



An Roinn Sláinte  
Department of Health

# Statement of Priorities

Health & Social Care Research 2023-2025





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## Purpose of this Statement

This statement of research priorities identifies emerging contexts, challenges, and opportunities for Irish public health. The intent of this statement is to synthesize the Department's research priorities into one high-level document for the purposes of facilitating a clearer pathway for research into healthcare policy. In the spirit of *Impact 2030: Ireland's National Research and Innovation Strategy*, this statement provides the transparency to the Department's research needs, allowing policy and research to speak to one another more easily. The document recognises the reciprocal role that research and policy must play in shaping each other. The aim of this statement is not to dictate an exhaustive list of the types of research that should be funded; rather, it is as a signpost for research bodies and researchers looking to conduct research directly linked to public policy.

It should be noted, the Department of Health is one of the top five funding Departments in Ireland. At a European level, Ireland has participated very successfully in accessing European research funding. For Horizon 2020, Ireland submitted nearly 18,000 applications across all work programmes, with a success rate of 14.7% against an EU average of 12%. Funding secured in the health cluster was the highest of all sectoral clusters. These priorities are designed to build on this success, guiding Irish researchers into area of health innovation that will stand to advances not only in Ireland, but on a European and global level.

The research priorities that follow were identified through a synthesis of government, European, and international strategies. Input was also sought across the Department of Health and from key health research supporting agencies including the Health Research Board, the Health Service Executive, and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation, and Science. Recognising the necessity of coordinating health research with the documented health needs of the population, this statement draws on policy imperatives identified in the 'Programme for Government: Our Shared Future', the Department



of Health's 'Statement of Strategy 2021-2023', the 'Sláintecare Implementation Strategy and Action Plan 2021-2023', as well as pertinent policies and strategies in priority areas. This statement is also framed by flagship European and international initiatives such as the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals, the WHO's 'European Programme of Work: 2020-2025: United Action for Better Health', and EU4Health 2021-2027: a vision for a healthier European Union. Five key research areas are identified: Population Health, Health System Reform, Aging Well Studies, Health System Resilience and Pandemic Preparedness, and the Future of Healthcare. These areas, where applicable, are broken down into further sub-categories to provide richer context.

As the aim of our healthcare system is to promote health equality, the Department places priority value on research that explores underserved populations and their unmet health needs. These populations include, but are not limited to, medical card holders, non-native English speakers, Travellers, refugees, women, LGBTIQ+, children, individuals with low levels of literacy, individuals with a disability, and border and rural residents. Studies that do not focus explicitly on these groups are encouraged to use these groups for sub-category analysis to provide a broader socio-demographic picture. These categories should not exclude under addressed topics in areas such as sexual health or men's health, where investigation into much needed areas, such as men's mental health, are welcome.

Any exercise in research prioritisation carries an implicit risk of being restrictive. However, all publicly funded research has a mandate to allocate limited resources to areas that potentially have the greatest impact on public good. Acknowledging that balance, this statement of priorities is not programmatic but indicative. This statement does not preclude research that may address unanticipated challenges or result in transformative discoveries. Funding open research calls will remain a key part of healthcare research.



## **The Delivery of Health Research**

The Department of Health delivers and supports research across several sectors. Internally, through our Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Service (IGEES), the Research Services and Policy Unit produces evidenced-based papers for units across the health sector. Sample research areas addressed by IGEES include Strategic Workforce Planning, Current & Capital Expenditure Appraisal, Population Health & Behavioural Science, Population Based Resource Allocation, and Entitlement Expansion.

The Health Services Executive also supports significant research within the Irish healthcare system. The Health Research Board, the Department's lead funding agency, sponsors research across the healthcare sector that supports both infrastructure and people. This included clinical trials, investigator-led research, and research for public policy. The Department also works with the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) to ensure its research work is linked across government initiatives and has maximum impact on a European and national level. In this capacity, the Department participates in DFHERIS's Impact 2030 Steering Group and Implementation Forum and also sits on the Horizon 2030 High-Level Group.

