An Roinn Leanaí
agus Gnóthaí Óige

Department of
Children and Youth Affairs

National Strategy for Research and Data on Children's Lives 2011 - 2016

SUMMARY

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SUMMARY

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Minister's Foreword

It gives me great pleasure to be associated with this important policy document, which sets out a strategic direction and comprehensive action plan for research and data on children's lives in Ireland for the next five years. The availability and use of accurate information is essential if children's lives are to be better understood and, through that, improved. While many important developments have taken place in recent years, some gaps in our understandings about children's lives remain and this strategy will go some way towards filling those. This strategic approach will help to ensure the continued development of our knowledge on children's lives through the implementation of a systematic, harmonised and coordinated approach to research and data.

Good information is essential and can help us to understand how children and young people are developing, as well as assisting us in identifying the impacts of various policies and services on their lives. A more strategic approach to knowledge about children's lives can also help us to identify the most effective ways to intervene in their lives and to ensure that this knowledge is used by those in a position to make changes.

One of the key messages in this strategy is to make the most use possible of existing data and information. An important aspect of the strategy will be ensuring that data from the *Growing up in Ireland*, National Longitudinal Study of Children is used by as many researchers as possible. The study follows the progress of approximately 8,500 9-year-olds and 11,000 9-month-olds, and its main aim is to provide information about how children in Ireland are growing and developing within the social, economic and cultural environment.

It is clear that the commitment of my own Department to improving understandings of children's lives is mirrored by other stakeholders and I would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone who has contributed to the development of the policy. As Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, I will work with my Government colleagues to ensure implementation of this strategy in order to improve the lives of children and young people.

Frances Fitzgerald, TD
Minister for Children and Youth Affairs

Secretary General's Foreword

The recent Government decision to create a Department of Children and Youth Affairs, which incorporates the functions of a number of policy areas on children and youth (such as early childhood care and education, youth justice, child welfare and protection, children and young people's participation, research on children and young people, youth work and cross-cutting initiatives for children), provides a key infrastructure through which evidence can be at the centre of policy and practice around children's lives.

The National Strategy for Research and Data on Children's Lives, 2011-2016 has been prepared by the Research Unit of the Department. The development of the strategy emerged from a number of policy initiatives. These include the work of the National Statistics Board towards building an Irish Statistical System and a Government decision for all Departments to take a more strategic approach to their data holdings, in particular to develop and publish a data strategy. More recently, a commitment was given in the social partnership agreement *Towards 2016* for the development and publication of a National Data Strategy on Children's Lives. The inclusion of *both data and research* in the current strategy is an explicit recognition of the importance of attaining a comprehensive insight into children's lives.

This strategy seeks to coordinate and mobilise research and data across a range of important bodies in order to achieve a better understanding of children's lives. It is, therefore, of relevance to a wide variety of stakeholders. The strategy sets an Action Plan under 5 key objectives encompassing 8 action areas, many of which focus on improved use of existing data and information holdings.

Development of the strategy over the period 2007-2011 was overseen by a cross-departmental, multi-sectoral Steering Group, chaired by the Director General of the former Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs. The strategy's development took account of a wide range of evidence and, crucially, incorporated extensive consultation with stakeholders, including statutory bodies, the research community, service delivery practitioners and children and young people themselves. This consultative and participative approach is reflected in the Action Plan in which more than 20 organisations have committed to take part in implementation.

This implementation will be overseen by an Interagency Steering Group. The Department of Children and Youth Affairs is responsible for specific actions in the strategy and will have an oversight role in relation to delivery of the overall Action Plan. The other organisations that have undertaken to carry out certain actions will be responsible for the delivery of these items. We will, however, continue to work closely with them and with other stakeholders to ensure that the Action Plan is delivered and reported on in a manner that provides clear evidence for planning, monitoring and evaluating policy and services for children and young people. This strategy will play an important part in informing policy and practice developments by facilitating the creation, synthesis and transfer of the best available knowledge in the area for the purpose of ensuring services are made more effective and children's lives improved.

