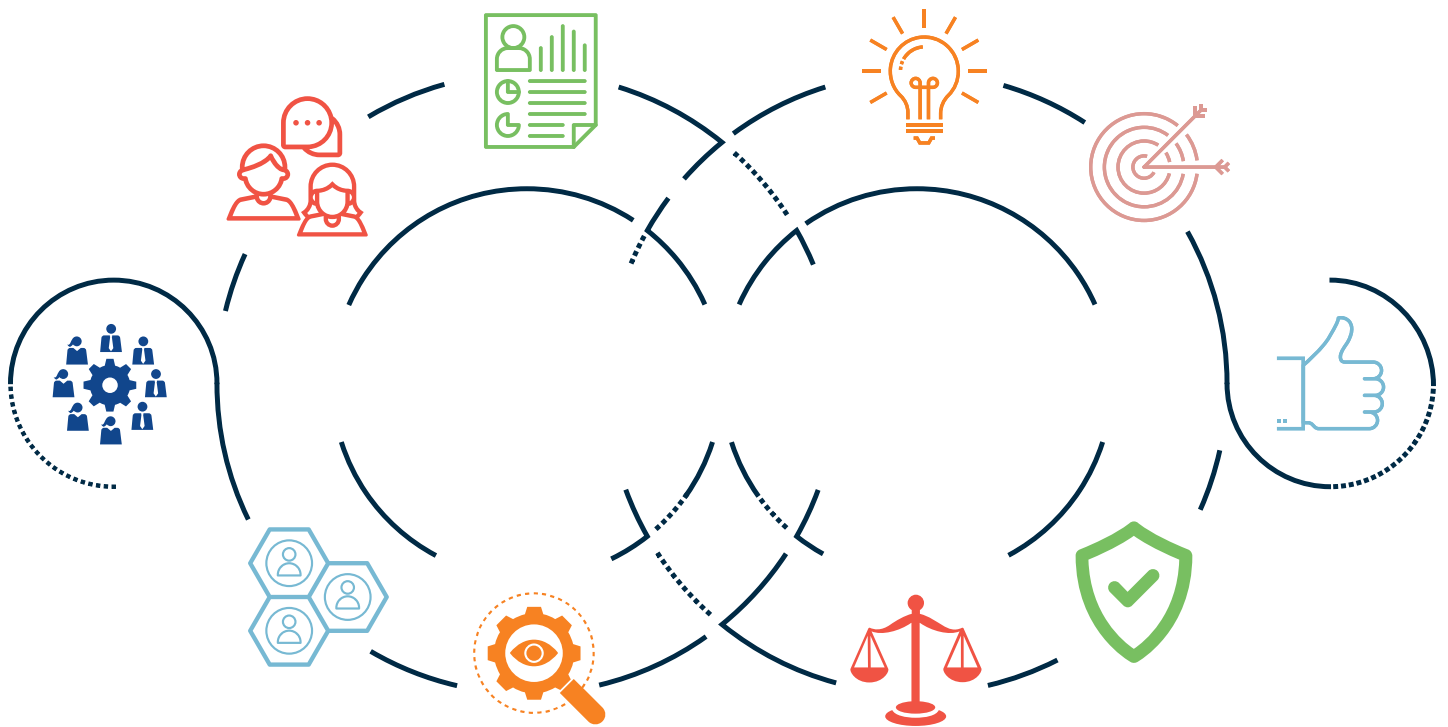


Social Work and Social Care Research, Evidence, Innovation and Improvement Strategy

Northern Ireland



**“Cultivating a culture of curiosity
and critical thinking.”**

2026 – 2031

Contents

Foreword	3
Context	5
What we mean by research innovation and improvement	7
Our way of working	8
Our Vision Framework	10
What each of our six pillars mean	11
How will we know if we have made a difference	18
Conclusion	19

Foreword

The Northern Ireland Social Care Council (the Social Care Council) is proud to launch this *Social Work and Social Care Research, Improvement and Innovation Strategy 2026 2031* (the Strategy). It has been co designed in partnership with social workers and social care practitioners from across a range of organisations and sectors, other related professions, academics, people with lived experience and carers. We want the Strategy to be clear and understood by all.

