



An Ghníomhaireacht um
Leanaí agus an Teaghlach
Child and Family Agency

Research Strategy



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Version	Date	Updated By	Comments
1	01/12/14	Aidan Waterstone	Working copy draft
2	09/02/15	Aidan Waterstone	Final draft with SMT amendments

Implementation Date:	03/03/15
Review Date:	03/03/16

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1. Introduction

Tusla the Child and Family Agency was established on 1st January 2014 and is responsible for improving well being and outcomes for children.

Tusla has responsibility for the provision of the following wide range of services as follows:

- Child Welfare and Protection Services, including family support services;
- Family Resource Centres and associated national programmes;
- Early years (pre-school) Inspection Services;
- Educational Welfare responsibilities including School Completion Programmes and Home School Liaison;
- Domestic, sexual and gender based violence services;
- Services related to the psychological welfare of children.

One of the specific functions of the Agency, as set out in the Child and Family Agency Act, 2013 Part 2 Section 8 (1)(f) is to *“Undertake or commission research relating to its functions”*.

2. Background

The Tusla Research Strategy has been developed within the following policy context:

1. ***Better Outcomes Brighter Futures The national policy framework for children & young people 2014 – 2020*** (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2014) which states :

- Government investment in children will be more outcomes-driven and informed by national and international evidence on the effectiveness of expenditure on child related services, with the aim of improving child outcomes and reducing inequalities. Resource allocation within services will be based on evidence of both need and effectiveness.

2. ***The National Strategy for Research and Data on Children's Lives 2011 — 2016*** (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2011) which provides a research framework for improving understanding of children's lives across all sectors. This strategy seeks to coordinate and mobilise research and data across a range of agencies in order to achieve a better understanding of children's lives.

3. ***The Tusla Corporate Plan 2015 – 2017*** which has set out its Mission Statement as follows :

“With the child at the centre, our mission is to design and deliver supportive, coordinated and evidence-informed services that strive to ensure positive outcomes for children, families and communities”.

The Corporate Plan establishes 8 Strategic Objectives, each underpinned by a series of actions, key performance indicators and targets in order to track and measure progress. The research strategy supports all of the strategic objectives of the Corporate Plan and gives effect in particular to the following Objectives:

- Strategic Objective 3:
'Establish new and distinct values based culture, which empowers children and families through high quality services'
- Strategic Objective 5:
'Develop a workforce which is valued and supported within a learning organisation';
- Strategic Objective 7 :
"Build on our research strategy to develop policy and enable evidence-based decision-making and high quality service delivery";
- Strategic Objective 8 :
'Ensure a strategic approach to quality assurance, information management and risk management that supports continuous improvement and good governance'.

This legislative, policy and planning context provides a framework and rationale for the development of the Tusla Research Strategy.

Having a 'whole child' approach to service planning and delivery, it is essential that the strategic research focus of Tusla is connected to and integrated with the research initiatives of and knowledge generated by other research bodies.

3. Research Strategy Aims

The Tusla Research Strategy sets out a long term action plan for active engagement within the context of the Tusla Corporate Plan and a sector wide strategic approach to knowledge about children's lives. Tusla is committed to being a learning organisation providing evidence informed services. This strategy will contribute to our understanding of the most effective ways to intervene in children's lives and to ensuring that this knowledge informs service development.

The aim of this research strategy is to set out a plan for the next three years for the development of a research function and the promotion of a research culture across the organisation in support of corporate strategy. These developments between 2015 and 2017 will ensure that all research undertaken or commissioned by Tusla will be nationally co-ordinated and will inform the priority needs of children and families who avail of Tusla services.

Tusla is committed, as a learning organisation, to improving the well being of children and their families based on the five National Outcomes which are set out in *Better Outcomes Brighter Futures The national policy framework for children & young people 2014 – 2020*. The five national outcomes that we want for all our children and young people are that they:

1. Are active and healthy, with positive physical and mental wellbeing;
2. Are achieving their full potential in all areas of learning and development;
3. Are safe and protected from harm;
4. Have economic security and opportunity;
5. Are connected, respected and contributing to their world.

In order to become a learning organisation with a shared vision we need to develop a culture in which there is a commitment by staff to the process of learning and where individual learning can be transferred into organisational learning.

