

Positively Influencing the Determinants of Health:

Practical Contributions that can be made by Population Health

by

Health Promotion Services
Health Service Executive West

Author: Thérèse Costello



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Population Health, of the HSE, is responsible for protecting and promoting the health of the entire population and this includes positively influencing the determinants of health. Many of the determinants of health are considered to be outside the remit of the health service as the decisions made by a variety of people, groups and organisations can influence the creation and determination of health. This study aimed to identify the unique practical contributions that Population Health can provide, specifically to government departments, to enable them to positively influence the determinants of health.

A review of a selection of national and strategic publications was conducted to identify the extent to which they refer to the determinants of health, improving the health of the population and reducing health inequalities. Representatives from government departments were surveyed to identify a) activities which they implement that they perceive as influencing the determinants of health and b) practical contributions that Population Health can provide to enable them to influence positively the determinants of health. Representatives from Population Health were also surveyed to identify practical contributions that they can offer.

The key findings of the study can be summarised as follows:

- Almost half of the reviewed publications highlighted the fact that Ireland's social, economic and environmental context can impact on the health, quality of life and well-being of the Irish population.
- The aim of improving the health, quality of life and well-being of the Irish population was featured in 65% of the reviewed publications.
- Reducing health inequalities was stated as one aim for 19% of the reviewed publications.
- Respondents from government departments are aware of the determinants of health and their impact on health; however this knowledge has not been translated into their strategic objectives.
- Forty-one per cent of respondents from government departments stated that their departments' strategic objectives and actions do not directly aim to influence health issues, the determinants of health or improve health outcomes.
- The majority of the activities suggested by respondents from government departments as positively influencing the determinants of health can be categorised as targeting issues at policy level.
- Respondents from both government departments and Population Health suggested the following contributions:

- Enhance the knowledge of government departments, with the use of evidence, of the impact that their sectoral actions can have on health.
 - Demonstrate the effectiveness of health protecting and health promoting policies and actions.
 - Highlight the 'value for money' that can be achieved by protecting and promoting health.
 - Develop and make available a toolkit which can guide the integration of health into the development of policy.
- Other suggestions from respondents include:
 - Affirm the role of Population Health.
 - Engage with other sectors of society.
 - Increase the use of Health Impact Assessments.
 - Ensure Population Healths' capabilities to implement the suggestions.

This study's findings suggest that there is room for improvement in the extent to which government departments integrate health into their strategic objectives and actions, and also in how Population Health can facilitate this.

The following recommendations have been made:

1. Acknowledge the activities of government departments and Population Health which are positively influencing the determinants of health.
2. Assert the use of a population health approach within the workings of Population Health and government departments.
3. Engage Population Health and government departments in the development and implementation of a toolkit/framework.
4. Communicate the roles and resources that each partner, especially Population Health, can offer.
5. Continue to enhance and make clear the determinants of health evidence base of Population Health.
6. Increase the practice of Health Impact Assessments and incorporate their use into policy development.
7. Quantify financially the value of health promoting policies and activities.
8. Engage Population Health and other sectors of society in the creation of relationships that protect and promote health.
9. Identify challenges that can hinder the process of positively influencing the determinants of health and implement strategies that prevent or address them.

CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	1
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	2
1 INTRODUCTION	6
1.1 Introduction	6
1.2 Aims and Objectives	7
2 METHODOLOGY	8
2.1 Introduction	8
2.2 Review of National and Strategic Publications	8
2.3 Survey of Representatives from Government Departments and Population Health	9
3 REVIEW OF NATIONAL AND STRATEGIC PUBLICATIONS	11
3.1 Introduction	11
3.2 Profile of the Publications	11
3.3 The Determinants of Health	12
3.4 Improving the Health of the Population	12
3.5 Reducing Health Inequalities	12
4 SURVEY OF REPRESENTATIVES FROM GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENTS	13
4.1 Introduction	13
4.2 Perceived Roles in Relation to Influencing Health	13
4.3 Activities that Influence the Determinants of Health	14
4.4 Suggested Practical Contributions	16
4.4.1 Enhance the Knowledge of Departments	16
4.4.2 Communicate the Role of Population Health	16
4.4.3 Demonstrate Effectiveness of Activities	16
4.4.4 Demonstrate Value for Money	17
4.4.5 Develop a Methodology/ Framework	17
4.4.6 Distribution of Health Information	17
4.4.7 Conduct Further Research	18
5 SURVEY OF REPRESENTATIVES FROM POPULATION HEALTH	19
5.1 Introduction	19
5.2 Existing Resources Available to Population Health	19
5.3 Influencing the Determinants of Health	19
5.4 Suggestions for Practical Contributions	21

