

UK Policy Framework for Health and Social Care Research – 24 March 2016

The Institute of Public Health in Ireland

The remit of the Institute of Public Health in Ireland (IPH) is to promote cooperation for public health between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland in the areas of research and information, capacity building and policy advice. Our approach is to support Departments of Health and their agencies in both jurisdictions, and maximise the benefits of all-island cooperation to achieve practical benefits for people in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

IPH welcomes the publication of the UK policy framework for health and social care research. The commitment to conducting high quality, ethical research in all four countries is important to ensure consistency in the approach and conduct of research in health and social care settings, particularly for multi-site studies and to ensure the transferability of research practice and findings across the UK. IPH would like to make a number of comments and suggestions regarding the principles set out in the policy framework, Personal and Public Involvement (PPI), as well as issues related to the sharing of data and dissemination of research findings.

Principles and Operational Procedures

The policy framework sets out a number of principles which apply to all health and social care research. Whilst not disagreeing with the content of the 'principles' as currently outlined, IPH would suggest that these should be more accurately described as operational procedures for undertaking research in the health and social sector. IPH believes it is essential to separate out the principles underpinning health and social care research in the UK from the operational procedures required for best practice. IPH recommends that a set of high level guiding principles is developed for the framework, supported by the operational requirements which are already very well presented.

IPH recommends that the policy framework would be strengthened if it set out a more strategic view of its direction for health and social care research by outlining the priorities for the sector, for example, the need for more inter-disciplinary research, developing partnerships and collaborations and outlining specific areas where more research is needed, for example, health promotion, disease prevention and public health studies.

PPI

In relation to the role of patients, service users and the public, IPH would suggest that these groups need to 'inform and support' in addition to 'participating in health and social care research'. IPH welcomes the statement outlined in 8.4 and believes this should be an underlying theme throughout the policy framework and should be stated more clearly from the beginning of the policy framework and how this aspect is both supported and developed to inform the direction and utilisation of the research.

Data sharing and dissemination of findings

IPH would strongly advocate that the sharing of data and dissemination of research findings feature as a high level principle within the policy framework. IPH supports the view that data from publicly funded research should be made openly available to other researchers. IPH would propose that the policy framework seeks to support the sharing of data (as appropriate) among all researchers and publication of research findings in open access journals.

Health inequalities

IPH would suggest that the policy framework takes account of health inequalities as a distinct focus and outcome of what health and social services should seek to achieve. IPH recommends that the new policy framework outlines importance of studies to examine the effectiveness of health and social care services in addressing inequities in service access and quality and in meeting the needs of vulnerable populations. IPH would also recommend that the policy framework takes account of Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act, which lists nine key groups that must be given consideration to ensure equality of opportunity. The nine equality ground should be appropriately considered in the policy framework and advice for researchers provided as relevant.

Policy landscape

In developing a new policy framework, it will be important to take account of the wider policy landscape within each jurisdiction. IPH would suggest that the framework considers the strategic direction outlined in the recently published Strategy for Health and Social Care Research and Development in Northern Ireland¹. It is the aim of this strategy that the health, wellbeing and prosperity of the Northern Ireland population will benefit from excellent, world-renowned research and development in health and social care that is led from Northern Ireland. IPH believes Northern Ireland can make a meaningful contribution to the health and social care research in the UK and this should be reflected in the policy framework.

The health and wellbeing of the population in Northern Ireland is currently guided by two key strategies. *'Transforming Your Care'* seeks to deliver a safe, resilient and sustainable health care service. The aim of *'Making Life Better – A Whole System Strategic Framework for Public Health'* is to achieve better health and wellbeing for everyone and reduced inequalities in health. IPH believes this research and development policy framework should reflect the strategic direction of health and social care services and measures to promote health and wellbeing in Northern Ireland. Delivery of services and improvement in health protection and disease prevention will only be achieved where timely and relevant research is undertaken.

Cooperation with other jurisdictions

It is important that the policy framework makes provision for studies across the five nations (UK and Ireland) to facilitate comparisons of different health and social care systems, including natural experiments. This type of research would be particularly informative in the context of cross-border health and social care services planning and delivery, which is increasing aspect of service delivery between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

IPH would also recommend that the policy framework considers the approaches outlined in the Health Research Board Strategy 2016-2020. The Health Research Board (HRB) has identified three focus areas, (i) Address major health challenges; (ii) Support healthcare interventions; (iii) Address the research needs of the Irish health and social care system. It will be important to consider the strategic direction of the HRB in conjunction with the research and development strategies from other UK countries to determine and how these can complement and support the implementation of the new policy framework.

¹ DHSSPS (2016) Research for Better Health and Social Care. Belfast: DHSSPS