

and partner organisations, service users and carers

Social Work and Social Care Research Evidence

Supporting Continuous Improvement in service outcomes



Strategy 2020 – 2025

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. The Strategy was 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> in the implementation 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.

Foreword to be added

DRAFT

Contents	
	Page
Introduction	5
Messages from the review	6 – 7
Research is important for...	8
Vision , Aims, Objectives, Principles and Values	10 – 12
Our current position	13
The target audience	16
Partnerships	17 – 19
Overview	20
Focus Area 1	21
Focus Area 2	22
Focus Area 3	23
Focus Area 4	24 – 25
Focus Area 5	26 – 27
Implementation Plan	28
Conclusion	29
Glossary	30- 31

Introduction



In 2015 we launched the Social Work Research and Continuous Improvement Strategy 2015-2020 (HSCB 2015).¹ Our aim was the development of a culture that recognises and values the contribution of research evidence within social work and social care to support better outcomes for service users and carers.

A review of the strategy was undertaken in (2019)² which has identified and acknowledged quite a number of achievements over a relatively short timeframe and made suggestions for moving forward. The consultation process undertaken as part of this review pointed to a broad consensus that the Research and Continuous Improvement Strategy symbolises an overarching commitment to the development of research and evidence, research capacity and collaborative working.

“We shouldn’t underestimate the symbolic nature of the Social Work Research and Continuous Improvement Strategy for providing an impressive commitment to social work research and an important message about its value”.

There was also agreement that strategically there needs to be greater clarity regarding purpose, planned and timely actions, outcomes and an implementation plan identifying roles and responsibilities of those involved.

¹ Social Work Research and Continuous Improvement Strategy 2015 -2020(HSCB 2015)

<http://www.hscboard.hscni.net/our-work/social-care-and-children/swresearch>

² Social Work Research and Continuous Improvement Strategy Review (HSCB 2019)

Messages from the review to inform the future strategy

Specifically within the review there were a number of suggestions for the way forward

- Revisit the strategic research priorities developing a time limited implementation plan that pays attention to measurement of impact linked to accountability processes.
- Develop a revised implementation structure that supports organisational ownership of the agenda.
- Establish a collaborative network across a range of statutory and voluntary agencies, service users and carers and academia.
- Give concerted attention to ensuring there is adequate funding allocated locally for the implementation of the research strategy.
- Develop collaborative activity with academia and others to lobby and seek out opportunities offered by funding bodies.
- Continue to focus on raising the visibility of social work and social care research evidence activity with a variety of audiences, including service users and the wider public and researchers in other professions.
- Embed research evidence and knowledge transfer in policy, practice, learning and development to support ongoing service improvements.
- Build the capacity and capability amongst staff and service users and carers to develop a continuum of research mindedness and evidence informed practice.
- Develop and review approaches to facilitate dissemination of research evidence within and between organisations.

Using the 2015-2020 HSCB's strategy (2015) this new strategy is intended to build on its strengths and successes. It places greater emphasis on establishing research partnerships, strengthening links between researchers, academia, policy makers, managers, practitioners and service users and carers and securing wider ownership. It supports the ethos of Improving and Safeguarding Social Wellbeing Social Work Strategy 2012-2020 which set out the vision for improving the social wellbeing of individuals and families in Northern Ireland (2012)³.


Research related activities make an immense impact, directly and indirectly on social work and social care and on the wider social and economic society.

This strategy for 2020 onwards therefore takes a broad approach to support this.

³ Improving and Safeguarding Social Wellbeing Social Work Strategy 2012-2020, (DOH 2012).