Investment in research capacity will support evidence-informed decision making and promote high quality service delivery. It will help to create an environment in which staff can confidently share learning and transfer knowledge. The overall aim is to ensure that staff at all levels are supported to consistently produce creative solutions using the knowledge and skills of all within the organisation.

The accumulation of knowledge gathered through inspection, monitoring and evaluation should be systematically analysed and integrated into daily practice.

Best practice research methods which are intrinsic to work practices and which become part of the suite of performance indicators will broaden and strengthen inspection processes.

There is a wider strategic context for the development of this Strategy within an explicit government commitment in recent years to investment in science, technology and innovation.

There are a number of statutory bodies which have strategic and funding responsibilities in delivering this Government agenda in regard to children. This strategy will help to ensure that research findings and data collected by Tusla will be made accessible for use by other researchers to increase the possibilities of meaningful analysis of data across sectors, services, disciplines and over time.

This strategy will help to forge links across the wider landscape of stakeholders and service users with an interest in promoting and developing quality research activities in child care.

4. Research Strategy Definition

Many different definitions of research exist and there is considerable debate about the quality of research evidence (Buckley and Whelan, 2009). Defining what is meant by research will help to ensure that the quality of research being undertaken, supported or commissioned by Tusla can be assured.

A number of qualities can be seen to characterise research activity. Research is intended to provide new knowledge and/or understanding; to be generalisable; to be open to critical examination; and accessible to those who could benefit from the research findings (see also the Health Research Board, 2000).

Routine data collection and audit activities can be seen to overlap with research to some extent or share some features of research. Whilst these activities may contribute to the research process they do not fall completely within the activities of research.

For the purpose of this research strategy the following definition of research is applied:

'Research is 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, 1997:5).

5. Research Strategy Principles

The research principles set out in this Strategy align with Tusla's core values as set out in *Ireland's Child and Family Agency: Towards a Shared Purpose (2014)*, namely:

Respect – Integrity – Fairness – Collaboration - Compassion

The research principles that will guide Tusla's research activity are as follows:

- **Ethical standards**

All research activity of Tusla is underpinned by ethical research standards. Ethical research should be: worthwhile; avoid making unreasonable demands on participants; based on informed consent; based on sound research skills and methodologies and avoid adverse consequences to participants (Webster et al., 2014). The principles outlined in the "Guidance for developing ethical research projects involving children" (DCYA2012) should be adhered to.

- **Person- and child-centred research activity**

Research conducted by/or on behalf of Tusla may involve children and their parent(s)/guardian(s) staff and management, and other external bodies. All research activity should be conducted using a person-centred approach.

- **Wider social, economic and cultural context**

All research activity of Tusla will be cognisant of temporal and social perspectives, recognising that both past and present experiences of individuals are shaped by the wider social, economic and cultural context.

- **Do no harm / duty of care**

Tusla has a duty of care to children and their families, its staff and stakeholders engaged in the research process. Tusla will ensure that staff members engaged in research functions shall be supported and that necessary safeguards are in place for all. No harm should be caused to any research participant as a result of their engagement in

the research activities of Tusla. The protection of all participants in the research process is paramount. Participants and researchers should be made aware of disclosure procedures at all stages of the research process.

- **Beneficial**

All research involving Tusla should be based on a commitment to the individuals concerned, and should strive to ensure that the research is of benefit to those involved. This benefit could be indirect, for example, through an increased understanding or knowledge of a particular subject.

- **Partnership and collaboration**

All research activity should be conducted in the spirit of partnership, collaboration and respect. Tusla will ensure that all researchers and participants involved in research projects will be acknowledged.

- **Respect, confidentiality and privacy**

The dignity and rights of the individuals involved in research will be respected. Tusla will endeavour to uphold the confidentiality and privacy of research participants unless circumstances dictate that this cannot legally be maintained.

All research conducted or commissioned by Tusla will be in compliance with current, up-to-date legislation with regard to data protection and the protection of privacy of individuals.

- **Independence and impartiality**

Tusla will facilitate independent and impartial research. Research will be safeguarded so that its findings and conclusions are not withheld or selectively reported (National Committee for Research Ethics in Norway, 2006)

6. Governance and Structures

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 input of key stakeholders including children and other service users needs to be facilitated.

The structures below facilitate access to and input from a wide range of stakeholders through the Research Ethics Committee and the National Research Advisory Group.

