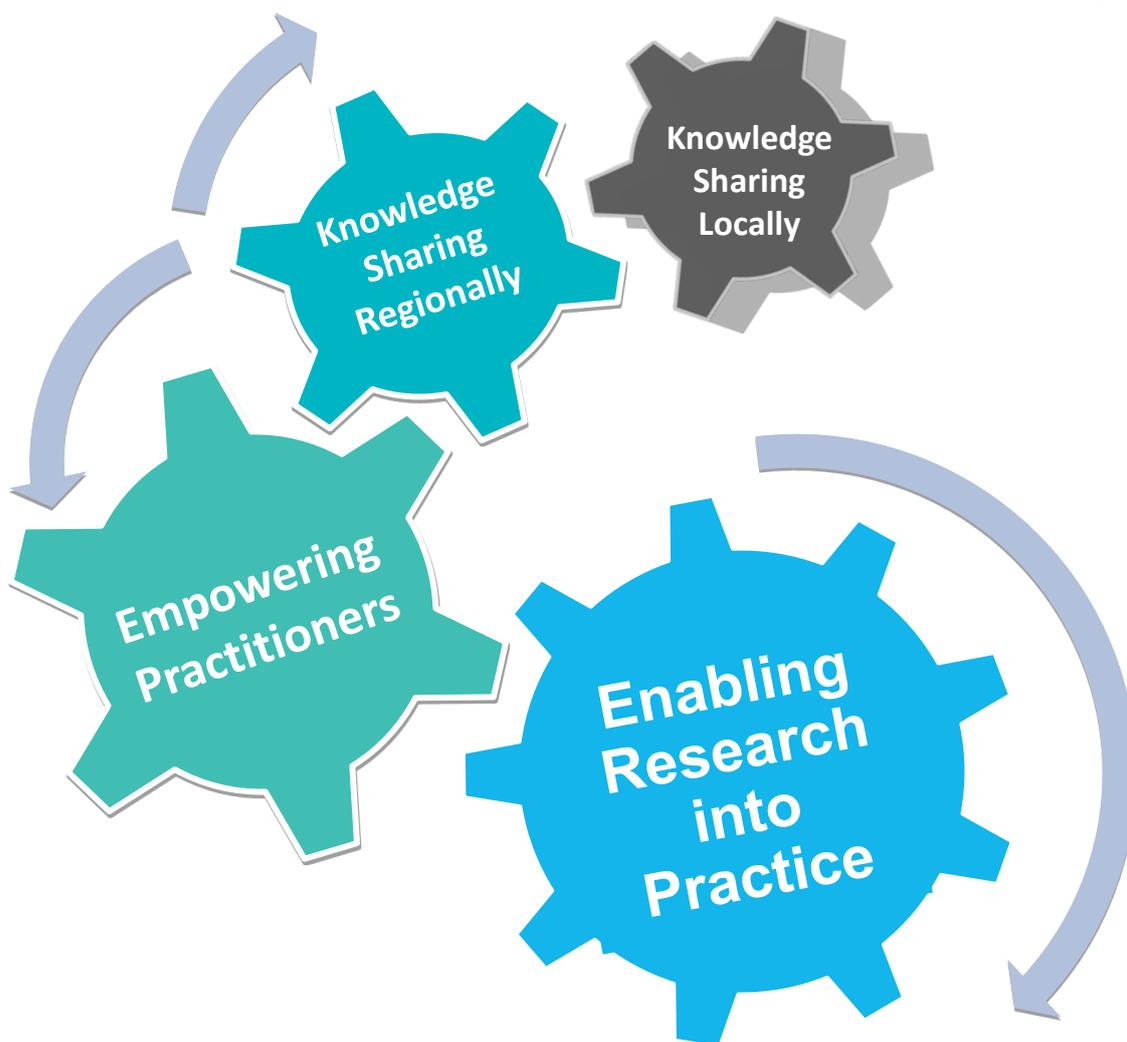


Tusla – Child and Family Agency Research and Information Mentor Strategy

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Research and Information Mentor Strategy
National Research Office
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1.0	February 2017	Marian Brattman, Bernard Barrett and Angela Feeney	Signed off by Cormac Quinlan, Interim Director of Policy and Strategy
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By Marian Brattman, Interim National Manager for Research and Bernard Barrett,
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1. Introduction

1.1 The Tusla Research Strategy sets out a long term action plan for the development of a research function and the promotion of a research culture within the context of the Tusla Corporate Plan and a sector wide strategic approach to knowledge about children's lives. In order to promote a research culture across Tusla and to embed research into everyday practice it is important that research can inform and influence practice governance, service development, workforce development, performance improvement, leadership and management. The Tusla Research Strategy therefore is designed to support a national approach to practice which is evidence informed supporting evidence-informed decision making and promoting high quality service delivery. The Strategy will help to create an environment in which staff can confidently share learning and transfer knowledge. The overall aim is to ensure that staffs at all levels are supported to consistently produce creative solutions using the knowledge and skills of all within the organisation.