Social workers and social care practitioners are part of the wider health and social care family concerned with the wellbeing of society. They are also employed in a range of justice, education and community and voluntary sectors. Using a compassionate, relationship-based approach, underpinned by social justice and human rights, they share many tasks to safeguard and empower individuals, families and communities to fulfil their potential and to live their best life. Supports provided include physical, social and emotional dimensions, supported by autonomy and choice of the individual. Both disciplines must adhere to their profession's [**Standards of Conduct and Practice**](#) and engage in continuous learning and development.

Why we believe the Strategy is important

Our work in social work and social care is complex. We need to continually reframe how we look at problems, consider different ways of working and be flexible in providing solutions. This Strategy aims to put research and evidence-informed practice at the core of how we work. In a fast changing economic, social, political and technological environment,

this will help practitioners to use the right approaches, science and technology and the right training and development to inform policy and practice, innovations and improvements.

In particular, it will help social workers and social care practitioners to:

- maintain a curious mind to discover and understand day to day problems affecting people's lives
- ensure that professional decisions are evidence based
- develop effective and evidence-based policies and training
- provide the best solutions for each individual and situation, and
- deliver confident and safe practice.

Simply, this is about us all being curious about what we do and asking straightforward questions such as 'what if?' and 'why not?' These questions are important in a learning culture. Openness to new ideas leads to greater innovation and improvement in our responses to community and individual needs. Ultimately it fosters a richer, safer and more dynamic experience for all.

Research can sometimes seem out of our reach or something that only academics have access to, this is not the case. Research is available to anyone who is curious and willing to learn. It supports the delivery of quality interventions in partnership with the people we support by:

- telling us what works and what doesn't, and
- helping us make confident and effective decisions.

The vision is that people who use our services can feel confident that social work and social care practice, innovations and improvements are informed by the best available evidence and research. This builds confidence in the profession, develops trusting relationships and offers a better outcome for everyone.

This Strategy outlines the necessary steps for creating the environment, conditions and support essential to strengthening our research activity. Our aim is to foster an enabling culture where research and evidence thrive across social work and social care.

We invite you to read, reflect on and engage with this Strategy, and consider the positive impact you can make in your own role. Research and evidence is a collective endeavour. Everyone has a part to play. By working together and building strong partnerships, we can realise our research ambitions and create meaningful, lasting change.



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tracy Reid'.

Tracy Reid
**Chief Executive,
Social Care Council**



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'David Hayes'.

Professor David Hayes
**Chair,
Research and Evidence Partnership**

Context

Over the past ten years in Northern Ireland there were two previous research strategies (2015 2020 and 2020 2025),¹ that led to coordinated activities with positive impacts. As a result, we have built a range of cross sector and cross-country social work and social care research networks; developed relevant research training for social workers and people with lived experience and carers; hosted an annual research conference and generated discussions on identifying research priorities. Our research activities have grown, with a significant number of social workers now securing post-qualifying masters and doctoral awards. Many of our research activities are recognised both nationally and internationally.

Whilst research activities have grown, more work is still needed. We live in a climate of economic and financial pressures and increasing demands on the workforce. This highlights the need to make best use of available resources through the use of evidence-informed practice. We need to recognise the valuable contribution made by social work and care practitioners and support them to become more involved in continuous professional learning and training and to generate their curiosity for research and evidence.

New opportunities for increased momentum and energy have emerged through two key developments. Firstly, the Social Care Council now holds a defined strategic leadership role in relation to research. Secondly, social care, like social work, has become a regulated workforce. Together, these developments create a stronger foundation for elevating research, evidence and professional practice across the sector.

About the Social Care Council and its strategic research role

The Social Care Council as a non-departmental body is accountable to the Office of Social Services at the Department of Health (DoH). Its role is to make a difference to the quality of social care services by regulating workforce standards and promoting continuous training and learning. This work supports the development of a strong and professional social work and social care workforce, providing quality care and best outcomes for people who use services and their carers.

The Social Care Council's *Strategic Plan (2023 2027)*² stresses the need for a stronger evidence base, better data, and a robust research and evidence infrastructure, and placed emphasis on the importance of innovation and improvement.

