

**OFMDFM
RESEARCH STRATEGY
2011/12 – 2014/15**

**INCORPORATING THE EQUALITY AND SOCIAL NEED RESEARCH
PROGRAMME**

FOREWORD

This research strategy is designed to enhance the information and research base upon which equality, social need and good relations policies are developed and evaluated. It aims to promote joined up working between departments by coordinating research efforts and disseminating findings across a wide range of stakeholders.

The Strategy originates from commitments by government to support the research process, improve methodology, identify gaps and develop an equality research and statistical infrastructure. The original Strategy was launched in 2003 but given changes to the management structure within OFMdfM has been subjected to revisions designed to improve its strategic position as an in-house and cross-departmental resource.

The strategy continues to focus on a number of main themes: renewed emphasis on the strategic priorities underpinning the annual research programme; greater utilisation of existing sources of data; improved dissemination and accessibility; interdisciplinary cooperation; policy relevance; methodological diversity, and providing insights into a better understanding of the economic and social challenges facing the local economy. In addition, the use and impact of the social investment fund and the social protection fund will be key research themes.

Following a review of the structure of OFMdfM a 'matrix management' structure was established. This method of operation conceptualises the various branches and disciplines within OFMdfM as a single resource operating to a common aim. In light of this it is now appropriate to gather all of OFMdfM's equality directorate research functions and budgets into a single place guided by a single research strategy. This strategy will work alongside the equality and social need research programme and will be subject to the same standards of operation outlined later in this document.

It is anticipated that by promoting these principles across a wider range of research fields that a more cohesive and outcome focussed research programme will emerge. The key aim still remains the production of research that will provide the evidence base required to develop and improve strategy and policy.

CONTENTS

	Page
1. Introduction	4
2. Aims of the strategy	6
3. Principles of the strategy	7
4. Funding and implementing the strategy	9
5. Submitting an application	10
6. Monitoring the strategy	11

INTRODUCTION

In 2003, following a period of consultation, the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister published the first cross-Departmental Equality and Social Need Research and Information Strategy covering the period 2003 – 2006.

The Strategy aimed to focus efforts and resources on 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 Act (1998). The Strategy outlined the aims, principles and priority areas in support of these requirements. The key outcomes of the Strategy evaluation are outlined below¹. These principles apply not only to the equality and social need element of the research programme but also to all of the additional research conducted within OFMdFM such as Cohesion, Sharing and Integration; collaborations with academic institutions and other stakeholders; and work in relation to the Child Poverty Act (2010). An added research strand relates to economics, sustainability and the Programme for Government. The economic research will need to be coordinated with other departments to ensure maximum benefit and synergy.

DEPARTMENTAL GROUPS

Within OFMdFM there are two key cross-Departmental 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 group 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 Group 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. The primary functions of ESNRIG is to provide research and statistical support to the work of the ESNSG and to ensure that departmental equality and social need issues are

mainstreamed within departmental research agendas. This entails liaison with senior policy officials across departments to ensure that research findings are effectively disseminated.

OFMdfM RESEARCH MANAGEMENT GROUP

The structures described above will remain in place but a new body will be established, - the Research Management Group (RMG). This group will consist of policy officials, statisticians and economists within OFMdfM whose role will be to formally endorse the need for the research and agree departmental research spending.

The RMG will be the commissioning authority for all of OFMdfM's research projects within the Equality and Strategy Directorate. The research programme encompasses a number of main areas: equality and social need; good relations; economics; sustainability; and the Programme for Government.

Collectively these research streams constitute a significant amount of public expenditure and as such are being rationalised under one research strategy, the principles of which are detailed in this document.

Since a set of research principles and procurement standards already exists within the Equality and Social Need Research and Information Strategy it is intended to apply the same procedures to the OFMdfM research programme that the RMG will take forward.

A single annual call for project grant applications will be made in respect of both the ESNSSG and the OFMdfM research programme and a business case covering the call will document the rationale for the programme. This will streamline the grant allocation process, establish a common timeframe and reduce costs. However, it should be noted that there may be occasions when ad hoc research commissions take place based on new and emerging priorities.

AIMS OF THE RESEARCH STRATEGY

The aims of the expanded Research Strategy are as follows:

- 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. The social investment and social protection funds will be important in this regard.**
- 2. To assist Departments to access the data they need to inform their implementation of 'Lifetime Opportunities', the new anti-poverty strategy for Northern Ireland, and to monitor its impact.**
- 3. To assist our understanding of public opinion and attitudes in respect of all of the issues covered under the themes of Cohesion, Sharing and Integration and to commission policy relevant research in these areas.**
- 4. To promote improved economic policy, sustainable development and contribute to the development of the Programme for Government.**
- 5. To assist Departments and Public Bodies in complying with their statutory duty under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act.**
- 6. To promote policy relevant research in response to new and emerging priorities.**

While the primary aim of the Strategy is to assist Government Departments it will also contribute to, and facilitate, wider public debate on these issues. In recognition of this, commissioned research will be made available through publication on the OFMdfM, NISRA¹, and other websites both within and outside government.