1.2 Tusla's Research Strategy 2015-2017 outlines a number of actions to develop the research infrastructure in line with the Agency's corporate objectives. One of the actions identified is the recruitment of 'Information Stars' across the Agency, to support Tusla as a learning organization¹.

1.3 The following strategy outlines the rationale for the role of the newly-named Research and Information Mentors, their role function; the process of selecting, recruiting and retaining Mentors; proposed research and information activities; quality assurance, monitoring and evaluating impact; and an implementation plan.

¹ Tusla Corporate Plan 2015-2017 does not provide a definition for a learning organization but does identify levers and objectives to achieve it.

2. Terminology use

The following research definitions frame the strategy. These definitions support an overall framework as to how Tusla can utilize research within its organizational structures.

RESEARCH	‘A process through which we attempt to achieve systematically and with the support of data the answer to a question, the resolution of a problem, or a greater understanding of a problem’ (Leedy, 1997, p.5).
RESEARCH CULTURE	The structure that gives research behaviour significance and that allows us to understand and evaluate research activity (Cheetham, 2007). Therefore, a culture of research provides a supportive context in which research is uniformly expected, discussed, produced and valued (Hanover, 2014).
RESEARCH CAPACITY BULDING	Is defined as 'a process of individual and institutional development which leads to higher levels of skills and greater ability to perform useful research' (Trostle p. 1321).
RESEARCH UTILISATION	Is defined as ‘the process of synthesizing, disseminating, and using research-generated knowledge to make an impact on or change in existing practice’ (Burns and Grove, 2005).

<p>EVIDENCE BASED PRACTICE (EBP)</p>	<p>Is typically predicated on a ‘push’ model of research use, in other words a top down approach, where formal structures facilitate a linear transfer of information to practitioners who need to be informed by credible evidence to support and strengthen their practice related decisions. Research data is subjected to rigorous analysis and scientific claims as to what works.</p>
<p>EVIDENCE INFORMED PRACTICE (EIP)</p>	<p>Is a model that promotes knowledge application where practitioners draw from and integrate knowledge in practice and decision making processes from a variety of sources including service user experiences, professional practices and scientific data on intervention effectiveness (Mullen, Bledsoe & Bellamy 2008) cited in McBeath and Austin (2015). This is aligned with the ‘user pull’ approach of EIP where practitioners use research as and when needed to inform practice related issues (Brown, 2012, Stevens et al 2009).</p>