In 2023 the Social Care Council took on the strategic role for social work and social care research. In the same year the Research and Evidence Partnership was established as a Committee of the Social Council Board. This partnership draws on the expertise of a diverse group of stakeholders, health and social care, education, justice, institutes of higher education, community and voluntary and the independent sector. Its role is to steer this Strategy, set priorities, identify resources and influence and guide member organisations to nurture an inclusive culture for social work and social care research and evidence related activities.

¹ Previous research strategies, see: nisc.info/our-research-publications.

² Social Care Council Strategic Plan (2023 2027), see: nisc.info/app/uploads/2023/01/Strategic-Plan-AW.pdf.

The decision that this Strategy applies equally to the social work and social care workforce reflects the fact that both professions are subject to compulsory registration by the Social Care Council, though on different timelines. Social work as a profession has been regulated since 2005 whilst regulation of the social care profession has been phased, commencing for some in 2012, and completed in 2018.

This need for high quality research and evidence is echoed within a number of strategic drivers (see examples below), recent policy and reform agendas specifically for adult and children’s social care and a number of strategic documents to support learning and improvement and leadership of the social work and social care workforce.

Our overarching aim is to ensure that the outcomes we pursue and the activities we deliver align closely with the needs of those who receive, lead, develop and deliver social work and social care services.

Strategic drivers

[Programme for Government \(PfG\) \(2024 2027\)](#)

[DoH, Adult and Children’s Social Care](#)

[DoH, Social Care Workforce Strategy \(2025 2035\)](#)

[DoH, OSS, A Learning and Improvement Strategy](#)

[DoH, Social Work Leadership Framework \(2022\)](#)



What we mean by research, innovation and improvement

Research



The word research can be broken down for clarity. **“Re”** means **“again”**. **“Search”** means to look closely, test, or probe. It means being curious about what we are doing. Asking clear, relevant questions and using systematic, ethical methods to generate evidence.

Improvement



Improvement is about looking at what matters to people, what would add value. Testing changes and learning from what works. It means, making the experience more positive. It can save time, resources and improve outputs.

Innovation



Innovation means bringing about new ideas, creating or adapting better ways of doing things. Like research, it can also test ideas and discard what doesn't work. Innovation is not confined to technology but can include novel ideas and approaches.

Quality improvement



Quality improvement is a systematic approach for solving a simple or difficult issue. It means developing ideas and testing, using faster cycles and methods than research, using data and experiences to learn and adapt.

Other useful terms

Evaluation means asking probing questions, similar to research, in order to judge a service or inform how best it should be delivered. Practice must be ethical but without the need for formal ethical approval.

Implementation means completing the task by putting evidence-based research into practice through planned processes and supports. It also helps to track progress and can adapt when needed.

Systematic reviews mean the collation of evidence on a topic summarising the results from multiple studies. They remain a strong source of evidence.

Our way of working

We believe that **human rights and social justice** should be at the heart of evidence-based social work and social care research. In developing our values and principles, we have committed to a people-centred approach that guides all we do.



These values underpin our commitment to removing barriers to involvement in research, innovation and improvement.

Our **principles** are:

Creativity

Humility

Courage

Collective
action

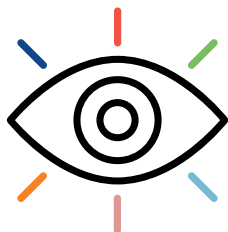
They reflect our intent to meet people where they are and hold a clear vision for real inclusion and social justice.

We will:

- **Work collaboratively**, to share knowledge and resources to strengthen the quality and effect of our actions.
- **Support change**, drawing on strong leadership and organisational backing, valuing everybody's contribution.
- Ensure that any actions taken are in line with **ethical standards and social justice**, upholding human dignity.
- Promote **quality, integrity, rigour and excellence** in all aspects of the research process.
- Adapt to emerging needs and technologies, including Artificial Intelligence (AI), while maintaining **professional standards and ethics** that underpin public trust in research evidence.
- Increase **accessibility of research**, using plain language summaries, digital platforms and easy to use tools to support of those delivering and receiving services.
- **Navigate potential challenges**, including differing institutional priorities and communication barriers, to maximise the benefits of collaborative working.
- **Celebrate** success and learn from experience, recognising both achievements and setbacks as essential to improvement.

