



Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister

Cross-Departmental Equality and Social Need Research and Information Strategy

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INTRODUCTION

The research and information requirements of equality and social need related policies and the Statutory Duty as outlined in Section 75 of the Northern Ireland (1998) Act place particular demands on all Government Departments. In December 2002, OFMDFM issued a consultation document outlining the general aims, principles and priorities of a cross-Departmental Equality and Social Need Research and Information Strategy intended to address these requirements.

After careful consideration of the responses to the consultation, the details of the research and information strategy for the period 2003 – 2006 are outlined below. We are grateful to those who provided responses to this important strategy and a summary of the responses to the consultation can be found at Annex A.

DEPARTMENTAL GROUPS

Within Government, there are two key groups tasked with taking forward the broad Equality and Social Need policies and strategies and in providing statistical and research support. The role of each of these groups is outlined below.

Equality and Social Need Steering Group

The Equality and Social Need Steering Group (ESNSG) is a cross-Departmental group comprising senior officials and chaired by the Head of the Equality Directorate within the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM). The ESNSG is tasked with taking forward the broad Equality and Social Need agendas within Government and to maximise the impact of joined-up Government action in the various areas covered by Equality and Social Need.

Equality and Social Need Research and Information Group

The Equality and Social Need Research and Information Group (ESNRIG) is a sub-group to the ESNSG and comprises members of the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA), including NISRA representatives outposted in the various Government Departments. In addition, representatives from both the Equality Commission and the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action are members of the ESNRIG. The function of ESNRIG is to provide research and statistical support to the work of the ESNSG.

AIMS OF THE RESEARCH AND INFORMATION STRATEGY

The aims of the cross-Departmental Information Strategy in support of Equality and Social Need are threefold:

- 1** *To assist our understanding of the extent, distribution and causes of inequality and social exclusion in Northern Ireland society and the consequences of policies and actions aimed at their reduction, and to assess their impact on those affected;*

- 2** *To assist Departments to access the data they need to inform their implementation of Equality and Anti-Poverty policies and to monitor their impact;*

- 3** *To assist Departments and Public Bodies to access the information they need to comply with their statutory duty under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act (1998).*

Whilst the primary aim of the Strategy is to assist Government Departments and Public Bodies in fulfilling their Equality and Social Need responsibilities, it will also contribute to, and facilitate, wider public debate on these issues. In addition, it will be important to ensure that affected individuals and Community and Voluntary Sector organisations and others are involved, as appropriate, on developments related to the Strategy.

PRINCIPLES OF THE RESEARCH AND INFORMATION STRATEGY

Many of the principles which apply to Government research and statistics generally, apply equally to research and statistical work carried out as part of an information strategy in support of Equality and Social Need. In general, this research and statistical work will need to:

Be fit for purpose: capable of generating reliable and valid conclusions on the basis of robust methods;

Be relevant: in assessing the impact of existing policies and learning lessons for incorporation into future policies in relation to: a) statutory commitments under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act; and (b) Equality and anti-poverty policy commitments;

Be based on common and consistent definitions of terms;

Not be intrusive: in respecting an individuals' privacy and Human Rights;

Not place an onerous burden on data providers in that it must not seek more information than is necessary for the intended purpose;

Be conducted with **due regard to obtaining value for taxpayers money;** and

Be conducted in an **open and transparent manner** with results and outputs being **generally available.**

Definitional issues

Definitional issues raise particular challenges in the context of Equality and Social Need. Poverty, for example, can be defined in many ways, including: as a proportion of average income; as a proportion of median income; it can be subjectively self-assessed; it can be indirectly measured in terms of access to social security benefits; and can be benchmarked against international comparators. All these definitions and measures are valid and are of use under certain circumstances. Adopting specific definitions in the broad context of Equality and Social Need can therefore be useful.

In the context of those categories identified under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act, and for the purposes of Equality Impact Assessment, there is a need for clear, agreed definitions.

The Equality Commission has been engaged in consultations regarding the development of practical guidance on Equality Impact Assessment. As part of the consultation, views were sought on the definitions of categories as outlined in Section 75 of the NI Act 1998.

The outcome of this consultation will largely determine those definitions that are adopted under the Strategy for the purposes of the development, collation and dissemination of data underpinning monitoring in the context of conducting Equality Impact Assessments. In the interim, the guidance issued by the Commission in the Practical Guide will continue to provide the basis for Equality monitoring and Equality impact Assessment.

Equality data sources

The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency have updated the sources of Equality data as published in the Commission's Practical Guidance. This is available on the web at:

www.nisra.gov.uk/statistics/eqdatasources.html

PRIORITY AREAS OF THE RESEARCH AND INFORMATION STRATEGY

The ten priority areas that the Research and Information Strategy will focus on are:

Addressing Gaps in Data

Establishing Baselines

Statistical Indicators

Researching causes and dynamics

Neighbourhood focus

Identifying and addressing social exclusion

Researching community capacity

Improving implementation

Identifying best practice

Assessing policy impact

With limited resources, a degree of prioritisation of effort is inevitable. Work is already progressing on most of the priorities detailed above with additional developments underway.

FUNDING AND IMPLEMENTING THE STRATEGY

The Strategy will be funded in two ways:

Where research and statistical work has a particular departmental or sectoral focus e.g. dealing with only education or health issues, then it will be for the relevant department to consider and if appropriate, fund. Where research and statistical work is of relevance to more than one Government department e.g. issues around social and financial exclusion, then the work may be funded by an inter-departmental research budget. This budget (the Equality Social Need Inter-departmental Budget ESNIDB) will be managed by OFMDFM Research Branch on behalf of the ESNRIG. Decisions on approving funding will be made by the Equality and Social Need Steering Group.