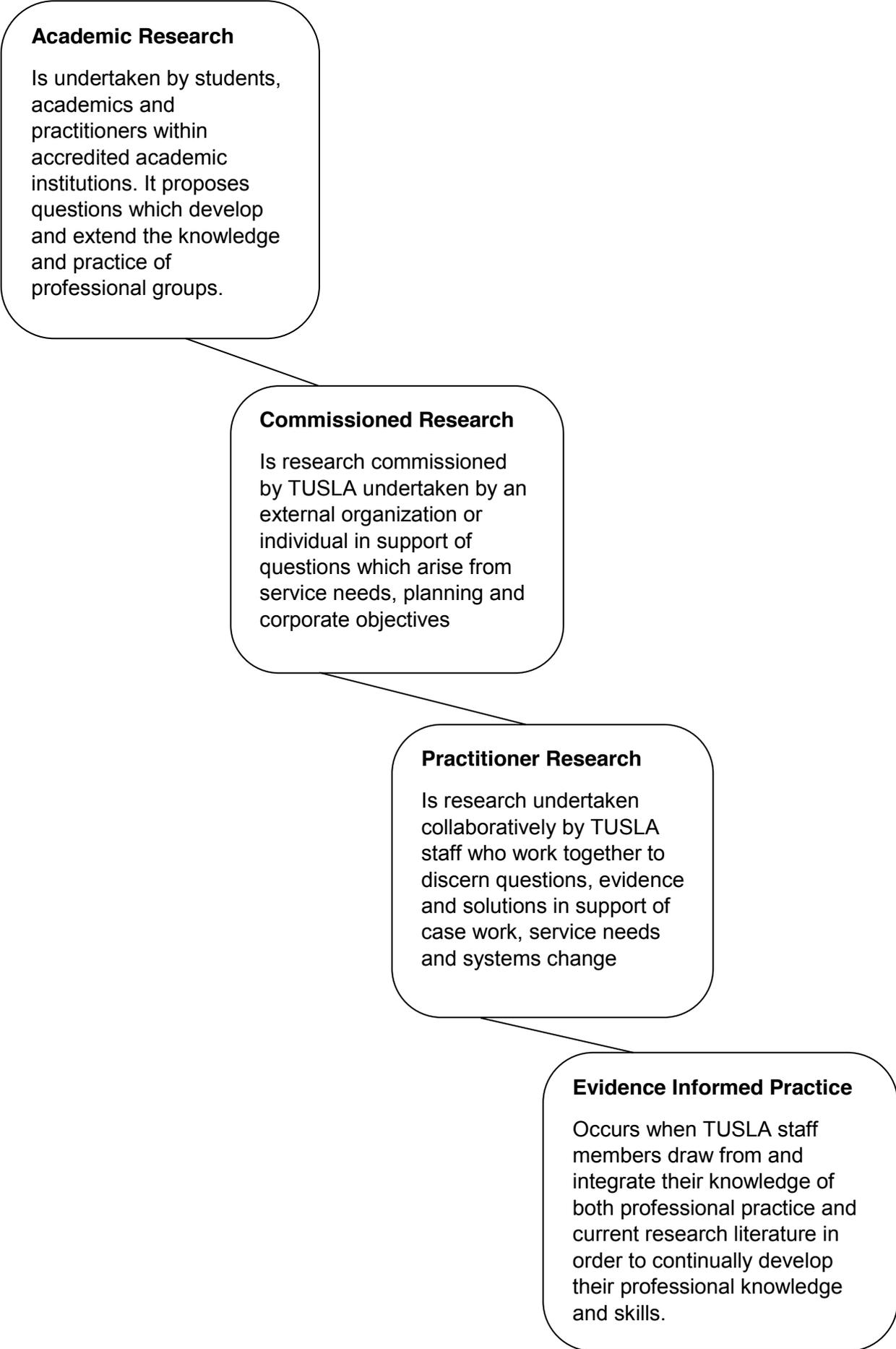
3. Creating the building blocks for a culture of Research Empowerment within TUSLA

3.1 Building on the definitions provided in Section 2, **Research Empowerment** - is defined as:

The personal and collective capability and responsibility of all Tusla staff to ask basic research questions as an established component of their professional practice. All Tusla staff working within and contributing to such a culture see research as an activity which empowers themselves, empowers their colleagues and empowers all those they practice with leading to a cycle of reflection and knowledge creation.

3.2 The National Research Office is a new function of the Agency, and in recognition of this, a stepped approach is required to build the capacity of the Agency to become empowered by and through research (Model 1). The stepped building blocks below provide an illustration of the ways in which research can occur within the work undertaken by professional staff within Tusla.