Research is important for

- Ensuring that practice and organisational decisions are based clearly on best available evidence.
- Reflecting underpinning principles and values of fairness, justice, equality, participation, openness, transparency and co-production.
- Providing a body of scientific evidence supporting the effectiveness of interventions.
- Keeping organisations and individuals up to date with demographic social, economic and technical advancement.
- Assessing and responding to the needs of people in society who need support and services.
- Challenging ingrained thinking and assumptions, helping to improve services and people's experiences of care.
- Building a body of regional and local specialists in a particular area who act as a resource for others in that specialism.
- Encouraging greater collaboration between academic, other research evidence providers and policy and practice settings in order to identify and respond to gaps.
- Supporting methods for the translation of effective research into practice.
- Engaging and encouraging collaboration with the end user to increase the exchange, dissemination and use of research evidence.
- Engaging and involving service users and carers in the whole research process.



A research minded culture that supports the transfer of research evidence into practice.

- Enhancing professional and service user and carer learning and development opportunities to build competence and capacity in light of the changing contexts of practice.
- Stimulating creative and innovative responses.
- Informing and influencing legislation to generate a greater understanding of its impact and the impact of social policy on the communities served.
- Developing new knowledge, policies and programmes.
- Demonstrating quality and cost effectiveness of services and interventions.
- Demonstrating ethical practice in services and interventions.

This strategy sets out our plan in Northern Ireland to move forward beyond 2020. It documents how we are going to promote and implement the desired culture of evidence informed practice; confidence credibility and quality improving service user and carer outcomes. This will be achieved through the delivery of research, evaluation and audit activity across services. Alongside this strategy there will be a full implementation plan which will look at how the strategy will be put into practice and ensure the necessary ownership with identified roles and responsibilities. The implementation plan will highlight a small number of agreed outcome measures, which over the years will be populated with demonstrable evidence of impact.

Our Vision

Is that people in Northern Ireland who use our services will have confidence that social work and social care policy, practice and service outcomes are underpinned by a strong research evidence base committed to continual improvement?

Our Aim 1

To inspire and empower the development of individual and collective research leadership regardless of where individuals are in their careers. Research leaders are those who advance their field, develop creative and innovative methods of enquiry, support and mentor their colleagues and are engaged with the research activity.

Objectives

- Nurture, develop and celebrate all those engaged with research; practitioners, researchers, academics and service users and carers.
- Cultivate research leadership at different levels.
- Build capacity amongst research leaders and potential research leaders through learning and other developmental opportunities.

Our Aim 2

To increase engagement and involvement between practitioners, researchers, academics and service users and carers increasing mutual knowledge and engagement in co-design and co-production approaches to research social issues.

Objectives

- Build and support partnerships on a local, national and international basis.
- Support the sharing of information, skills and opportunities in securing access to and responding to funding sources and bids.
- Encourage greater transparency to enable research activity to thrive beyond traditional boundaries.

Our Aim 3

To seek out and further develop research evidence to generate knowledge that impacts positive change and improved social wellbeing outcomes for service users and carers and wider communities.

Objectives

- Generate agreement across partners on what research impact entails.
- Collaborate for the delivery of research evidence for policy, commissioning and practice impact.
- Support collaborations locally, nationally and internationally.
- Support a culture of openness and transparency in research activity.

Our Aim 4

Strengthen the credibility, professionalism and resilience of the workforce to support effective research evidence informed services for service users and carers.

Objectives

- Support and facilitate an organisational culture encouraging research mindedness
- Encourage social work staff to engage in education and learning that supports evidence informed practice and critical appraisal
- Support practitioner based research evidence activity in the workplace involving service users and carers as part of regular mainstream activity.

To support the implementation of these aims and objectives, five focus areas have been identified with a number of associated actions. These are outlined later in this strategy. The implementation plan which accompanies this strategy will outline how these actions will be taken forward, by whom and within what timescale.

Principles and Values

The strategy is based on the principles of equality, inclusion, equal participation, openness and transparency. Work emerging from the strategy will be produced on the basis of empowerment, research for all, service user and carer involvement, excellence, effectiveness and the efficient development and use of best available robust evidence.