## **Types of Research**

The Department of Health seeks research that is action-orientated and addresses public policy needs. Research can accomplish this through several approaches. It can, for example, range from longitudinal studies, clinical studies, costing analyses, case studies, to assessment tool development. These studies can come from number of disciplines. Indeed, in areas where research would benefit significantly from expertise that exists in other disciplines, such as climate change, interdisciplinary studies are highly encouraged. Collaborations can take the form of research performed on an 'all-island', north-south, east-west basis



and among institutions. Research that speaks to the *Shared Island Initiative*, examining north-south services with a look to future collaboration, would be welcome. The Department has made a commitment to increasing public/patient engagement in public policy development and research. Research projects that aim to include patient partners in research, would be fully supported.

Clinical trials play an important role in the overall health research landscape, as increased access to clinical trials improve patient outcomes. Ireland has made a commitment to increasing its clinical trial capacity. Expanding our national clinical trial landscape has been an important component of this work. The recent expansion of National Research Ethics Committees and increased funding of the Cancer Clinical Trial Networks are an example of this growth. The Department will continue to promote clinical trials as part of its overall research agenda.

## **Building on Best Practice**

The COVID pandemic thrust this nation and the world into a period of learning and development. Some of the great advances made need to be interrogated to ensure we have captured all the important lessons learned. Looking ahead, we will also need to prepare for the future pandemics we may face. The European Health Emergency and Preparedness Response Authority (HERA), has at a European level, identified the promotion of research on medical countermeasures and related technologies as a key future-proofing task. The Department has also made a funding commitment through the Health Research Board to supporting research in the areas of Public Health and Pandemic Preparedness to increase Irish research in this area.

Innovation in health research, requires drawing from the knowledge that is available around the world. Evidence synthesis and evaluating current information systems remains an integral part of our broader research agenda, as they these tools often serve as the most rapid answer to the immediate questions we face.



This Statement does not intend to diminish these critical areas of work, rather it strives to build upon them – harnessing the power of information available, while also providing a supported pathway for new ideas and developments moving forward.

Ensuring that our research is informed by best practice and globally innovative, requires Ireland to remain connected to developments across the world. Participating in European and international partnerships is an essential piece of our research agenda. The Department encourages partnerships that facilitate information exchanges and collaborative learning opportunities with partners across Europe and the world.

## **Enabling Infrastructure**

Building structures that support transparency and information access allow us to more rapidly respond to policy needs and ultimately maximises research impact. Open data sources and biobanks are examples of infrastructural tools that offer significant value to the future of Irish healthcare. Biobanks, for example, centralise data allowing researchers to develop a better picture of diseases, which in turn allows for a more rapid response. The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that biobanks can serve as a key resource in designing powerful interventions. Biobanks enabled the development of vaccines in record time and allowed researchers to track their effectiveness. The Department of Health, therefore, welcomes the development and utilization of these tools.



## Priority Research Areas

Innovation in health research requires a flexible approach to identifying areas of study that are of maximum value to a changing society. Nevertheless, given the identified priorities the State now faces, the following five topics have been selected as key areas for research.

### 1. Population Health

The Department encourages research on population health, particularly in the areas of mental health, public health, behaviour and cultural insights studies, and women's health.

#### 1.1 MENTAL HEALTH

The WHO's PAN-European Mental Health Coalition has helped drive the imperative for further mental health research across Europe. Caring for and supporting those facing mental health challenges is a priority for the people of Ireland. 'Sharing the Vision' is the new 10-year policy designed to improve mental health outcomes. It recognises the need for a whole-of-population, whole-of-government approach to the delivery of mental health services. Although it was published before the Covid-19 pandemic, implementation of the policy has taken on a new urgency given the impact the pandemic on mental health.

#### 1.2 NONCOMMUNICABLE DISEASES (NCDS)

Considerable progress has been made in Ireland to address lifestyle risks and ensure better detection, treatment, and control of noncommunicable diseases (NCDs). Heart disease, asthma, diabetes, and COPD are just some examples of the NCDs that remain prevalent in Irish society. As the *EU4Health 2021-2021 Initiative* has shown, addressing chronic diseases requires research not only into the diseases themselves, but also into effective health promotion strategies to increase public knowledge about these diseases and their treatments.