Model 1: A stepped-approach to building research empowerment

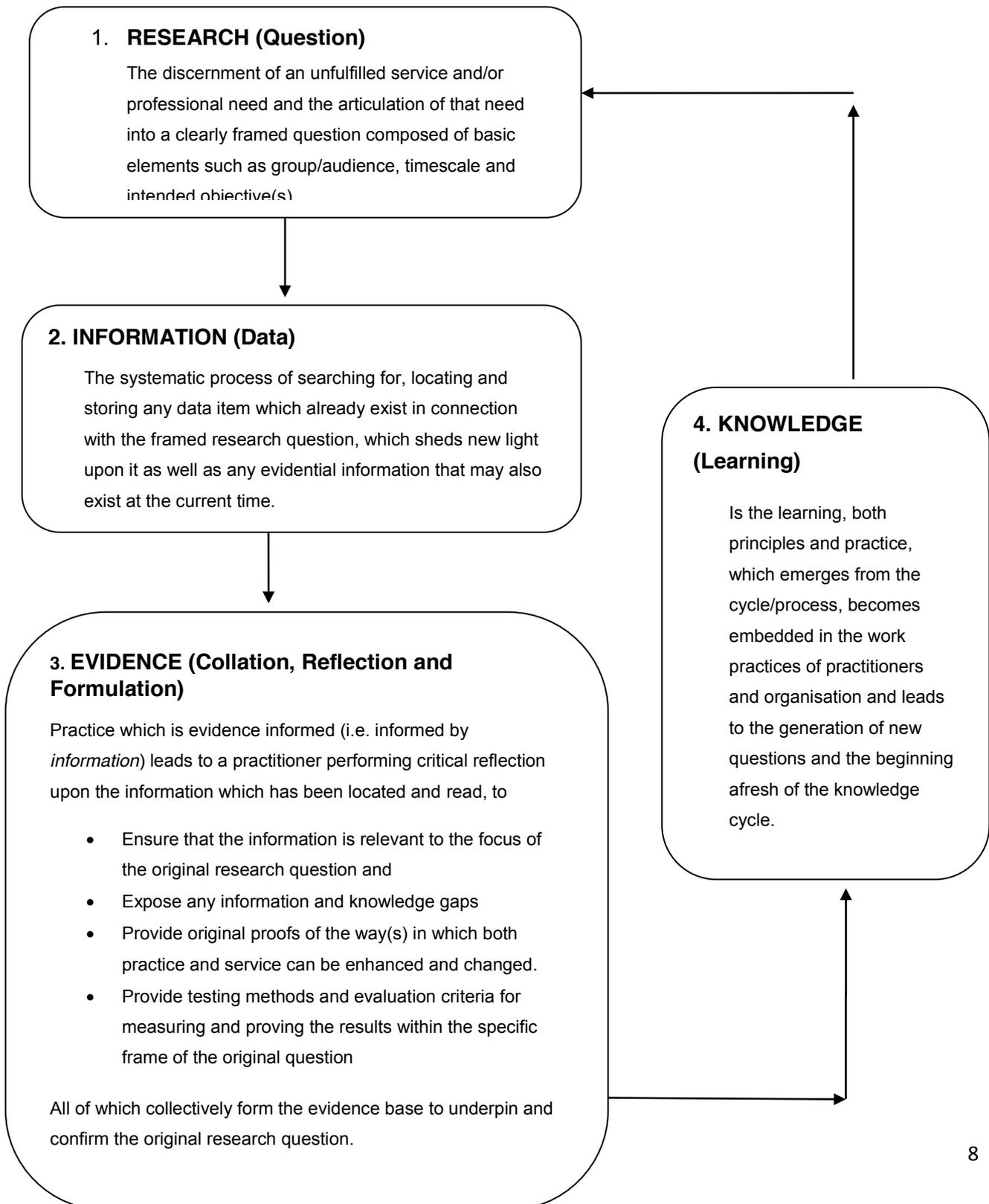


3.3 The Research and Information Mentor Strategy is part of the overall approach by the National Research Office for the Agency to build its research capacity, embed a research culture and create the conditions where good research evidence supports practice and new research supports Tusla in building its own knowledge base.

3.4 Consequently, it becomes central to all the research activities undertaken by Tusla to define how the organisation understands the related terms of *Research, Information, Evidence and Knowledge*. Collectively, all four while distinct, can in relationship to each other be known as the *Knowledge Cycle* (Model 2).

Model 2: THE KNOWLEDGE CYCLE

A clearly defined and focussed question is at the core of any research activity. A prerequisite for the framing of a research question is the need to define and/or understand any terminology which is central to the consideration of such questions. The four building blocks below describe the context within which the Knowledge Cycle operates within TUSLA and seek to embed a culture of research empowerment within the organisation.



4 Why Research and Information Mentors?

4.1 Feeney (Tusla, 2016) produced a paper for the National Research Office entitled 'A Reference Paper on The Development of a Research Skills Programme located within Research Minded Culture and Utilization Structures'. The paper found that in order for an organization to develop 'research mindedness' a number of elements have to be implemented from the 'top down' in order to create the appropriate environment to support research activity from the 'bottom up'. For example, leadership, organisational governance and support at corporate level and recognition of the importance of the learning organisation and knowledge sharing at managerial level. This creates the necessary cultural ethos, whereby staff 'bottom up' are supported within an appropriate framework to share learning, information and appropriate research. This approach supports the feedback loop required for a learning organization to be informed by policy and practice and from practice to policy, utilizing appropriate and robust research and information sources as part of this system.

4.2 Feeney also notes that from the literature reviewed, research utilization is often framed from the 'top down' and identifies a number of conceptual frameworks, namely: evidence-based practice, evidence-informed practice, knowledge production/utilization and implementation science. Feeney notes (2016:7) the following:

“conceptual frameworks for research utilization can identify definite pathways for the dissemination and/or transfer of research based knowledge throughout organizations. Corporate decision making and managerial leadership can establish what frameworks to employ dependent on the nature of what is envisioned as effective use of particular learning from research”

4.3 The conditions created from the 'top down' assist and facilitate in the empowerment of practitioners at all organizational levels to engage in research activity. As Feeney notes (2106:6):

“at local levels, not only are practitioner researchers supported from a framework that prioritises learning, they are supported from communities of practice for example local or team based opportunities that involve teamwork, shared learning and local or organisational goals that enhance learning from practice.”