Our current position

Northern Ireland has a long and continuous commitment to the conduct of high quality research. The HSC R&D in Northern Ireland 'Research for Better Health and Social Care' (DoH 2016)⁴ is the third strategy since 2002. This strategy and implementation plan restates the agencies' commitment to focussing on research evidence that addresses priorities for evidences identified by local policy-makers, HSC staff and organisations and the population whilst recognising evidence generated in other parts of the globe. This strategy further emphasises that participating in research adds real value to academic and clinical careers. Delivering the message to colleagues at the earliest stages of their careers that they are able to identify and be supported by appropriate mentors, and that they have realistic opportunities to become research leaders is a key factor for the new researchers. This message applies equally to our social work professionals.

Specifically in relation to social work and social care early attempts by leading academics, health and social care senior managers and voluntary sector representatives to profile social work research as an integral part of the HSC Research and Development infrastructure can be traced back to the late 1990's.


A particular strength in Northern Ireland is the close partnership and collaborative working relationship between a range of key stakeholders in the statutory, not for profit sector and other employers of social workers who share a growing commitment to the engagement of service users and carers. A further strength is the fact that Northern Ireland is a small geographical area with close proximity to the Republic of Ireland,

⁴ HSC R&D in Northern Ireland 'Research for Better Health and Social Care' (DoH 2016)

the United Kingdom and the rest of Europe which provides opportunities for multi-site research.

Post qualifying training in Northern Ireland provides continuous professional and academic development opportunities for social work managers and practitioners and service users and carers. This has the potential for greater acquisition of the necessary research skills and knowledge for application across the spectrum of research, evaluation and audit activities.

All staff in social work and social care posts must be on the social work and social care professional register held by Northern Ireland Social Care Council (hereafter referred to as the Social Care Council). The Social Care Council's Professional in Practice Framework (PiP), the Continuous Professional Development Framework for Social Work (2015),⁵ incorporates existing provision within the Post Qualifying (PQ) Framework for research minded practice or a research minded workforce. The Professional in Practice Framework (PiP) Awards and Requirements are worded specifically to encourage research minded practice focusing on the understanding, demonstration and acquisition of skills in:



"Research is fundamental to everyday practice of policy makers, commissioners and frontline staff"

⁵ Professional in Practice Framework (PiP) The Continuous Professional Development Framework for Social Work (NISCC 2015)⁵

- Critical judgement, critical reflection and critical analysis;
- Analysis in applied research, professional research, audit and evaluation; and,
- Conducting applied research, professional research, audit and evaluation.

There is a need for a 'nuts and bolts' development to make this Framework more of a reality in practice and to allow a culture of research to become better embedded in social work and social care in Northern Ireland.

Universities in Northern Ireland have a dual role in relation to social work research. They provide teaching and education to students, practitioners and managers at qualifying and post qualifying levels. This helps to develop a culture of informed research mindedness and critical enquiry. They also undertake research across a range of topics and issues, often in partnership with social work and social care organisations in Northern Ireland. An additional strength is that all of the academic staff are social work practitioners which continue to inform much of the research undertaken.

In order to meet the Social Care Council requirements, all academic staff in Social Work Departments need to hold a recognised social work qualification, comply with registration requirements and have at least three years professional in practice experience (two years post qualifying experience following successful completion of Assessed Year in Practice (AYE) or equivalent. In addition all academic staff that supervise or provide personal tutoring must be on the social work

register. Assessment of assignments on qualifying programmes must include at least one person who is a registered social worker.

These strengths help to ensure that academic social work (both teaching and research) are firmly rooted in practice issues which they critically appraise using relevant research methodologies underpinned by sound and necessary theoretical knowledge.

Both Ulster University and Queen's University have a long tradition of supporting research and research related activity often in response to the interests and expertise of social work staff and other colleagues but also in responses to the needs of the service in a broad range of areas, relevant to social work and social care: mental health; disability; child care and safeguarding; adult care and safeguarding and criminal justice. A number of research clusters are already in place aimed at getting research evidence into practice.