5.4.1	<i>Develop a Population Health Approach</i>	21
5.4.2	<i>Reorientate Beliefs</i>	21
5.4.3	<i>Educate Government Departments</i>	22
5.4.4	<i>Develop and Demonstrate the Evidence Base</i>	22
5.4.5	<i>Develop a Toolkit</i>	23
5.4.6	<i>Demonstrate Value for Money</i>	23
5.4.7	<i>Involve Population Health in the Policy Making Process</i>	23
5.4.8	<i>Enhance the Practice of Health Impact Assessments</i>	24
5.4.9	<i>Continue Locally Based Activities</i>	24
5.4.10	<i>Engage with the General Public</i>	24
5.4.11	<i>Develop Relationships with a Variety of Sectors</i>	24
5.4.12	<i>Build Capacity of Population Health</i>	25
6	DISCUSSION	26
6.1	<i>Introduction</i>	26
6.2	<i>Health and Government Department Policy</i>	26
6.3	<i>Health at the Centre of Public Policy</i>	27
6.4	<i>Population Health and the Population Health Approach</i>	29
6.5	<i>Infrastructure for Health</i>	29
7	CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS	31
	REFERENCES	32
	APPENDIX 1	35
	APPENDIX 2	37

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Health is not just the absence of disease: it is a state of physical, mental and social well-being and is a resource that individuals can use in everyday life (WHO, 1986). Health also has a value for society. It is a major determinant of socio-economic and political development (WHO, 2005). It has been acknowledged that there is a *'need to recognise...health and its maintenance as a major social investment'* (WHO, 1986). This has also been accepted by the Irish health sector and is documented in the current Irish Health Strategy (Department of Health and Children, 2001).

Numerous factors or determinants interact with each other to influence health. Figure 1.1 presents an outline of these factors which can influence health and subsequently affect the health of the Irish population.