In practical terms and at a local level, Buckley and Whelan (2009) identify the importance of training practitioners in self-reflection, critical thinking and evaluation skills as part of developing research cultures among practitioners.

4.4 In research carried out on how social workers look for, acquire, and use information, to support their practice, Flanagan (2013) found that social workers engaged in considerable 'information behaviour' while others engaged in less. Flanagan concluded that this cohort of information savvy social workers acted as channels to information for their colleagues and represented a key asset to the profession. This information behaviour need has also been advocated for by Buckley and Whelan (2009) in the Irish and Canadian context by way of a 'champion', somebody who could act as 'an agency knowledge broker by identifying, appraising and distributing research evidence' which would promote skills development.

4.5 A 2014 survey of information needs of a cross section of 64 Tusla staff from all directorates and grades, carried out in collaboration with HSE Library Services, demonstrated that staff require up-to-date information on a regular basis and that there was a need for access to information which could support the development of evidence-based practice (Tusla, 2015). A survey to Educational Welfare Services staff based on a similar methodology found comparable findings to the 2015 HSE Library Services survey. It also found that staff were more likely to access information related to educational interventions, practice and policy rather than social work or child development, but the multi-disciplinary nature of the work was acknowledged and that dedicated time and training was required to assist staff in becoming more 'information savvy'.

4.6 These findings suggest that Tusla staff require general training in relation to accessing information, carrying out literature searches, saving searches, retrieving searches etc. They also require access to key journals and books online and in an easy to access format. The development of *the Tusla Research Centre*² will provide access to books, journals, evidence summaries and/or communities of practice. Knowing how or where to search for documents, or simply being aware that a relevant document or website exists, represents a barrier to social workers (Flanagan, 2013). Membership of a professional association emerged as a significant influence on information sources, with members engaging in more information behaviour (Flanagan, 2013).

4.7 Feeney identifies a number of international models in which the theoretical concepts and constructs discussed above have been applied. One specific model identified utilizes a 'Research and Information' Champion approach to disseminate research and information, namely the Institute for Research and Innovation in Social Services based in Scotland.

² <http://www.tusla.ie/research>

4.8 The Institute develops and promotes the use of tools and techniques for embedding knowledge, evidence and innovation in practice across social service organisations and agencies in Scotland. Their vision is to develop high standards of practice in social services as expressed through their mission statement:

‘...promote positive outcomes for the people who use Scotland’s social services by enhancing the capacity and capability of the social services workforce to access and make use of knowledge and research for service innovation and improvement’.

The website provides extensive resources for practitioners and policy makers which include online access to research, video links and podcasts. There are three strands to their programme: evidence informed practice, innovation and improvement and knowledge media. Partnerships with social service agencies facilitate training and development strategies. The institute operates a ‘Champion Network’, locating research champions throughout organisations with the role identified as to embed knowledge, develop ‘learning for outcomes’, dissemination, information sharing, information sessions and joint workshops.

5. The role of the Research and Information Mentors

5.1 Supporting the promotion of research and information is in line with Tusla’s Research Strategy 2015-2017 and Objective 7 of the Corporate Plan 2015-2017, which states that Tusla should:

‘build on our research strategy to develop policy and enable evidence-based decision-making and high quality service delivery’

Tusla’s Business Plan (2016: 49) provides a vision and intent for all processes and systems underpinning children and family policy to be evidence-informed.

5.2 This initiative will be led by the National Research Office with the direct assignment of a National Research Officer to Research and Information Mentors in each area.

5.3 The central role of the Research and Information Mentor is to work with staffs to enable them to access and promote good quality research and information within and across Tusla, and to share research knowledge and information with colleagues locally, regionally and nationally in order to support evidence informed policy, practice and service development and to support the growth of Tusla as a learning organisation.

5.4 Tusla Research and Information Mentors will work closely with other staff including Senior Social Work Practitioners, Regional Professional Support Managers and

Workforce Development to ensure an integrated approach to learning and development. The National Research Office will examine mechanisms and structures for doing so.

Research and Information Mentors will also work closely and align with other Champions in the system existing or appointed to support Tusla's strategic work in the areas of child protection and welfare, alternative care, PPFS and others, as they emerge.