Cancer remains one of the leading NCDs, holding its place as the second leading cause of death in Europe. Ireland has a critical role to play in the advancement of cancer treatment studies and has made a commitment to this through the *National Cancer Strategy*. Hosting cancer clinical trials are a major part of this work. We will continue to invest in clinical research trials and structural developments, such as the formation of the National Cancer Clinical Trials Network and the Cancer Consortium, to ensure Ireland remains at the forefront of cancer research studies.

### **1.3 BEHAVIOURAL AND CULTURAL INSIGHTS (BCIS)**

Behavioural and cultural insights (BCIs) acknowledge the wider cultural, political, psychological, and economic factors that can affect health and well-being. Incorporating BCIs to achieve both healthy lifestyles and positive engagement with health services is a flagship priority in the WHO 'United Action for Better Health' European Programme of Work (2020-2025). BCI studies could, for example, explore the behavioural and cultural barriers to and drivers of health behaviours and practices; monitor the application of BCIs in current health systems; uncover ways BCI data can be incorporated into health policy; or analyse methods to better promote BCIs role in informing individual health choices.

### **1.4 HEALTH INEQUALITIES**

Health inequalities are linked to social and economic disparities and contribute to unequal healthcare outcomes and mortality rates. Addressing health inequalities is a key focus of international health research. The OECD's Health Committee's recent Programme of Work includes a focus on 'Measuring and Addressing Inequalities in Healthcare Access, Quality and Outcomes'. Ireland remains committed to supporting these efforts and welcomes research that is focused on addressing health inequalities in the Irish healthcare system.



### **1.5 WOMEN'S HEALTH**

In recent years, greater understanding of the specific health needs of women and the inequalities faced by groups of women in Irish society – including Traveller women, migrant women and women experiencing violence – has demonstrated the need for a coordinated focus on women's health. Further, the World Health Organisation (WHO) recognises that the social construction of gender identity and unbalanced power relations between women and men affect the health-seeking behaviour and healthcare access of women and men in different ways. Women and men, because of their biological differences and gender roles, also have different health needs and face different barriers in achieving good health.

Nationally, the focus on improving women's health over the last two decades has primarily been on maternal health and reproductive services. Research into areas related to these areas, exploring equity of access to termination of pregnancy, the expansion of IVF services and endometriosis can be used to inform policy developments in these areas. In coming years, this focus must be broadened to include areas such as health behaviour and service access for women in marginalised populations, as well as menopause support.

## **2. Health System Reform**

The importance of the principles of Sláintecare, such as the centrality of the patient; the provision of timely, needs-based care; a focus on prevention and public health; and engagement with citizens and staff, were clearly demonstrated through the COVID-19 emergency. These principles will remain a key focus of our health system as we continue to face COVID-19 challenges in the immediate future. Health system reform aims to address these aims by exploring topics such as integrated healthcare delivery, enhanced community care and population-based allocation. In addition to these areas, health system reform should also address key areas of health infrastructure and digital health.



### **2.1 HEALTH INFRASTRUCTURE**

Additional pressures due to increasing demands for services, driven by a growing and ageing population, will also be a concern. The reductions of waitlist times remains a key policy focus. We need the right infrastructure – people, buildings – to deliver the right services. Studies into workforce planning that could be used to supplement research completed by Department and HSE staff would be welcome. We also need to rethink how we deliver these services. We welcome research that seeks to reduce agency costs, improve rostering, promote enhance safe staffing structures. Research in areas such as the provision of universal healthcare, the delivery of community care, the implementation of regional health areas, the practice of screening and immunisation, and the accessibility of health services. There also the important areas of governance, financing, resource allocation, payment mechanisms, insurance, and sustainability.

### **2.2 DIGITAL HEALTH**

Improved digital health technologies are vital to the delivery of modern healthcare services. The Department is committed to improving Ireland's digital health infrastructure and is currently developing a refreshed eHealth Strategy. Research into technologies that would improve Ireland digital health capabilities would help support the objectives of this revised strategy.

## **3. Aging Well Studies**

Ireland is projected to have one of the fastest ageing populations in Europe. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a disproportionate effect on the well-being of older people. Those living on their own and those residing in nursing homes have keenly felt the effects of pandemic. For these reasons, valuable studies into positive aging, such as those outlined in Age-friendly Ireland, are essential to future planning.