Results of research and statistical work funded through ESNIDB will normally be published both in hard copy and on the web. The amount for 2004/5 is expected to be in the region of £250,000 made up of contributions from Government Departments.

Commissioning research

It is not possible to be fully prescriptive about what research is needed. Whilst tenders may be issued for specific pieces of research, the strategy will rely, in part, upon the research community to come forward with relevant proposals. Members of the research community may submit unsolicited proposals for consideration provided the research falls within the aims, principles and priorities outlined in this strategy. This will be a continuous process but may also involve calls for research proposals on specific topics. The OFMDFM web site (www.research.ofmdfm.gov.uk) will indicate when the Equality and Social Need Inter-departmental Budget is fully committed for the current year.

While acknowledging that resources are limited, it is not the intention of the strategy to seek to impose financial limits on research proposals. To that end, proposals which seek part-funding as part of a larger consortium of funders are also welcome.

Selection criteria for applicants

Decisions on the funding of research will be made by the Equality and Social Need Steering Group on recommendations made by the Equality and Social Need Research and Information Group. Funding applications are likely to be assessed against the following criteria:

- Policy relevance
- Consistency with the aims, principles and priorities detailed in the Strategy;
- Methodology;
- Track record and experience of researchers i.e. evidence of ability to carry out the work;
- Timeliness; and
- Cost and value for money.

Submitting an application

An application can be submitted for consideration at any time and the application for research funding must be submitted as part of the proposal. A copy of the research application form can be found at:

www.research.ofmdfmi.gov.uk.

Proposers will receive an acknowledgement that their application has been received. Normally an application will be initially considered by the ESNRIG and a recommendation made to the ESNSG. Proposers will normally hear the outcome of the application for funding within two weeks of the ESNSG meeting. Depending on demand, the ESNRIG research sub-group will meet 2-4 times a year. Decisions on funding will be made according to this timetable and the need to consult ESNSG members. Unfortunately, this could sometimes lead to delays in making research decisions and it may be necessary to identify ways to streamline this process.

Steering Arrangements

The ESNRIG will convene, or be represented on, a steering or reference group as appropriate for the funded project.

Contact Point

All enquiries and submissions should be addressed to:

ESNRIG
Equality Directorate Research Branch
Block E
Castle Buildings
Stormont Estate
BT4 3SG

MONITORING AND EVALUATING THE STRATEGY

The success of the Research and Information Strategy will be judged against the extent to which it meets the aims of the Strategy as outlined earlier in this document. Specifically, the Strategy will be judged against a number of questions:

- Do Departmental research and information strategies reflect the priorities identified in this Strategy?
- Are critical gaps in research and statistical information identified and filled?
- Is information on equality and social need more readily accessible?
- Have baselines been established against which future progress in reducing poverty and social disadvantage can be measured?

These questions will be central to the ongoing monitoring of the Strategy over the planning cycle. An evaluation of the strategy will be completed towards the end of the planning cycle to enable the results to feed into preparations for the following planning cycle (2006 – 2008).

Summary of responses to the consultation

The Equality and Social Need Research and Information Strategy was issued for consultation in December 2002, and ended in March 2003. A public seminar, arranged by the School of Sociology and Social Policy of the Queen's University of Belfast was held in March 2003.

While many of the comments received were of specific relevance to those particular responding organisations, there were some consistent themes that were apparent. The responses to the consultation are briefly summarised below.

Aims

Among respondents, there was general agreement with the aims of the Strategy as described. Many Community and Voluntary groups who responded, flagged their areas of responsibility in relation to the Section 75 categories as priority areas.

Principles

There was broad agreement with the principles of the Strategy. The principles were referred to as "sound" and "sufficient" by some respondents. A number of respondents highlighted the need for agreed definitions in relation to Section 75 categories and the need for meaningful participation of all involved groups.

Priorities

This section of the Strategy produced the most comments and suggestions by respondents. In brief, comments included:

- Greater involvement of the Voluntary and Community Sectors and affected individuals and reflection of their views;
- That gaps in data exist specifically in relation to ethnic minorities, and measurement of the prevalence of disability;

- That qualitative data sources should be created and valued, specifically for those Section 75 categories for which traditional quantitative approaches may be inappropriate; and
- The need for Section 75 categories to be appended to existing and newly developed sources of administrative data.

Implementation

A number of respondents expressed an active interest in participating in any kind of information group relating to the Strategy. There was some concern about how the Strategy is to be funded, the priorities determined for funding purposes, and the possible implications this could have.

Monitoring/Evaluation

There was broad agreement of the need and importance of monitoring and evaluating the Strategy.

List of consultation respondents

Armagh City and District Council
Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland
Barnardo's
Causeway Health and Social Services Trust
Central Support Division, Department of Finance and Personnel
Disability Action
Down and Lisburn Health and Social Services Trust
Equality Commission for Northern Ireland
Housing Executive
North Eastern Education and Library Board
Northern Health and Social Services Board
Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities (NICEM)
Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA)
North West Institute of Further and Higher Education
Regeneration of Mourne Area Ltd (ROMAL)
Research and Development Office
Royal National Institute for the Blind
Royal College of Nursing
Roz Goldie Partnership
Save the Children
Simon Community
South and East Belfast HSS Trust
South Health and Social Services Board
Translink
Ulster Community & Hospitals Trust
University of Ulster

For further information please contact:

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Or visit the website at:

www.research.ofmdfmi.gov.uk