5.5 Research and Information Mentor duties will be as follows:

- Become the first point of contact within each Tusla area for discerning and responding to research inquiries/questions from local Tusla staff within that area.
- Record queries gained from such inquiries to the assigned National Research Officer to be evaluated for inclusion into a national Tusla knowledge base which can then be accessed by Tusla staff. The national Tusla knowledge base will be developed as part of the Tusla Research Centre. It will be a place where all Tusla staff can ask questions and share knowledge and expertise about the application of research to practice as well as sharing knowledge of undertaking research.
- With the National Research Office, support practitioner and/or action research approaches to research questions identified by local Tusla staff and/or through the research structures (e.g. Tusla Research Needs Analysis, Research Ethics Committee, Research Advisory Group) or other structures such as Quality Assurance.
- Working with the National Research Office, report to the Agency on the outcomes of practitioner and/or action research initiatives to inform Tusla as a learning organisation and/or to inform policy and practice approaches.
- Working with the National Research Office, promote research and information sharing activities locally through formal and informal communications with local Tusla staff within that area.
- Working with the National Research Office, assist Tusla staff to acquire basic information and research skills through participating in relevant training to support the role.
- Develop a thorough knowledge of Electronic Information Sources that are available to Tusla staff nationally, becoming the local experts in the interrogation and manipulation of these resources.
- Assist Tusla staff in awareness of/instruments available to stay up to date on work based specialisms.

- Become a conduit for passing inquiries to the National Research Office, when a national response is needed/ or inquiry falls outside of available resources / or a more detailed interview of staff needs to be undertaken.
- Be prepared to develop a range of interviewing techniques, through training, to clarify and verify the exact nature of an enquiry, match the enquiry to available resources, and to assess the quality of the information provided in response.
- Become a local conduit for the sharing and dissemination of practice-based information and knowledge to all Tusla staff locally.

5.6 Research and Information Mentors will form part of the formal structure of the National Research Office (see Figure 1).