Jim Breslin
Secretary General
Department of Children and Youth Affairs

Introduction
by Chairperson of Steering Group

The National Strategy for Research and Data on Children's Lives 2011-2016 is the culmination of an extensive process of evidence gathering, consultation and analysis. It presents a set of objectives for improved understandings of children's lives and a detailed action plan to initiate achievement of this goal.

The development of the strategy was overseen by a cross-departmental, multi-sectoral Steering Group, chaired by myself as Director General of the former Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, now the Department of Children and Youth Affairs. The group was previously chaired by Ms. Sylda Langford, former Director General, and Ms. Bairbre Nic Aonghusa, former Director. This group included representatives from the Departments of Education and Skills, Health, Justice and Equality, and Social Protection, the Central Statistics Office and the Health Service Executive, as well as experts from The Atlantic Philanthropies and the National University of Ireland, Galway. Membership of the Steering Group is given in the Appendix.

Development of the strategy was led by the Research Unit at the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA), under the direction of Dr. Sinéad Hanafin, Head of Research, and Gillian Roche, Statistician.

The participation and insight of the Steering Group into the key issues for research and data on children relating to their area of expertise, together with their cooperation in providing a liaison point between the Research Unit and their respective organisations, greatly aided the development of the Action Plan component of the strategy.

The development adopted a consultative and participative approach that involved extensive engagement with a range of stakeholders, including policy-makers, service providers, researchers and children and young people. In that regard, we would like to acknowledge the following in particular:

- Members of the DCYA Research Team, particularly Bairbre Meaney and Anne-Marie Brooks, and National Children's Research Scholars Susie Donnelly, Elaine O'Callaghan, Danika Sharek and Ruth Geraghty.
- The Health Promotion Research Centre of the National University of Ireland, Galway, particularly Dr. Saoirse Nic Gabhainn, Pauline Clerkin and Aoife Gavin, whose work was financially supported by The Atlantic Philanthropies.
- The DCYA Children and Young People's Forum (CYPF), established to act as a reference panel and advise the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs on issues of concern to children and young people.
- The organisations and individuals who responded to the request for submissions.
- The DCYA Research Development Advisory Group, which provided valuable input to the process of development of the strategy.
- The many personnel from Government departments, agencies and other bodies that engaged with us in the development of the strategy, especially those from the 24 organisations that agreed to implement specific actions in the strategy.

We hope that the actions now to be undertaken in the implementation of this strategy will add greatly to our understandings of children's lives and thus will provide a high-quality evidence base for policy and practice, leading to improved outcomes for children and young people in Ireland.

Mary Doyle
Chairperson
Research and Data Strategy Steering Group

Overview

This research and data strategy is published in fulfilment of a commitment given in the social partnership agreement *Towards 2016* for the development and publication of a National Data Strategy on Children's Lives. The strategy has been developed in the context of substantial investment in the creation and transfer of knowledge for the purpose of improving citizen's lives. This has resulted in a growing knowledge base across many different areas and in Ireland, as elsewhere, has led to increased support and concern for evidence-informed policy and practice.

The initial intention in developing this strategy was to focus on data only, particularly on official and other statistical holdings, as has been the case with strategies developed by other Government departments. This strategy goes beyond this type of approach and both aligns and mobilises key issues of relevance to *both research and data* around children's lives. In doing so, it provides a framework for improving understandings of children's lives across all sectors, including policy-makers, service providers, researchers, children, families and communities. The inclusion of both data and research is an explicit recognition of the importance of achieving a comprehensive understanding of children's lives. Although there is much overlap between research and data, in general, agendas have evolved separately from each other and issues arising are usually addressed in different fora and through individual strategic developments.

The following definitions of research and data have been adopted:
- Research is defined as '*the search for new knowledge using scientific methodologies and approaches*' (Iwaniec, 1998).
- Data is defined as '*the physical representation of information in a manner suitable for communication, interpretation or processing by human beings or by automatic means*' (Eurostat, Concepts and Definitions Database).