- **Research Ethics Committee (REC)**

Ethical review is an essential component of the research process. However, a proper governance structure is essential for a fully functioning research system including the establishment of appropriate principles of good practice and robust monitoring arrangements.

The Tusla REC will review research proposals with regard to the extent to which they comply with recognised ethical standards (see Section 5 above), which includes respecting the safety and focus of the people who take part.

REC composition will be in line with international best practice.

- **National Research Advisory Group (RAG)**

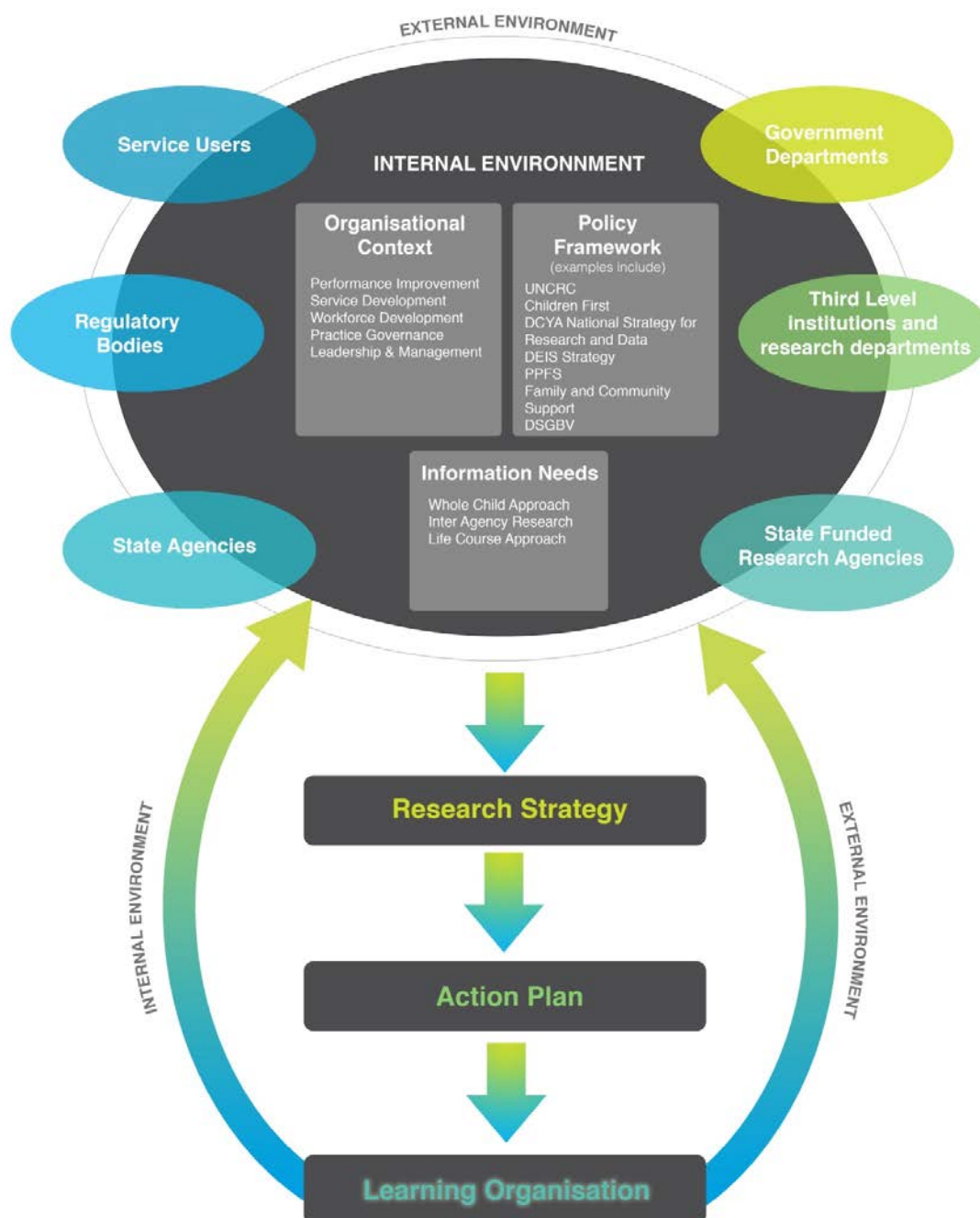
The RAG is representative of a wide range of stakeholders with an interest in promoting and supporting research including service users, academic institutions, regulatory bodies, professional associations and research institutions.