Our VISION

Our Research, Innovation and Improvement Framework is built on six pillars (the Six Pillar Framework). People with lived experience and carers, practitioners, leaders, managers and educators each have a vital role to play. Each pillar will demand different types and levels of activity dependent on role but all are important. Delivering on this ambition requires aligned responsibility at both an organisational and individual level.



The Six Pillar Framework



Valuing

Meaning

Research, innovation and improvement are core to everyday work.

What it looks like in practice

Using evidence to guide every day practice decisions.



Inclusion

Equality, equity, diversity and inclusion are built in to all that we do.

Ensuring research reflects all groups, removing barriers to participation.



Systems

Structured, visible systems support research at every level.

Providing clear plans for different roles and functions.



Implementation

Turning ideas into real change.

Carrying out small pilot programmes, checking what works and scaling innovation.



Ownership

Staff, people with lived experience and carers all feel included in the research and evidence process.

Giving voice to and valuing ideas from all contributors.



Nurture

Build a research mindset from the start of learning and development and onward. Keep curiosity alive.

Offer continuous learning, mentorship and co-production opportunities.

What the six pillars mean and what we will do together to make the vision real

Valuing research, innovation and improvement in practice

This Strategy promotes the value and necessity of research for social work and social care. Research and evidence drive innovation and improvement. It will help shape the strategic and operational direction for research including setting priorities.



What this means for people with lived experience and carers

- Care is more personalised and effective.
- Support is based on approaches that have been tested, evaluated and informed by the latest evidence, reducing variability and improving reliability of care.

- Professionals combine research evidence with the lived experiences, wishes and goals of people who use services.
- Practice becomes more responsive to individual strengths, cultures, identities and circumstances.
- They can expect clear explanations of why certain approaches are used and how evidence informs their care plans.
- Greater attention is paid to shared decision making that strengthens confidence in the system.
- They are invited to take part in research, co design improvements and test new ideas.
- Their expertise, based on lived experience, is valued equally alongside professional and academic knowledge.

What this means for social workers and social care practitioners

They will:

- Seek out and use accessible, up-to-date evidence including recommendations of relevant studies to inform practice.
- Reflect and discuss research within supervision, team meetings and forums to consider how available research applies to practice.
- Blend knowledge from research with professional judgement and the voices of those who receive services to deliver best care and support.
- Identify practice priorities for research, innovation and improvement with colleagues across disciplines.

What this means for managers, leaders and educators

They will:

- Make evidence available and accessible to practitioners.
 - Use research and evidence to inform policy, standards, guidance and learning and development.
 - Regularly review and update how staff work, using research to identify what needs to change.
 - Identify and communicate gaps in knowledge and areas for informing future research innovation and improvement priorities.
 - Support staff to get involved in research and service improvement initiatives.
 - Seek out partnerships and opportunities to fund research and innovation initiatives and encourage staff to get involved.
- Promote and encourage junior managers and practitioners to use evidence-informed training, guidance, standards and research briefings to inform practice.
 - Use research and evidence in decision making, reflect on this in supervision and through wider organisational systems.
 - Ensure that research and evidence reflect the requirements of post-qualifying awards within the *Professional in Practice (PiP) Framework* and the *Care in Practice (CIP) Framework* and align with identified research priorities.
 - Reflect research and evidence criteria in job specifications.



Inclusion is a foundational principle within the Strategy

Equality, equity, inclusion and diversity underpin practice. The diversity of people and communities in Northern Ireland shapes our research agenda and approach paying attention to ethnicity, race, religion, disability, age, gender and sexual orientation. Co-production needs to be consistent throughout the research process, from an early stage to the end.



What this means for people with lived experience and carers

They are confident that:

- Their values are reflected in all research activity.
- Barriers to involvement are removed and the voices of underrepresented groups are now heard.
- They can influence research priorities that reflect need.
- Research outcomes are fair, just and equitable.

What this means for social workers and social care practitioners

- There are opportunities for funded training at all levels to engage in research, innovation and improvement initiatives.
- Flexible opportunities are available (part-time, remote) to reflect different work patterns and responsibilities.
- Research outputs include plain language summaries, translations and different formats for people with sensory impairments.
- Digital platforms support easy access to research resources and tools.