Living longer poses challenges, including living with chronic disease, isolation, cognitive loss and financial hardship. Service use and the care needs of older



populations differ significantly from younger populations. A critical question to consider is whether our society is adequately prepared for this challenge. Evidence shows that it is possible to live longer with a good quality of life by developing healthy lifestyles and enhancing social capital in our families, communities and society. As such, further research in areas such as eHealth and assistive technologies, talk therapies, town planning, housing needs, air pollution and respiratory diseases, and loneliness and isolation would help inform future policy.

#### **4. Health System Resilience and Pandemic Preparedness**

*The National Risk Assessment* by the Department of the Taoiseach and the Office of Emergency Planning has identified a number of high-level threats that have a specific relevance to the health system: demographic change (i.e. an aging population as referenced above); pandemics; antimicrobial resistance; and climate change. The Department encourages research that seeks to address these challenges or other research which seeks to strengthen health system resilience against unanticipated shocks.

##### **4.1 PANDEMIC PREPAREDNESS**

The fundamental importance of pandemic preparedness has been re-enforced through the experience of COVID-19. We need to continue to study potential pandemics scenarios and design informed responses to ensure we are future proofing our health policy. Research should also take stock and build from the valuable lessons learned from the recent pandemic, including embedding innovation into everyday practice and the continued evaluation of new health technologies, particularly in the areas of surveillance and diagnostic testing.

##### **4.2 ANTIMICROBIAL RESISTANCE (AMR)**

Antimicrobial resistance (AMR) has been recognised as one of the greatest potential threats to human health. Ireland will address the challenge of antimicrobial resistance by mobilising the resources of a 'One Health' approach. To



ensure that the State is adequately prepared for the challenge of AMR, we encourage research in behavioural change initiatives promoting the growth of optimal antimicrobial environments; approaches to prescribing and reducing antimicrobial consumption; and analysis of sources, fate, and transport of antimicrobial residues in the environment. The Department of Health and the Department of Agriculture Food and Marine, have agreed in partnership with their corresponding state agencies to support Irish entry into a Horizon Europe Partnership on One/Health AMR that will see European funding made available to Irish researchers working in this area.

Additionally, we encourage research into Infection Prevention and Control (IPC) measures where there are gaps in the evidence base. Specially their direct benefit to patients, feasibility and cost effectiveness. In particular, research is welcomed on the relationship between air quality and IPC in transmission dynamics, patient outcomes and reducing risk to healthcare workers.

#### **4.3 CLIMATE CHANGE**

Climate change is a globally pervasive phenomenon that represents a significant threat to human health. The Department of Health has identified six main climate scenarios with the most profound health implications. Research in this area might focus on UV radiation and carcinoma, air pollution and COPD, heat mortality and zoonotic pathogens, and infrastructure resilience in the face of flooding events. Capturing the health benefits from modal shift and other adaptation measures will also be important.

### **5. Future of Healthcare**

As challenges facing the Irish health sector change, our response will evolve and benefit from advances in medical science. There are, however, a few key areas that merit our current attention. Topics such as robotics, assisted living



technologies, remote care, digitisation and AI to support health decision making, hospital redesign, 3D printing of organs would be welcome.

### **5.1 GENETICS AND GENOMICS**

The development of the National Strategy and Genetics and Genomics in Ireland has set a new imperative to research in this area. In addition to supporting the implementation of this Strategy, the Department has also facilitated entry into Europe's 1+MG Initiative, entered two Horizon Europe Partnerships on Rare Diseases and Personalised Medicine, and facilitated entry into 18 European Reference Networks on Rare Diseases. Each of these developments have increased funding opportunities and support structures for researchers exploring these fields.

## **Conclusion**

The research areas identified in this paper are not meant to be exhaustive. Indeed, as research findings unfold and our policy needs shift, more new research areas may emerge. In the spirit of aims outlined in the National Innovation and Research Strategy, this document intends to offer proactive strategic direction to research, while also remain flexible enough to respond to new research needs. We encourage collaboration with research agencies and researchers interested in addressing these and other research priorities as they develop. We look forward to continuing to keep research at the heart of Irish health policy moving forward.