The RAG provides independent expert advice to Tusla on identifying and prioritising research topics. Its input helps to enhance the quality of both the research process and the research findings through eliciting a broad spectrum of experiences and views.

7. Research Strategy development process

The ongoing process of research strategy development in Tusla will be informed by knowledge from a range of sources. This is neither a static nor fixed process, rather it is a dynamic and iterative process of development that will be continuously refreshed and updated within an organisational culture that is 'research-minded'.

The diagram below illustrates this process.



8. Research Strategy Objectives

The Objectives of this strategy are set out below to provide short-term and medium-term goals that Tusla is seeking to accomplish within the timescale of the Corporate Plan 2015 – 2017. These Objectives will provide a framework within which Tusla can progress its overall strategic goals in regard to research.

1. Develop research infrastructure

To establish appropriate structures and functions to ensure that high quality research is embedded within the organisation.

2. Provide research coordination

To develop the systems and processes necessary to ensure that research is coordinated and supported across the organisation.

3. Use research to develop the capacity of Tusla as a learning organisation

To promote a culture in which there is a commitment by staff to use research including research skills and methods to promote the process of learning and in which individual learning can be transferred into organisational learning.

4. Use research information to support improved service delivery through evidence informed practice

To ensure ready access to information resources and establish linkages with academic institutions and other learning organisations.

5. Use research to inform and guide policy development.

To establish the research requirements of the Agency so that the planning and development of policies and services is informed by best available evidence and to identify and address knowledge gaps.

9. Research Strategy Action Plan

Successful implementation of this Strategy will require a complex plan involving a range of staff, stakeholders and external agencies. A series of Actions are set out below to provide for structured and measurable implementation of this Strategy.

Action Plan

Objective	Lead Responsibility	Activities	Progress indicator	Timeline
Develop research infrastructure	Dir of Policy & Strategy	Establish Tusla research function	Re-pointing of existing staff	Q4 2015
	Research lead	Implement protocols and policies	Policies and procedures for core research functions in place.	Q4 2015
	Research lead	Establish Research Ethics Committee	Research Ethics Committee in place	Q2 2015
Provide research coordination	Dir Policy & Strategy	Publish Strategy	Strategy published	Q1 2015
	Research lead	Provide coordination and support to research initiatives	Framework in place	Q3 2015
	Research lead/Comms Mgr	Develop Communications strategy	Research Comms strategy in place	Q1 2015
	Dir of Policy & Strategy	Establish research budget	Budget in place.	Q1 2015
	Research lead/Dir ICT	Establish research database	Database in place	Q4 2015
Develop learning organisation	Research lead/Nat Mgr WD	Systematic improvement of research skills	Increase in numbers trained	Q4 2016
	Research lead/Nat Mgr WD	Establish research activities in compliance with CPD standard and requirements	Agreement with CORU	Q2 2016
	Research lead	Ensure that findings from research are disseminated	Establish a register of research	Q2 2015
	Research lead/Comms Mgr	Establish a research web page	Web page on internet	Q2 2015
	Research lead/Nat Mgr WD	Establish research training modules through Workforce	Research training modules in place	Q4 2015

Objective	Lead Responsibility	Activities	Progress indicator	Timeline
		Development		
Support improved service delivery	Research lead	Establish Research Advisory Group	Research Advisory Group in place.	Q3 2015
	Research lead	Promote partnership with 3 rd Level Institutions	Seminar held	Q4 2015
	Research lead/Comms Mgr/HSE Library	Provide easy access to key information sources	Web Portal in place	Q1 2015
	Research lead/HSE Library	Enable case-related information searches	Links to Library services in place	Q2 2015
	Research lead	Support 'information stars'	Information stars identified and supports in place	Q2 2015
Identify and address knowledge gaps	Research lead/HSE Library	Identify information needs of staff	Conduct staff needs survey	Q4 2014
	Research lead	Conduct research needs analysis	Needs analysis conducted with needs identified.	Q1 2016
	Research lead	Link research initiatives to corporate objectives	Provide evidence informed rationale and context for corporate objectives	Q3 2015
	Research lead/HSE Library/ Comms Mgr	Increase awareness of available online resources	Web Portal in place	Q1 2015

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