What this means for managers, leaders and educators

- There are funded learning and development opportunities for practitioners at all levels to engage in research, innovation and improvement initiatives.
- There are flexible research opportunities (part-time, remote) to reflect practitioners with different work patterns and responsibilities.
- Scholarships or grants are available for underrepresented groups in social work and social care research.



Systems level approach

It is important that structured systems for research and evidence are supported at all levels of the professions of social work and social care, at individual, team, organisation, regulator and commissioner levels.



What this means for people with lived experience and carers

- In research and evidence activity, professionals and those with lived experience are on an equal footing.
- Have confidence that their input into research and evidence is recognised and valued as part of the wider systems approach.
- Lived experience knowledge is consistently integrated in practice education.
- There is meaningful acknowledgement, including remuneration, for their involvement in research related activity.

What this means for social workers and social care practitioners

- They are confident to raise evidence-based issues and ask questions on how to improve and deliver safe practice.
- They see research and related activities as integral to continuous professional development.
- They are supported to identify research priorities from a practice perspective.

What this means for managers, leaders and educators

- There is a coordinated approach between wider organisational strategies across health, social care and justice organisations, and wider Programme for Government (PfG) including the identification of research priorities that inform practice.
- Research and evidence are embedded as appropriate, in business plans, policies and procedures, funding and governance. arrangements for research, innovation and service development.
- Organisational networking and collaborations are fostered to integrate multiple perspectives on issues related to professional practice.
- Structured partnership working is strengthened between research institutions and service managers about knowledge transfer and implementation.
- There is synergy between research and quality improvement initiatives.
- Research funding is secured aligned to regionally agreed research priorities.

Implementation and evaluation

Implementation is the process of turning the strategic plan into action. This requires research leadership at all levels. Evaluation involves measuring if the identified actions have met the aims of this Strategy.



What this means for people with lived experience and carers

- Outcomes for those who use social work and social care services are improved.
- They are valued as equal partners in implementing and evaluating Strategy initiatives and regarded as active, rather than passive, recipients.

What this means for social workers and social care practitioners

They:

- Are familiar with the Strategy and understand their role in relation to embedding it in practice.
- Engage with the Strategy at induction and throughout their careers.
- Use the Strategy as a tool for career development.
- Are confident in identifying opportunities and barriers about Strategy implementation.

What this means for managers, leaders and educators

They:

- Support and encourage evidence-based policy.
- Prioritise continuous testing and evaluation of initiatives and outcomes as outlined in implementation and are open and transparent about what is and isn't working.
- Are flexible and can adapt their approach where needed.
- Support, encourage and value feedback from interested parties by putting in place easily navigated approaches.
- Integrate the Strategy into standard operating policies.
- Advocate for ongoing evaluation and monitoring of the Strategy.

The Strategy recognises the importance of ownership by the social work and social care workforce, people with lived experience and carers. Ownership fosters buy-in, making it easier to translate research findings into everyday practice and policy. Involvement in research builds skills and confidence. It requires a shared understanding by partners of their contribution to the Strategy and encourages collective ownership for delivering the vision.

What this means for people with lived experience and carers

They:

- Participate in and influence research priority setting.
- Help ensure that research reflects diversity and is inclusive of marginalised communities.
- Avail of learning and development opportunities to build research capability.

What this means for social workers and social care practitioners

They:

- Engage in priority-setting exercises to help shape research questions and outcomes relevant to practice.
- See research and evidence as vital for practice and service outcomes, not as a luxury.
- Take opportunities to participate meaningfully in research activities.
- Take responsibility to influence the interpretation and implementation of research findings.

What this means for managers, leaders and educators

They:

- Lead inclusive research priority-setting exercises.
- Develop the case, and justification for the necessary resources for delivering on identified research priorities in accordance with size, scale and complexity of the priority area.
- Champion and resource continuing research skill development, capacity building and associated innovation to drive excellence and foster future research resilience.
- Ensure that the workforce have the requisite skills to engage in opportunities offered by digital and technological advances including, AI, whilst understanding responsibilities of ethical practice, transparency and accountability in research.
- Identify training needs to support research and evidence.
- Identify senior leaders to advocate and support the outcomes of research priority setting.
- Create a nominated role for seeking out and applying for research and innovation funding and grants.
- Foster a culture of innovation, creating conditions which encourage professional and academic curiosity at all levels.
- Link research goals to organisational strategy, business plans and service improvements.
- Use findings to inform policy and real practice changes.