The target audience

The social work and social care profession in Northern Ireland are the key audience of this strategy. In light of the multi professional and multi-dimensional aspects of social work and social care the strategy is intended to reach the wide range of social work and social care professionals in statutory, private and not for profit sector while embracing a partnership ethos with academics, academia, independent researchers and service users and carers.

The partners or stakeholders are identified under partnerships in the next section.

Partnerships



A review of the original strategy (2015-2020) undertaken in (2019) gave us the impetus for the establishment of a network of interested stakeholders. The ambition is to build a community that will foster mutually beneficial relationships and partnerships in research evidence. Through collaborative working we hope to build upon our evidence base relevant to social work and social care in Northern Ireland. Over time this will help us identify the types of research evidence which best informs practice, explore gaps in our evidence and support the identification of research evidence priorities. This is in line with the intentions identified within the original strategy but which required formalisation. This community based on the principle of equality and participation will be instrumental in agreeing the content of the new strategy to ensure ownership of the agenda. This supports the vision and intentions of the original strategy but with a new enthused energy, ownership and commitment as we move forward.

Those who attended initial networking events were drawn from a range of backgrounds and included service users and carers (with knowledge and competence in research evidence), statutory, community and not for profit sectors.


A number of expectations of a Research Community were reported by participants who engaged in initial networking events. These included:

“It is an opportunity to work across organisations, agencies and wider networks”.

“An interagency forum, one in which service users and carers are actively involved”.

“It represents the development of collective ownership to drive forward the research evidence agenda at different levels”.

“The community will offer opportunities for learning and sharing across organisations and programmes”.



“We are committed to ensuring that people have confidence in our decisions and service developments are evidence based”

The key partners⁶ identified through this research community include:

Service Users and Carers

- *Those who have developed research evidence competence and capability*
- *Other service users and carers*

Health and Social Care

- *Department of Health*
- *Health and Social Care Board*
- *Health and Social Care Trusts*
- *Research and Development Division – Public Health Agency*
- *Northern Ireland Guardian ad Litem Agency*
- *Social Care Council*
- *Regulation and Quality Improvement Agency*
- *Patient and Client Council*

Academia

- *Queen’s University*
- *Ulster University*
- *Other colleges*
- *Education Welfare (To be invited)*

⁶ Partners identified in this list are those who participated in initial discussions but may not reflect the final stakeholder group.

Justice Agencies

- *Department of Justice*
- *Probation Board Northern Ireland*

Community and Voluntary Sector

- *Voypic Voice of Young People in Care*
- *Barnardos NI*

Other research providers

Other statutory organisations

Detailed feedback from the engagement events is available on the HSCB website⁷ under Building a Research Community.

- *British Association Of Social Workers NI (To be invited).*

Key partners indicated their expectation of a Research Community:

“A small, energetic and motivated group to move the agenda forward with the membership prepared to take actions and deliver them”.

“We are living in a small country. It is important that we capitalise on the partnership that we already have especially between academia, practice and service users and carers”.

“The group needs to be sustainable”.

“The key is to make the existence of the Research Community known in the wider community”.

⁷ <http://www.hscboard.hscni.net/our-work/social-care-and-children/swresearch> under Building a Research Community

Overview

This strategy sets out details on the necessary steps to be taken to realise our vision. The approach through-out the strategy and in each of the focus areas is based on involvement between practitioners, researchers, academia and service users and carers in order to increase mutual knowledge and engagement, and develop co-design and co-production work.



Focus Area 1

Building collaborative networks through engagement and involvement

What we will do

- Establish an infrastructure inclusive of a Core Group reflective of representatives from key stakeholders and throughout different levels of organisations.
- Situate any tasks within this structure which will also allow greater openness, transparency and accountability.
- Develop and agree *Terms of Reference* inclusive of governance and accountability issues.
- Develop an agreed “*plan on a page*” and “*detailed action plan*” with clear measurable goals, targets and timelines and an associated immediate and longer term work plan. Review this plan.
- Collate evidence on how well we are changing the mind-set and culture.
- Avoid duplication by creating synergy and linkages with other existing meeting and networks.
- Develop communications to keep the conversation alive regionally and locally and share nationally and internationally.
- Launch strategy and implementation plan

