We believe that by increasing confidence and competence in the area of research mindedness and the use of evidence this will support both the visibility of the profession and deliver better outcomes for service users and carers.

To keep the Strategy alive effort needs to be sustained over the forthcoming years in order to realise its full potential in building a body of evidence relevant to Northern Ireland. To this end the initial approach will centre on two activities:

• Communications; and,
• Visibility.

These activities are vital forces in any strategy. A plan will be developed to support clear and accessible communications so that the Strategy is translated into terms that are understood by all who have responsibilities for its success. Annual events and seminars will be arranged to profile activity. It is important that the Strategy be included in relevant committee and team agendas.

The priorities and the framework for practice set out an exciting but equally challenging agenda. In order to keep the Strategy under review a phased implementation plan with timescales will be developed which will be reviewed and updated regularly. The focus will be on achieving outcomes and monitoring impact. Organisations will have different start points in relation to research capacity and activity, so locally sensitive approaches will be needed. The management of this activity and its alignment with the Strategy will be critical to sustainability.
STRATEGY
Health and Social Care Board

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