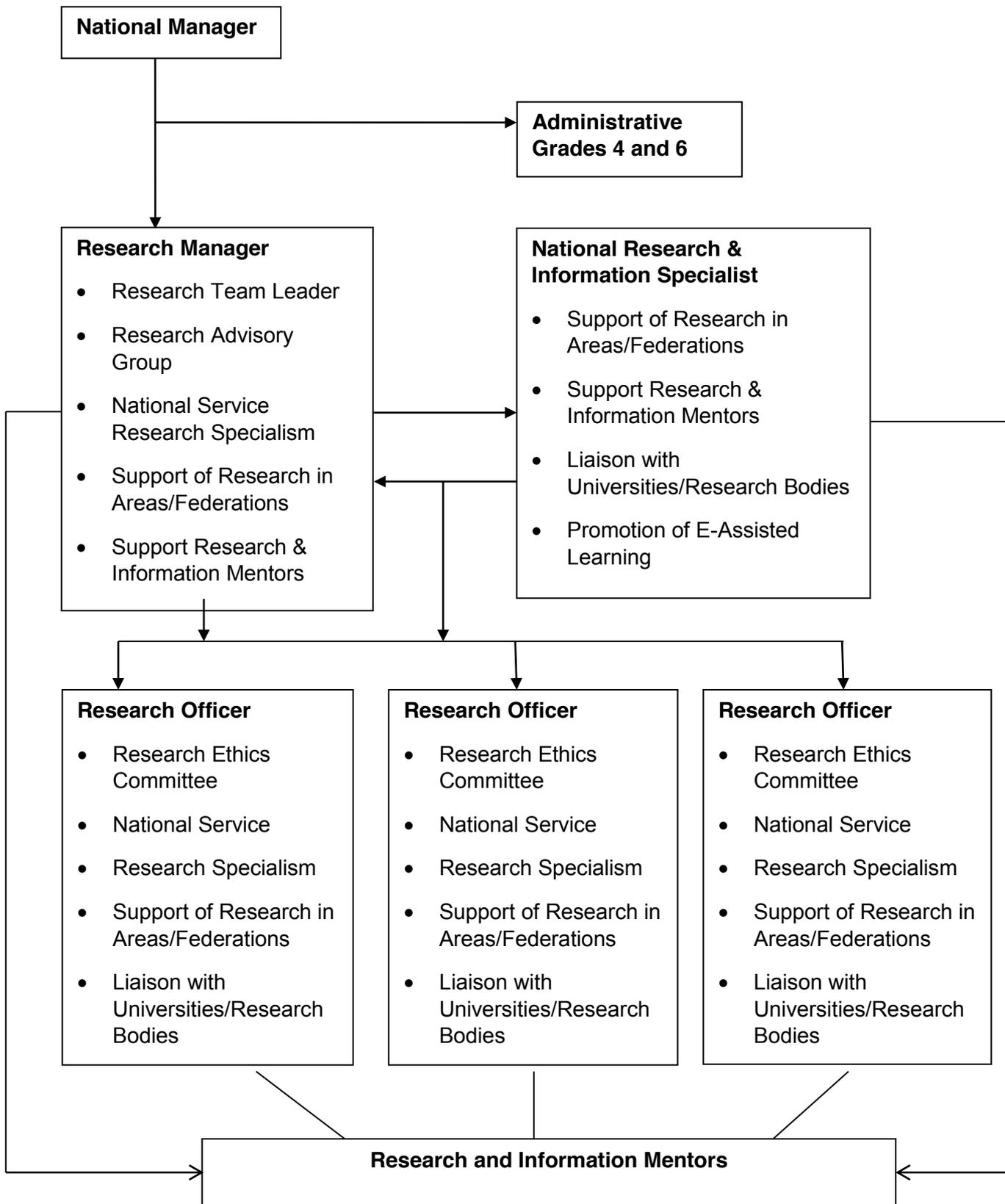


Figure 1: National Research Office Structure

5.7 Research and Information Mentors will:

- Form a national network of staff who promote research and information sharing activities, making themselves available to colleagues locally to support their research and information needs through a variety of approaches (see Section 5);
- Initially be assigned four ring fenced hours per week from their normal duties to promote research and information sharing activities; this will be agreed between the National Research Office, Area Managers (or equivalent), and the Mentor's line management;
- Be expected to meet as a group with the National Research Office Team once a quarter. Meetings will be held regionally;
- Make themselves available for a skills training and development programme run in conjunction with Workforce Learning and Development. CPD points (where applicable) will be available to Mentors who engage with the training;
- Be supported by the National Research Office staff to develop and implement a local research and information plan. This plan will be informed by the ongoing activities of the National Research Office including Tusla's Research Needs Analysis, the Research Advisory Group, the Research Ethics Committee, the EPPI programme, and locally identified research and information needs. Support includes a dedicated National Research Officer and a National Research and Information Specialist who Mentors will liaise with.

6. Process of selecting, recruiting and retaining Mentors

6.1 Research and Information Mentors will be selected through an initial process of nominations by Area Managers (or equivalent) and a subsequent application process to The National Research Office of those nominees. Up to three potential Mentors will be nominated from each area. The minimum total number of Mentors to be identified is 17, so that at least one Mentor is available in each Tusla area and /or that Mentors are available across the range of Tusla services. It is recognised that it may take some time to build up to the minimum number of 17 so a stepped-approach will be utilised i.e. 'working with what we get'. Selection will be based on a number of criteria (see below) so more than 17 Mentors may be identified as well as acknowledging that some potential Mentors do not fit into the current Tusla area approach or that the role may be shared. Mentors will be sought across Tusla's main service functions, namely:

- Social Work
- Social Care
- Family Support
- Educational Welfare Service
- Psychology
- Early Years
- Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based violence
- Clerical and managerial grades

6.2 The following Research and Information Mentor Person Specification will be applied:

<p>Person Specification</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - We are interested in applicants from all disciplines working within The Child and Family Agency. This Person Specification outlines the eligibility and criteria required for the role. We will appreciate all applicants who express interest and a commitment to the introduction and development of this role.
<p>Eligibility Criteria</p>	<p>-Applicants must currently be directly employed by The Child and Family Agency.</p>
<p>Essential Criteria</p>	<p>-Applicants must hold a qualification where a research component/module has been undertaken e.g. research design, qualitative, quantitative, evaluation research methods.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Or</p> <p>-Applicants must have attended training in relation to research methods e.g. research design, qualitative, quantitative, evaluation research methods.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Or</p> <p>-Where an applicant does not possess the above qualification/training, a commitment to attend training provided by the National Research Office is required.</p>

<p>Desirable Criteria</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Previous experience of research design, fieldwork, analysis and dissemination. -Previous experience of accessing research and information resources to inform practice and practice related decision making. -Previous experience of integrating and implementing research evidence into day to day practice. -Previous experience of collaborative interdisciplinary work within their role.
<p>Desired Attributes</p>	<p>It is key for applicants to demonstrate a range of attributes suitable for the role. A potential applicant should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Have a clear understanding of a range of research methodologies and their suitability to particular research. - Have a clear understanding of practitioner research. - Be familiar with concepts such as Evidence Based Practice, Evidence Informed Practice, Knowledge Utilisation, and Implementation Science. - Have the ability to critically analyse the quality and relevance of research and information resources. - Engage in excellent planning and organising skills. - Demonstrate effective communication skills both verbal and written. - Have the ability to work collaboratively with other professional disciplines in an inclusive manner. - Work to a plan and meet deadlines within designated timeframes. - Have the ability to establish and maintain relationships across the Agency. - Have a clear understanding of effective peer mentorship. - Be confident in the facilitation of group discussions. - Take a leadership role in research and information activities.