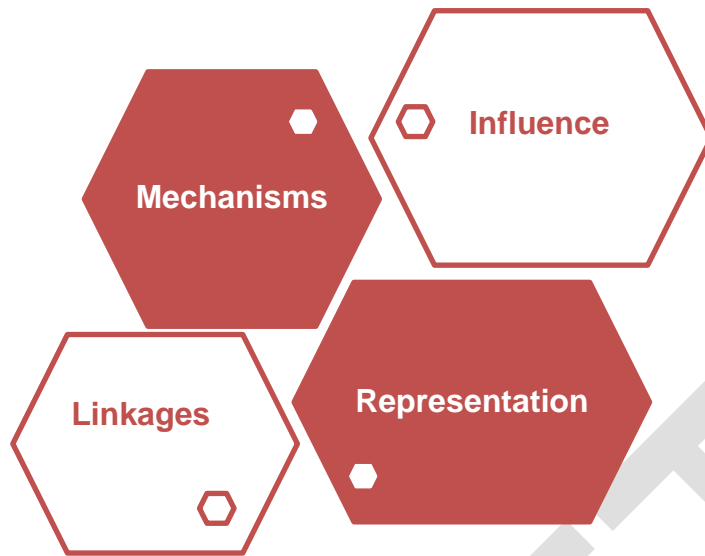


Focus Area 2

Research Priorities

What we will do

- Develop a mechanism in partnership with relevant others to determine, review and manage research evidence opportunities.
- Exert greater influence in decisions regarding funding calls reflecting research evidence priorities.
- Strengthen social work and social care and service user and carer representation on strategic research decision making bodies locally and nationally.
- Develop and maintain greater linkages and dialogue with Higher Education Institutes and other Centres of Excellence, locally, nationally and internationally in relation to research priorities.

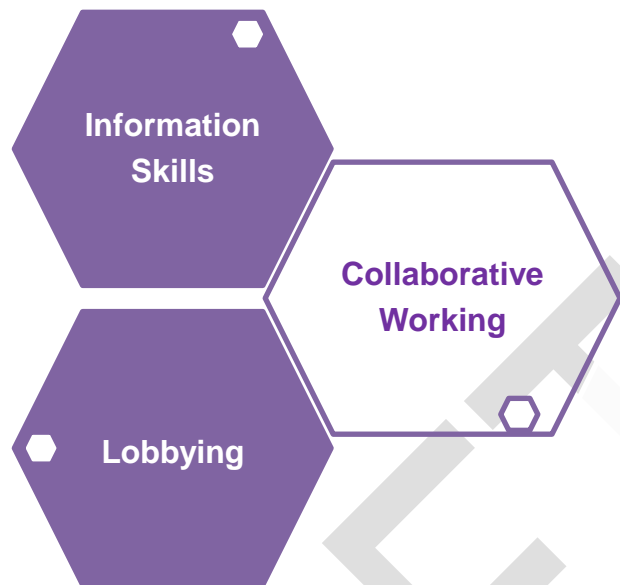


Focus Area 3

Securing Investment

What we will do

- Identify and monitor current level of investment in research evaluation and associated audit activity.
- Secure Departmental Commitment to support the implementation of this strategy.
- Support the sharing of information, skills and opportunities in securing access to and responding to funding sources and bids.
- Support and improve the quality of research applications through collaborative partnerships with academia and other researchers to secure funding for social work and social care research.
- Lobby funders to influence decisions about investment in high quality research evidence related to Northern Ireland.