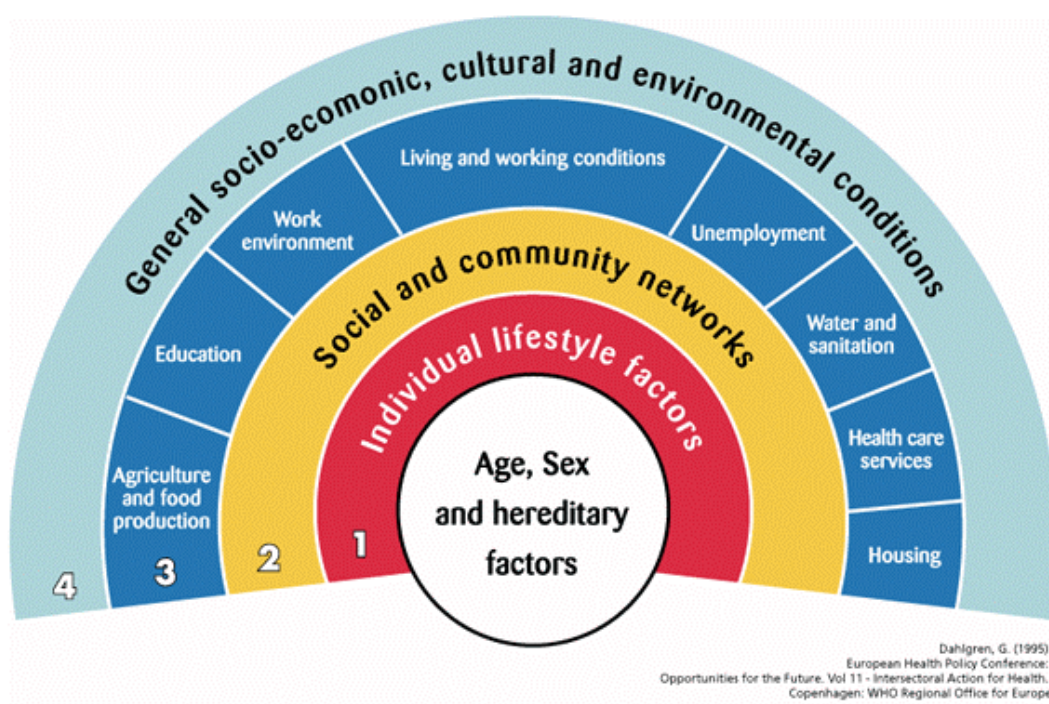


Figure 1.1: Determinants of Health.

It can be seen that the majority of the health determinants in Figure 1.1 are outside the remit of the health service and can be influenced by numerous other sectors. The decisions made by a variety of people, groups and organisations can influence the creation and determination of health (WHO, 2005). This is also acknowledged in the current Irish Health Strategy document where it is stated that *'many other individuals, groups, institutions and public and private bodies have a part to play in the effort to improve health status and achieve the health potential of the nation'* (Department of Health and Children, 2001, p16).

The Health Service Executive (HSE) states that its purpose is *'to enable people live healthier and more fulfilled lives'* (HSE, 2007, p7). Population Health, of the HSE, is responsible for protecting and promoting the health of the entire population and this includes positively influencing the determinants of health. Based on this it is important for Population Health to identify specific contributions that it can make to enable the sectors that create and determine health to positively influence the determinants of health. Ireland has a centralised and department-based government structure, with public service decision making and resources coming top-down from government, the ministers and their departments (Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, 2006). As a result, the focus of this study was on reviewing the extent to which health is considered by government departments and on identifying the contributions that Population Health can provide to them to ensure that they can have a positive influence on health.

1.2 Aims and Objectives

The study aimed to identify the unique practical contributions that Population Health can provide to government departments so as to enable them to positively influence the determinants of health. The objectives of the study were to:

- Identify the extent to which the health of the population and the determinants of health are referred to in a selection of national and strategic publications.
- Identify the activities of government departments which they perceive as positively influencing the determinants of health.
- Determine the contributions that Population Health can provide to enable government departments to have a positive influence on the determinants of health.

2 METHODOLOGY

2.1 Introduction

To achieve the aim of the project, it was necessary to obtain data using two methods of collection, namely:

- Review of national and strategic publications.
- Survey of representatives from government departments and Population Health.

2.2 Review of National and Strategic Publications

The frameworks provided in national policy publications inform the development of government departments' strategic objectives and actions. In each government department's¹ 'Statement of Strategy 2005-2007' references are made to national publications which inform and direct the development of each department's strategic objectives. The ten national policy publications most frequently referred to by government departments in their statements of strategy are displayed in Table 2.1. As a result these ten publications were considered to be key national policy publications and were selected for review as to the extent to which health and the determinants of health are considered. Each government department's 'Statement of Strategy 2005-2007' (15 government departments) and the latest strategic publication from the HSE, 'Transformation: Programme 2007-2010' (2007), were also included for review. This was done so as to get a broad perspective on the concept of health featured in the publications and its incorporation into the strategies of government departments and the HSE. A review of these 26 publications will reflect the extent to which health and non-health sectors consider the determinants of health and the health of the population in their strategic objectives and actions.

¹ Departments of: Agriculture and Food; Arts, Sport and Tourism; Communications, Marine and Natural Resources; Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs; Defence; Education and Science; Enterprise, Trade and Employment; the Environment, Heritage and Local Government; Finance; Foreign Affairs; Health and Children; Justice, Equality and Law Reform; Social and Family Affairs; Transport; the Taoiseach.