The recent Government decision to create a Department of Children and Youth Affairs, which incorporates a number of policy areas on children and youth people (such as early childhood care and education, youth justice, child protection and welfare, children and young people's participation, research on children and young people, youth work and cross-cutting initiatives for children), provides an important infrastructure through which evidence can be at the centre of policy and practice around children's lives.

This strategy, through its Action Plan (*Chapter 5 in main report*), will play an important part in informing policy and practice developments by facilitating the creation, synthesis and transfer of the best available knowledge in the area for the purpose of ensuring children's lives benefit from research and data. While the Department of Children and Youth Affairs is responsible for certain actions in the strategy and will have an oversight role in relation to the overall action plan, individual Government departments or other organisations that have agreed to carry out specific actions in this strategy will be responsible for delivering on these.

Aim of the strategy

The aim of this strategy is to set out a plan to guide and support the development of research and data around children's lives over the next 5 years (2011-2016) for the purpose of ensuring children and young people benefit from improved understandings of their lives.

In doing so, it will work towards the development of a comprehensive and coordinated approach to the collection, compilation and dissemination of research and data on children's lives and will facilitate the utilisation of good quality, easily accessible, internationally comparable information about the lives of children in Ireland. Through these, it will contribute to the development of more informed and responsive policies and supports for the purpose of ensuring better outcomes for children and young people.

Development of strategy

A consultative and partnership approach was adopted at every stage in the development of this strategy, from the compilation of the evidence to the identification of priorities and agreement on actions to be taken. Development was overseen by a cross-departmental, multi-sectoral Steering Group, chaired by the Director General of the former Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (now the Department of Children and Youth Affairs). The Steering Group included representatives from the Departments of Education and Skills, Social Protection, Health, Justice and Equality, the Central Statistics Office and the Health Service Executive, as well as experts from The Atlantic Philanthropies and the National University of Ireland, Galway (*see Appendix*).
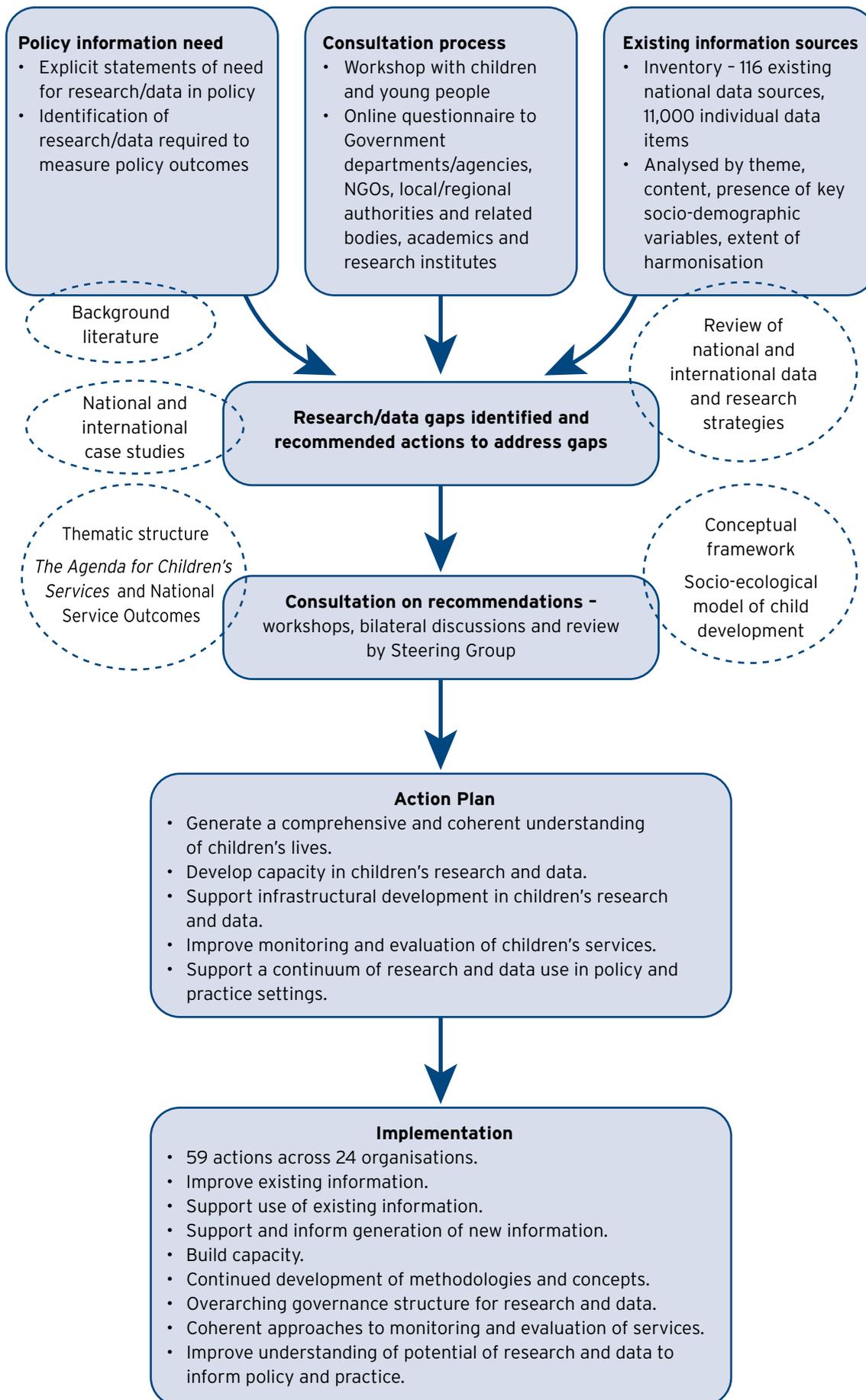
The development of this strategy is underpinned by current theoretical understandings of childhood (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 1998; Lerner, 1998) and builds on previous national developments in the area of research and data, such as the biennial reports *State of the Nation's Children* (OMC, 2006; OMCYA, 2008 and 2010), the development of a national set of child well-being indicators (Hanafin and Brooks, 2005) and *The Agenda for Children's Services: A Policy Handbook* (OMC, 2007). A systematic approach, incorporating a number of different elements, was taken to the development of the strategy, an overview of which is presented in Figure 1. The key elements were:

- **A literature review**, which identified key issues for consideration in the development of a data strategy.
- **Cross-national case studies on children's data systems**, which reported on a range of systems in Ireland, the UK, Finland, Sweden and Canada.
- **A review of existing research and data strategies**, nationally and internationally.
- **A review of national policy recommendations** with relevance to children's lives over the period 2000-2008.
- **An inventory of national data sources** with relevance to children's lives.
- **A wide-ranging consultation**, including a consultation workshop with children and young people, a public consultation process via an online questionnaire and extensive engagement with key personnel in policy, practice and research settings.

The following approach to the process of developing the strategy then took place (*see Figure 1*):

- **the identification of gaps**, or perceived gaps, in knowledge about children's lives;
- **an analytical process** that mapped the gaps identified against information known to be available, resulting in the development of a first draft of recommended actions;
- **an iterative consultative process** that took account of gaps and identification of mechanisms through which these could be met;
- **a series of bilateral discussions** with stakeholders for the purpose of reaching agreement about actions to be undertaken and implementation processes.

Figure 1: Data strategy development process

Policy information need
- Explicit statements of need for research/data in policy
- Identification of research/data required to measure policy outcomes

Consultation process
- Workshop with children and young people
- Online questionnaire to Government departments/agencies, NGOs, local/regional authorities and related bodies, academics and research institutes

Existing information sources
- Inventory – 116 existing national data sources, 11,000 individual data items
- Analysed by theme, content, presence of key socio-demographic variables, extent of harmonisation

Background literature

Review of national and international data and research strategies

Research/data gaps identified and recommended actions to address gaps

National and international case studies

Thematic structure
The Agenda for Children's Services and National Service Outcomes

Conceptual framework
Socio-ecological model of child development

Consultation on recommendations – workshops, bilateral discussions and review by Steering Group

Action Plan
- Generate a comprehensive and coherent understanding of children's lives.
- Develop capacity in children's research and data.
- Support infrastructural development in children's research and data.
- Improve monitoring and evaluation of children's services.
- Support a continuum of research and data use in policy and practice settings.