6.3 Nominated candidates will be invited to apply by The National Research Office for the role using the Research and Information Mentor application process outlining their interest, skills and experience relevant the role.

Applications will be shortlisted in each area according to the above criteria and a panel will be established from which Research and Information Mentors will be appointed.

Research and Information Mentors will be appointed for three years initially from 2017-2020. Initial applications must be approved by an Area Manager (or equivalent). Research and Information Mentors can be re-appointed for one more term, with approval from Area Manager (or equivalent). If a Research and Information Mentor retires or resigns, a succession plan will be put in place to ensure a smooth transition between Mentors. The succession plan could be between the outgoing and incoming Mentor in a particular area(s) or between the incoming Mentor and their dedicated National Research Officer through a new application process.

7. Local Research and Information Activities

7.1 There are many ways, formal and informal, in which Research and Information Mentors can promote information sharing practices, promote research and support and influence colleagues to become involved in research related activities.

The following are examples of local research activities:

- Promoting a clear understanding of the relationship between Research, Information, Knowledge and Evidence.
- Assisting and enabling staff to frame clear and well-structured research questions
- Becoming a local source of expertise in interrogating available electronic and print information resources.
- Providing (where appropriate with national colleagues (e.g. Workforce Learning and Development, Research Officers)) a mix of one-to-one and group training in the use and extrapolation of information etc. from available electronic and print information resources.
- Working in co-operation with the National Research Office to develop linkages and partnerships with Universities, Institutes of Technology and partners.
- Acquiring facilitation skills to establish, lead and co-ordinate communities of practice³
- Evidence-based practice seminars

³ A type of learning practice whereby a group of staff share a common interest in a particular service issue with the goal of gaining knowledge through the process of sharing information and experiences and learning from each other. The CoP provides an opportunity for personal and professional development.

Lave, Jean; Wenger, Etienne (1991). *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. [ISBN0-521-42374-0](#).; first published in 1990 as Institute for Research on Learning report 90-0013

- Journal clubs
- Lunchtime research lectures
- Writing-for-publication groups

8. Key benefits for Tusla

8.1 In recognition of the proposed approach whereby areas / services will be required to release a staff member for 4 dedicated hours a week for the Research and Information Mentors role, the following benefits will begin to be realised:

- A co-ordinated and systematic approach to research related issues throughout the Agency
- Development of research skills and capacity throughout the Agency
- Knowledge creation and transfer in support of Agency aims and objectives
- Support to an evidence-informed practice approach
- Support to Tusla in the development of a learning organisation
- Contribution to the personal and professional development of Tusla staff.

9. Quality Assurance, Monitoring and Impact

9.1 The following approach will be taken to ensure that the Research and Information Mentors Strategy is monitored, quality assured and assessed for impact.

- Mentors will formally liaise with a National Research Officer assigned to that area to ensure that the approach is in line with the local research and information plans devised and in alignment with national research priorities.
- Mentors will formally meet with the National Research Office team on a quarterly basis for reporting and monitoring. In addition, Mentors will have the opportunity to meet with their designated National Research Officer as and when required depending on the work plan and activities. These meetings can be held nationally, regionally or locally in support of horizontal learning.
- Mentors will have the opportunity to discuss progress during line management meetings / supervision.
- Mentors will engage with a skills development training programme to support them in their role.

- Mentors, with support from the National Research Office, will have a dedicated space on the Electronic Research Centre for sharing the outputs from the local research and information initiatives.
- Mentors, with support from the National Research Office, will meet with the Director of Policy and Strategy annually, to ensure that local research and information outputs inform and/or align with policy developments and service priorities.
- The Research Office Team will ensure that Area Managers are informed of the work of the Research and Information Mentors Strategy by making this information available through presentations and/or meetings with the Area Managers involved.
- Mentors, with support from the National Research Office, will review the strategy on an annual basis. A number of metrics will be devised to support the implementation and review of the Strategy underpinned by planning tools and other evaluative methodologies.

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