<i>National Policy Publications</i>	<i>Departments which stated that the publication informed the development of their 'Statement of Strategy'</i>	
	No.	%
Towards 2016 - Social Partnership Agreement (Department of the Taoiseach, 2006)	14	93
The Agreed Programme for Government (Department of the Taoiseach, 2002)	13	86
The National Development Plan (Department of Finance, 2007)	11	73
The National Spatial Strategy (Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, 2002)	7	46
Regulating Better (Department of the Taoiseach, 2004)	7	46
Building an Inclusive Society – NAPS (Department of Social and Family Affairs, 2002)	6	40
The Good Friday Agreement (Northern Ireland Assembly, 1998)	6	40
Quality and Fairness - The National Health Strategy (Department of Health and Children, 2001)	5	33
The National Children's Strategy: Our Children - Their Lives (Department of Health and Children, 2000)	5	33
National Reform Programme - The Lisbon Agenda (Department of the Taoiseach, 2005a)	4	27

Table 2.1: Ten national policy publications most frequently referred to in government departments' 'Statements of Strategy'

Two key elements of the population health approach (Health Canada, 2001): a) addressing the determinants of health and the interaction between them and b) focusing on the health of the population, informed the development of the questions that were used to review the publications. These questions were:

- Do the publications refer to the influences that Ireland's social, economic and environmental context have on the health, quality of life or well-being of the Irish population?
- Do the publications state that they aim to improve or contribute to the health, quality of life or well-being of the Irish population?
- Do the publications state that they aim to reduce health inequalities?

2.3 Survey of Representatives from Government Departments and Population Health

A survey was conducted with representatives from government departments and Population Health. The survey sought to identify:

- Activities that government departments implement which they perceive as positively influencing the determinants of health.

- Suggested practical contributions that Population Health could make to enable government departments to have a positive influence on the determinants of health.

The Secretary General of each government department and senior representatives from Population Health were selected as being the key informants from whom to obtain feedback. The Population Health representatives in the sample were as follows:

- National Director
- Assistant National Directors
- Health Promotion Managers
- Directors of Public Health

In total 33 representatives were surveyed. 45% (n=15) of the sample was comprised of representatives from government departments and 55% (n=18) was comprised of representatives from Population Health. Respondents replied in writing or via telephone interview. The survey questions are available in Appendix 1.

3 REVIEW OF NATIONAL AND STRATEGIC PUBLICATIONS

3.1 Introduction

In this section, the findings of the review of the 26 selected publications will be presented.

3.2 Profile of the Publications

Table 3.1 outlines the origin of the publications reviewed.

<i>Origin of Publications</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>
Dept. of the Taoiseach	5	19
Dept. of Health and Children and HSE	4	15
Dept. of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government	2	7
Dept. of Finance	2	7
Dept. of Social and Family Affairs	2	7
Dept. of Agriculture and Food	1	4
Dept. of Arts, Sport and Tourism	1	4
Dept. of Communications, Marine and Natural Resources	1	4
Dept. of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs	1	4
Dept. of Defence	1	4
Dept. of Education and Science	1	4
Dept. of Enterprise, Trade and Employment	1	4
Dept. of Foreign Affairs	1	4
Dept. of Justice, Equality and Law Reform	1	4
Dept. of Transport	1	4
Northern Ireland Assembly	1	4

Table 3.1: Origin of publications reviewed.

Of the publications, 15% originated from departments considered as being within the health sector. These publications were:

- Quality and Fairness: A Health System for You (Department of Health and Children, 2001).
- The National Children's Strategy: Our Children - Their Lives (Department of Health and Children, 2000).
- Department of Health and Children 'Statement of Strategy 2005-2007' (Department of Health and Children, 2005).
- Transformation: Programme 2007-2010 (HSE, 2007).

Seventy-seven per cent (n=20) of the publications reviewed were published within the last four years, that is the period 2004 to 2007 (Table 3.2).

<i>Year of Publication</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>
2007	2	8
2004-2006	18	69
2001-2003	4	15
1998-2000	2	8

Table 3.2: Year of publication

3.3 The Determinants of Health

When discussing the background and rationale for planned strategic objectives and actions, 42% (n=11) of the total publications highlighted the fact that aspects of Ireland's social, economic and environmental context can impact on the health, quality of life and well-being of the Irish population. A breakdown of this percentage has revealed that 55% (n=6) of the national policy publications referred to the influences on health, compared to 33% (n=5) of government departments' 'Statement of Strategy' publications.

3.4 Improving the Health of the Population

Sixty-five per cent (n=17) of the total publications reviewed stated that they aimed to improve the health, quality of life and well-being of the Irish population. Further analysis of this percentage has revealed that 53% (n=8) and 82% (n=9) of the 'Statement of Strategy' publications and the national policy publications respectively, stated this aim.