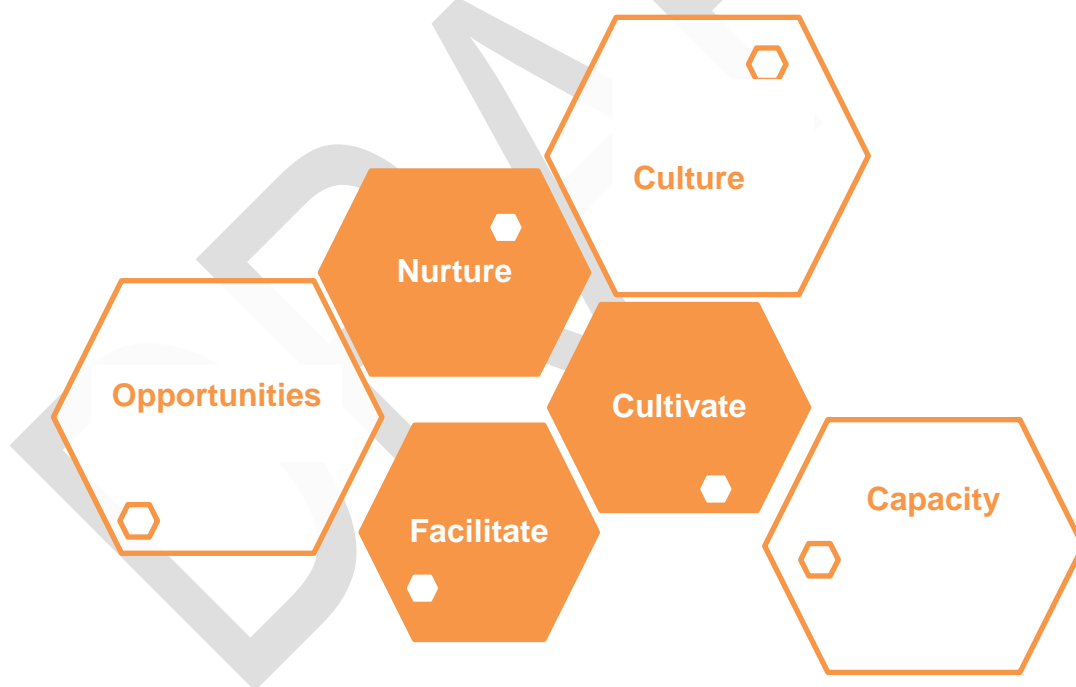
Focus Area 4

Inspiring research leadership, competence and capacity amongst staff and service users and carers

What we will do

- Support and drive leadership to embed an organisational culture to of research mindedness.
- Enable participants in the *Research Community* to champion and drive the research evidence agenda across service areas by recognising this as a valid role.
- Facilitate a review of job descriptions of relevant staff to ensure that research evidence is included.
- Support research evidence as a key component of the practice teacher role.
- Nurture, develop and celebrate all those engaged with research; practitioners, researchers, academia and service users and carers.

- Provide practical opportunities for the promotion, dissemination and sharing of new and already existing research and evidence.
- Identify targets for investment in education and learning and the development of social workers and service users and carers in research, evidence and critical appraisal.
- Cultivate diverse forms of research leadership.
- Build capacity amongst research leaders and potential research leaders through learning and other developmental opportunities.
- Create opportunities within learning and development teams to recognise value and maintain the skill base of staff and service users and carers who have achieved academic credit.