To that end, linkages with Community and Voluntary Sector organisations, and the academic research community will continue to be explored to ensure pro-active circulation of research findings to as broad an audience as possible.

Research release and publication

In continuing to facilitate open access to research and information, and particularly within the context of UK policy developments in relation to statistical legislation (emphasising the separation between ministers and statistical procedures), the current Strategy commits to the publication of all commissioned research within three months of completion and acceptance by the relevant research steering group. Where ministers are actively considering the policy implications of a piece of research that piece of research will be considered 'policy in development' and will not be published until ministers have made their decisions.

¹ www.nisra.gov.uk

PRINCIPLES OF THE RESEARCH AND INFORMATION STRATEGY

Many of the principles which apply to Government research and statistics more generally apply equally to the research and statistical work carried out as part of the research strategy.

Research and statistical work conducted under the Strategy will continue to:

Be fit for the 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 set of definitions of terms;

Not be intrusive: in that it must have respect for 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 **published**

Procurement and commissioning procedures will be open and transparent with an annual call for research projects being made and evaluated by the Equality and Social Need Group or the OFMdfM Research Management Group (a group of OFMdfM policy and research professionals). The business case for this annual call will constitute the authorisation of the business need for projects granted funding under the call.

Policy endorsement and financial approval will be required for all commissioned projects.

PRINCIPLES OF THE RESEARCH STRATEGY

The ten over-arching principles are listed below. As principles they are designed to be applicable across a wide range of research areas and themes. With the addition of the good relations and economic etc. dimensions to the research programme it should be noted that these are now subject to the principles listed below:

Addressing gaps in research and information

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

FUNDING AND IMPLEMENTING THE STRATEGY

Funding

The Strategy will be funded in two ways:

1. Funding through the Equality and Social Need Research and Information research budget

The inter-Departmental research budget in support of the Strategy is comprised of equal contributions from all Northern Ireland Government Departments.

2. Funding through OFMdfM research budget

The OFMdfM research budget, managed by the in-house Research Management Group will award project grants to successful applicants. RMG will also ensure that there is no duplication of effort between the two research strands.

Actions to be taken

Each year, following a formal externally advertised call for research proposals, policy and research professionals will:

1. Formally review the proposed research programme and conduct a process of awarding grants to projects based on standard procurement principles including amongst other things: policy priority, value for money; business need; and appropriateness of methodology.
2. It will be the responsibility of the commissioning bodies to maintain the link between the policy development and research content. A review of how this has operated will be required at the end of each research funding cycle.
3. Consider, and develop as appropriate, linkages to departments, other stakeholders and research networks to ensure Strategy outputs are disseminated as broadly as possible.

Commissioning Research

Given that it is not possible to be fully prescriptive about research needs and in recognition of the ability of the broader research and academic communities to identify unmet need, the Strategy will welcome annual applications for grants to support research proposals. These proposals must fall within the aims, principles and priorities outlined in this Strategy.

Acknowledging that resources are limited, proposals which seek part-funding, as part of a larger consortium of funders, are also welcomed.

Criteria for Research Funding of Proposals

Decisions on funding of research are made with reference to the following:

- Policy relevance
- Consistency with the aims, principles and priorities detailed in the Strategy
- Methodology
- Relevant skills and experience brought to the project
- Timeliness
- Cost and value for money
- Cross-cutting
- Forward looking
- Well communicated
- High quality in terms of proposed methodology and associated outputs

Submitting an Application

The application for research funding must be submitted as part of the annual call for grant applications. The call will run annually. There may be occasional exceptions based on changing Ministerial or policy priorities. A copy of the research application form can be found at:

www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/index/equality/equalityresearch/equality-social-need-programme.htm.

Steering Arrangements

Steering groups will be established for all funded projects. It is the duty of the steering group to ensure that the terms of reference are agreed and adhered to, and for the probity and proper financial payment procedures relating to research expenditure.

Responsibilities, Implementation and Monitoring

Those bodies with authority to commission research will be expected to:

- Endorse the principles of the research strategy;
- Set the broad strategic policy priorities in line with policy need;
- Agree the annual expenditure of the budget(s);
- Advise of emerging policy priority changes impacting on research and statistical requirements.
- Ensure that the addition of those themes addressing economic and/or sustainability issues are coordinated with other departments.
- Conduct a review at the end of the research funding cycle with the aim of assessing the relevance of research commissioned to policy priorities. In addition it will be expected that internal audit and/or the NIAO will periodically conduct reviews to ensure that procedural requirements have been followed in terms of management, procurement standards etc.

Expectations from the strategy

It is expected that the strategy will bring benefits in terms of the following:

- highlighting OFMDFM 's role in respect of the Programme for Government ;
- the role of research in strengthening the policy process;
- the synergy and economies of scale created by the new research strategy particularly in light of the current economic climate;
- the benefits of integrating economic policy research with social and community relations research;
- the enhanced flexibility the new strategy gives in being able to research cross-cutting policy issues.
- opportunity to enhance the policy relevance of the end product
- the potential it offers for NI to contribute to the policy debates at the European and international levels.