Implementation
- 59 actions across 24 organisations.
- Improve existing information.
- Support use of existing information.
- Support and inform generation of new information.
- Build capacity.
- Continued development of methodologies and concepts.
- Overarching governance structure for research and data.
- Coherent approaches to monitoring and evaluation of services.
- Improve understanding of potential of research and data to inform policy and practice.

◯ primary inputs   ⬭ background information

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Data gaps and priorities

The forensic and systematic analysis that took place in the development of this strategy facilitated the identification of research and data gaps, existing data sources and agreement on priorities for the Action Plan. Data gaps and agreed priorities are presented according to 5 outcome areas of children's lives, which are based on the National Service Outcomes defined in *The Agenda for Children's Services*, namely – that children will be:

- healthy, both physically and mentally;
- supported in active learning;
- safe from accidental and intentional harm, and secure in the immediate and wider physical environment;
- economically secure;
- part of positive networks of family, friends, neighbours and community, and included and participating in society.

In addition, 4 key issues that cut across research and data needs in all areas of children's lives were identified:

- development of a national strategic approach to information around children's lives;
- improvement of administrative data systems;
- building capacity across all areas of research and data development, particularly analytic capability;
- supporting evidence-informed policy and practice.

Gaps and priorities identified are now presented according to the 5 outcome areas of children's lives.

Outcome Area 1: Children will be healthy, both physically and mentally

This outcome area refers to growth and development, as well as physical and mental health across the lifecycle – from prenatal, through infancy, early and middle childhood, and adolescence. Mortality, morbidity and disability are given consideration here, along with issues of relevance to access, availability, utilisation and evaluation of primary, secondary and tertiary healthcare services.

RESEARCH AND DATA PRIORITIES

A number of data gaps were found in terms of children's health and the following areas in particular were identified as priorities for developments in research and data:

- The need to track children's health status over time.
- The evaluation of health services in terms of their capacity to meet children's needs, both in terms of direct health outcomes and the broader impact on their lives.
- The ability to disaggregate data by key population groups.
- Specific topics for further investigation included:
  - reporting on health status, health promotion initiatives and health surveillance mechanisms for children and young people;
  - mental and emotional health status of children and young people, and the impact on their lives;
  - children's behaviours around nutrition and physical activity, the impact on their physical growth and development, and the services and structures to support them;
  - sexual health and related behaviours.

Outcome Area 2: Children will be supported in active learning

Cognitive development, educational commitment, participation, attainment and achievement are all taken into account under this outcome area. It also includes areas of relevance to educational services provided in early child care, primary and secondary, and out-of-school settings. Outcomes, supports and services for children with additional learning needs are also considered under this outcome area.

RESEARCH AND DATA PRIORITIES

A substantial deficit, identified previously in the *Data Strategy* of the Department of Education and Science (2008), exists in data systems on children's learning pathways and outcomes due to the lack of an integrated learner database. Topics identified as key deficits in our knowledge of children's learning outcomes included:

- factors affecting attendance, retention/progression and early school leaving;
- long-term impacts of early learning experiences;
- learning pathways and outcomes in non-traditional or out-of-school settings;
- the impact of arts, cultural and sporting activity on learning;
- services and supports for general education attainment, in particular for those children with a learning or intellectual disability;
- behavioural issues, both pro- and anti-social, in educational settings;
- measures of literacy and numeracy at key stages and by key characteristics.

Outcome Area 3: Children will be safe from accidental and intentional harm, and secure in the immediate and wider physical environment

Children's safety in the home, community and broader environment, along with other settings, are considered here, including non-accidental harm. Risk behaviours are taken into account and crimes committed by, and against, young people are also reflected under this outcome area. In addition, preventive, protective and remedial services are considered, with a particular focus on describing, documenting, identifying and evaluating interventions.