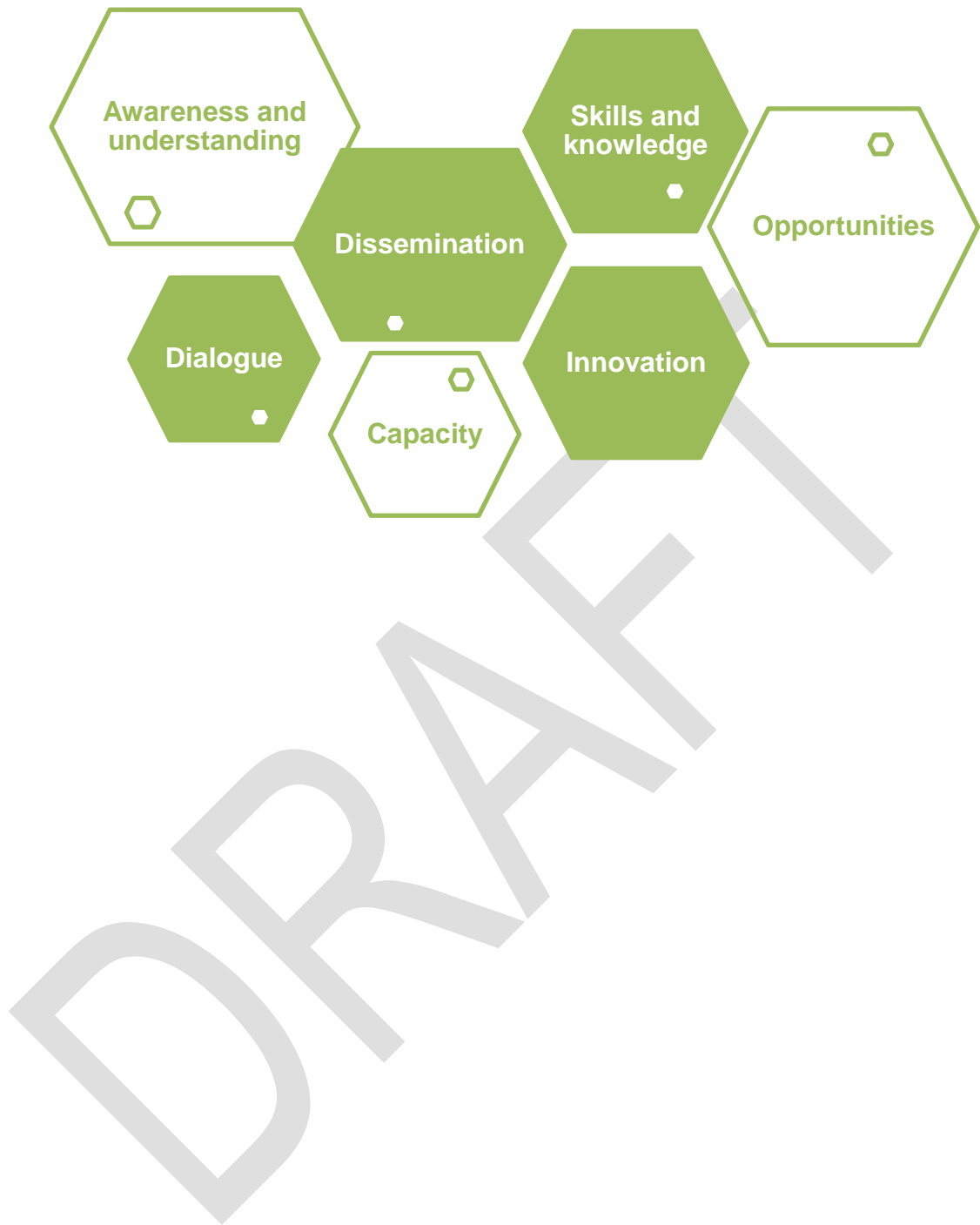


Focus Area 5

Research evidence utilisation and knowledge transfer

What we will do

- Increase dialogue between and within organisations to consider the best approach to implementation and knowledge transfer responsive to local needs.
- Build the capacity of staff and service users and carers for greater dissemination of research locally, nationally and internationally using a range of innovative technologies.
- Make research relevant to practice teams using *Research Highlights* or *Short Snapshots of Research Evidence*.
- Use innovation and creative technology to design accessible products to allow easy access to the research evidence base e.g. portals, hubs, and catalogue of evidence.
- Create and provide opportunities for learning and development such as a Hub or e-Learning Hub or Podcasts.
- Develop knowledge and skills in identifying relevant research, appraising research quality, synthesising findings and translating clear messages into practice and management of services.
- Create awareness of the various types of research evidence needs (qualitative, quantitative and experimental) to evidence the effectiveness of service interventions to make a difference to people's lives.
- Develop understandings across agencies to inform practice, management, policy, regulation and teaching.