This Strategy reinforces the need for research mindedness to be nurtured from the earliest stages of professional training. The *CiP Framework and the PiP Framework*, developed by the Social Care Council, support the creation of a resilient and informed workforce responsive to changing needs in society.

What this means for people with lived experience and carers

They:

- Have established relationships within research networks and partnerships founded on mutual respect and trust.
- Have access to information in accessible formats.
- Have the requisite skills to be equal partners in research related activity.
- Receive recognition and reward for their participation in research.

What this means for social workers and social care practitioners

They:

- Practise 'research-mindedness'.
- Are curious and reflective in relation to practice, using evidence to challenge and critically analyse assumptions, ideas and decisions.
- Build and maintain effective working relationships that ensure that the voice of people with lived experience and carers is present.
- Involve people with lived experience and carers to co-produce research, service delivery and practice guidelines.

What this means for managers, leaders and educators

They:

- Foster a culture of learning and curiosity.
- Support continuous professional development at all stages of careers through strengthening the role of research and evidence in learning and development programmes as well as in supervision.
- Create networks between academia, practice and those with lived experience and carers to seek out creative opportunities and research funding options.
- Empower people with lived experience and carers to be equal partners in research, innovation, service delivery and service improvement.
- Keep the Strategy alive.



How will we know if we have made a difference?

This Strategy will be considered a living active document. An implementation plan will guide the Strategy and outline how we will deliver the objectives and track delivery. This implementation plan will set out a number of specific, realistic and measurable short-term and long-term targets, taking consideration of the pressures and possible restraints in the system.

Timeline



Year 1 (2025-2026)

Launch the Strategy, engage with different groups to outline and explain objectives, creating accessible resources as required and identify research priorities.



Year 2-3 (2026-2028)

Develop and expand pilots, embed research into training, develop digital platforms for easy access to knowledge and evidence, and evaluate progress.



Year 4-5 (2028-2031)

Expand and extend successful innovations, publish reports on our achievement and impact, and ensure sustainability and continuity.

Measuring Strategy delivery

- **Reach** – The number of staff accessing research briefs and/or engaged in research training.
- **Engagement** – The number of staff, individuals with lived experience and carers involved in research projects.
- **Impact** – The improvements in service outcomes linked to evidence-based changes (e.g. higher satisfaction scores).
- **Inclusivity** – The diversity of participants in research activities and accessibility of outputs.

While measurement of success is important we will also ensure that we maintain a Strategy that is flexible, adaptive and responsive.

Conclusion

Research is the responsibility of all. Using research and evidence-based practice provides safer and more effective services and ensures better outcomes for those who use social work and social care services.

Research should be considered a critical tool in all that we do, not a burden. It is about asking questions, seeking out the evidence and sharing what we learn with others.

This Strategy is built on the six VISION pillars. By valuing evidence, including every voice, establishing clear systems, turning ideas into practice, sharing ownership and nurturing curiosity, we will deliver better, fairer, and more effective social work and care services for everyone.

It aims to build a confident, skilled and evidence-informed workforce, one that is committed, empowered and enabled to innovate and improve.

Delivering on this vision requires us to continue to work together to co-design relevant and thoughtful solutions to the important questions. We will develop new networks and seek out and make best use of available resources. We will also create and avail of opportunities to share knowledge to ensure that social workers and social care practitioners have access to the best and most up to date evidence.

Our success will depend on strong leadership, protected time for learning and reflection and sustained investment in workforce development. By creating the conditions for curiosity, critical thinking and shared learning, the social work and social care workforce can continually adapt and improve even in the face of increasing demand and complexity.

Want to connect with us? Here's how

You can stay up to date on all our news and events by visiting the Social Care Council's website,



or you can follow us across our social channels.

 [@northern-ireland-social-care-council](#)

 [@ni_scc](#)

 [@NISocialCareCouncil](#)

 [@NI_SCC](#)

 [@nisc.bsky.social](#)

 [@theniscc](#)