RESEARCH AND DATA PRIORITIES

Of the data gaps identified in terms of children's safety, the following areas were identified as being priorities for developments:

- rates of occurrence of accidental injury and factors influencing these events;
- children's pathways through child protection and alternative care services, the nature of children and family interactions with the child protection system and resultant outcomes, and the immediate and longer term impact of child protection services on families and children taking account of their well-being and well-becoming;
- the suitability of the built environment in which children live, attend school and receive other services, including the availability of safe open spaces;
- the type and quality of children's interactions with the criminal justice system and pathways through the system for those who have committed offences;
- access to and quality and cost of services for children and young people.

Outcome Area 4: Children will be economically secure

This outcome area takes account of family income, of relative, consistent and persistent poverty, and of the distribution of income within the household. The impact of social welfare dependence on children's lives, along with effects of youth and adult unemployment, are considered. Public expenditure at local, regional and national level on services and supports available to children, their families and local communities are also reflected in this outcome area.

RESEARCH AND DATA PRIORITIES

Although there is significant data available on income and living conditions in Ireland, there were deficits identified in relation to our knowledge of the impact of economic circumstances on children's lives. In particular, the focus on households, rather than individuals, in income and poverty statistics makes it more difficult to assess the impact of differing income levels and availability of resources on children. The following areas have been identified as requiring further investigation:

- child-specific measures of income, poverty and deprivation;
- the family situation in which children live (including employment status of their parents/carers) and the impact this has on their outcomes;
- how the effects of low income on children's lives can be mediated by formal and informal supports and services;
- supports and services for families and the impact they have on children's economic circumstances and related outcomes;
- social inclusion issues for children living with poverty or deprivation.

Outcome Area 5: Children will be part of positive networks of family, friends, neighbours and the community, and included and participating in society

Children's experiences of stable family life are considered under this outcome and issues of relevance to family relationships are included. Children's capacity to make friends, develop relationships and understand the impact of their actions, appearance and behaviour on others (including their broader communities) are also considered here, as well as activities children and young people might be involved in, such as sporting or cultural activities. The contribution children and young people can make through volunteering is also reflected, as well as the importance of ensuring children and young people have a voice in matters that affect them.

RESEARCH AND DATA PRIORITIES

The following areas have been identified as requiring further investigation to better inform us about the diversity of children's networks, supports and participation in their communities and wider society:

- children's living situations, quality of life, rights and influences;
- pathways for children living in alternative care and the outcomes for those with differing experiences of this system;
- the different types of social participation engaged in by children and young people (e.g. cultural, sporting, social/voluntary/political structures, ICT and media) and the impact of such participation;
- services to support children's social participation, the impact of these services on their lives and the extent to which they are available to different groups of children;
- issues relating to pro-social and anti-social behaviour and the youth justice system.

Key Objectives and Action Plan

Arising from the extensive preparatory work undertaken, 5 objectives have been identified for this National Strategy for Research and Data on Children's Lives. These objectives and associated action areas, detailed in Table 1, provide a framework under which actions agreed for implementation are presented.