Implementation Plan



Alongside this strategy there will be an implementation plan that identifies how we will put the strategy into practice. Particular actions have been identified under each of the focus areas. These need to be progressed but there are also overarching issues of governance.

To create ownership, which was less established in the previous 2015 - 2020 strategy, the implementation plan will identify the roles and responsibilities and tasks of individuals and organisations. It will also identify time-lines, expected outcomes and how we will evidence progress.

The implementation process will operate under the principles of leadership, accountability, credibility, transparency, integrity, partnerships and inclusiveness.

It will be based on a process of engagement and working together.

Communications will be enhanced through establishing regular and effective dialogue channels between and within stakeholder groups.

Conclusion



This strategy has set out the vision and commitment of health and social care and partner organisations and individuals for research, evidence and knowledge exchange. The approach that has been taken is one that encourages the fostering of leadership and reciprocal relations and networks between policy, practice, academia, service users and carers and inclusive of managers and practitioners and researchers.

Our Vision

Is that people in Northern Ireland who use our services will have confidence that social work and social care policy, practice and service outcomes are underpinned by a strong research evidence base.

We will continue to support organisations in responding to the diverse and complex needs of the populations we serve. By increasing confidence, competence and enthusiasm in research mindedness and the utilisation of evidence and knowledge transfer we will also support both credibility and public confidence in our social work and social care profession.

A strong research evidence base underpinning practice and service provision remains an important hall mark of any profession. It is intended that by implementing the strategy research evidence will be fully recognised as an integral part of service delivery and practice for the benefit of those who use our services.

Glossary

Term	What it means
Audit	Provides a method for systematically reflecting on and reviewing practice. It aims to establish how close practice is to the desired level of service. This is achieved by setting standards and targets and comparing practice against these. Research methods also have an application to audit.
Critical appraisal	Is a systematic framework to assist in interpreting the quality and relevance of the research process carefully judging its trustworthiness, and its value and relevance in a particular context? It asks are the results presented valid. Just because it is scientific or because it is published is not always a guarantee.
Evaluation	Provides a diverse, flexible and systematic assessment of a set of procedures exploring service aims, objectives, activities, outcomes and costs. Unlike audit there is not a defined standard. Audit can however be one activity that takes place during a service evaluation, alongside other activities such as routine data gathering, incident reporting and interviews with staff, service users and carers. Research methods also have an application to evaluation.
Evidence	The available body of facts and information about a particular topic or subject.
*Evidence - based	An intervention or practice which has been robustly evaluated (usually involving one or more Randomised Control Trial) (RCT). Other research designs also exist to generate robust evidence for example prevalence and incidence of social problems and experiences of problems and care processes including

	<p>service user and carer perspectives. Evidence based* and evidence informed* are often used interchangeably and are a matter of preference of terminology rather an absolute distinction.</p> <p>See also definition of evidence informed.</p>
*Evidence - informed	<p>Knowledge gained from integrating the best available research and literature with the professional judgement of practitioners and service user experience. Evidence is the information that supports or substantiates research findings.</p> <p>Identifies what makes for an effective intervention.</p>
Knowledge	<p>A synthesis of research and theoretical ideas that results in the interpretation of evidence into a coherent understanding.</p>
Research	<p>Is a scientific approach to answering questions about the social world designed to reduce potential sources of bias in everyday reasoning? It uses a set of logical, systematic and documented methods for investigation. It allows others to inspect and evaluate the methods used and the evidence produced by investigation.</p>
Qualitative research	<p>Includes participant observations, focus groups and interviews designed to capture views. Qualitative data are words, pictures or drawings. They do not have direct numeric interpretation. Its focus is on understanding lived experiences of people and the meanings that people give to those experiences.</p>
Quantitative research	<p>Includes surveys and experiments that record changes and variations. Data that is quantitative is either numbers or attributes that can be ordered in terms of size or magnitude.</p>

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