Table 1: Key action areas of the strategy

Objective A: To generate a comprehensive and coherent understanding of children's development, needs and appropriate supports and services	
Action area	**Action types**
1. Build and improve both survey and administrative data around children's lives.	■ Expansion of existing survey instruments in terms of population coverage, inclusion of new items, inclusion of additional classificatory variables. ■ New approaches to analysis of existing administrative datasets, e.g. more centralised analysis of locally held data.
2. Support and promote maximum use of existing information.	■ Synthesis of existing material from inspections/reports on services into key messages for service providers. ■ Linkage of administrative datasets to enable tracking of outcomes over time. ■ Analysis of existing quantitative and qualitative data on the impact of policies and practices.
3. Prioritise and inform the generation of new research and data.	■ Development of information systems in areas where deficits currently exist. ■ Increased focus on children as a priority group in existing research programmes. ■ Provision of dedicated funding and resources to research and data collection on children's lives.
Objective B: To develop research capacity in the area of children's research and data	
Action area	**Action types**
4. Build capacity in the area of children's research and data, with a particular focus on supporting quantitative analysis.	■ Continuation of existing scholarship and placement programmes. ■ Support for mechanisms to provide opportunities for engagement with key datasets and new techniques in analysis for research, policy and practice communities.
Objective C: To develop, support and promote good infrastructure in the area of children's research and data	
Action area	**Action types**
5. Contribute to and inform national developments around research and data on children's lives. Provide a mechanism for the continued development of appropriate methodologies and concepts in relation to data on children's lives.	■ National initiatives to improve harmonisation of key classificatory variables across data holdings on children's lives. ■ Review of national indicator sets on children's lives. ■ Engagement and cooperation between key agencies in relation to coordination of research and data on children's lives.
6. Develop an overarching governance structure for research around children, including ethical review.	■ Generation of guidance material for research governance. ■ Establishment of structures for increased coordination of data holdings and analysis.

Objective D: To improve monitoring and evaluation of children's services in Ireland at local and national level	
Action area	**Action types**
7. Develop coherent approaches to evaluation of access to, cost and quality of services, supports and interventions around children's lives.	■ Improved information on services for children and families. ■ Increased reporting on aspects of service quality. ■ Generation of new information on children's usage of and access to services.
Objective E: To support a continuum of research and data use within policy and practice settings	
Action area	**Action types**
8. Improve awareness, knowledge and understanding of the potential of research and data in policy and practice settings. Contribute to change in attitudes, perceptions and ideas in relation to utilisation of information around children's lives. Provide resources and support for utilisation of research and data in policy and practice.	■ Provision of findings from research and data analysis in the form of key messages for service providers and policy-makers. ■ Improved methods of dissemination to increase access to and use of research and data. ■ Development of strategic approaches to knowledge transfer.

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A full list of references used to inform the strategy is provided in the main report.

APPENDIX: RESEARCH AND DATA STRATEGY STEERING GROUP MEMBERSHIP

Chairpersons

Ms. Mary Doyle, Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2010-2011)
Ms. Sylda Langford, Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (2008-2009)
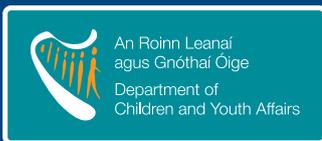Ms. Bairbre Nic Aonghusa, Office of the Minister for Children (2007)

Organisation	Representative
Research Unit, Department of Children and Youth Affairs	Dr. Sinéad Hanafin, Head of Research Ms. Anne-Marie Brooks Ms. Bairbre Meaney Ms. Gillian Roche (2009-2011)
Early Years Education Unit, Department of Children and Youth Affairs	Ms. Catherine Hynes Ms. Theresa Ryan
Child Welfare and Protection Policy Unit, Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs	Mr. Charlie Hardy (2007- 2009)
Department of Health	Mr. Alan Cahill Ms. Elaine O'Sullivan
Irish Youth Justice Service*	Mr. Barry O'Connor (2007-2008) Ms. Nicola Murphy (2009-2010) Mr. John Cole Ms. Pauline Waters
Youth Justice Unit, Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform	Mr. Gavin McDonagh (2007-2008) Ms. Sandra Smyth (2007-2008)
Office for Social Inclusion/Social Inclusion Unit, Department of Social Protection	Mr. Eamon Moran (2008-2009) Mr. Aonghus Horgan (2009-2010) Dr. Kasey Treadwell Shine Ms. Joanne Mulholland
Department of Education and Skills	Mr. Tom Healy
Health Service Executive*	Ms. Cate Hartigan (2007) Mr. Barry McGinn (2008-2009) Mr. John McCusker
Central Statistics Office	Mr. Gerry O'Hanlon (2007) Mr. Gerry Brady (2007-2009) Mr. John Dunne
The Atlantic Philanthropies	Mr. Tom Costello (2007-2010) Ms. Jane Forman
National University of Ireland, Galway*	Dr. Saoirse Nic Gabhainn

* Represented by alternates at certain meetings

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