3.5 Reducing Health Inequalities

Nineteen per cent (n=5) of the total publications stated that they aimed to reduce health inequalities in the Irish population. A breakdown of this percentage has revealed that 7% (n=1) of the 'Statement of Strategy' publications and 36% (n=4) of the national policy publications featured the aim of reducing health inequalities.

A description of the extent to which each of the publications refers to the determinants of health, improving the health of the population and reducing health inequalities is provided in Appendix 2.

4 SURVEY OF REPRESENTATIVES FROM GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENTS

4.1 Introduction

A survey was conducted with representatives from government departments. The survey sought to identify:

- Activities that government departments implement which they perceive as positively influencing the determinants of health.
- Suggested practical contributions that Population Health could provide to enable government departments to have a positive influence on the determinants of health.

Fifty-two per cent (n=12) of respondents to the questionnaire were from government departments.

4.2 Perceived Roles in Relation to Influencing Health

Initially respondents from government departments outlined their perceptions of the role of their department in relation to influencing health and the determinants of health.

- **Influencing the Determinants of Health**

Fifty-eight per cent (n=7) of respondents from government departments acknowledged a direct link between the work that they do and its having an impact on health. This is reflected in the statements:

Given the established link between a positive socio-economic environment and health status, the importance of the department's role is obvious.

Issues of lifestyle and background are addressed which diminish the likelihood of further crime but which also contribute to health gain.

We contribute to quality of life and tackling the determinants of health by involvement in...

- **Health and Departmental Policy**

Thirty-three per cent (n=4) stated that their department's strategic objectives and actions do not directly aim to influence health issues or the determinants of health. This is reflected in the statements:

Strategic objectives and plans do not address health issues directly.

Tackling the determinants of health is not an overt aim of this department's policy strategies. The extent to which it does is secondary and not purposeful.

...do not directly address health issues.

- **Improving Health Outcomes**

Eight per cent (n=1) stated that the improvement of health outcomes is not essentially a primary objective for the work of their department.

4.3 Activities that Influence the Determinants of Health

Respondents from government departments provided some examples of activities implemented by each that they perceive as positively influencing the determinants of health². The examples provided were categorised in relation to their action at one of the four levels of the determinants of health (described in Chapter One's Figure 1.1) and are detailed in Table 4.1. It should be noted that each activity's influence is not specific to one level but may have an effect at other levels.

² Comprehensive details of government departments' actions can be found in the 2006 Annual Report of each government department.

<i>Level 1: Individual lifestyle factors</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promoting energy efficiency • Promoting healthy eating
<i>Level 2: Social and community networks</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building an inclusive society • Rural development • Community development • Addressing issues for women, prisoners, asylum seekers, travellers
<i>Level 3: Living and working conditions</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Addressing the demographics of where people live and work • Labour force up-skilling • Improving workplace conditions • Provision of affordable, social housing • Maintenance of building standards • Funding of health services • Maintenance of natural and built environment • Provision of social security payments
<i>Level 4: General socio-economic, cultural and environmental conditions</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improving access to sporting facilities • Creating an environment for enterprise development • Providing a stable and secure environment • Improving probation services • Implementing the drugs strategy • Reducing emissions • Sanitation • Monitoring water quality • Improving air quality • Consumer protection • Providing sustainable employment opportunities • Planning and spatial policy • Waste disposal • Provision of emergency planning and services • Nuclear safety • Promoting sustainable development

Table 4.1: Examples of government activities categorised by the level at which they influence the determinants of health

4.4 Suggested Practical Contributions

Respondents from government departments suggested the following contributions that Population Health could provide to enable them to positively influence the determinants of health.

4.4.1 Enhance the Knowledge of Departments

Population Health can enhance the knowledge base of departments in relation to health and the determinants of health. This is reflected in the following:

...enhance the department's knowledge in reviewing, preparing and implementing the department's policies and goals which have a bearing on tackling the determinants of health.

...provide health intelligence...information on status of health and causes of ill health that could feed into policy thinking.

4.4.2 Communicate the Role of Population Health

To manage a potential lack of awareness of the roles that Population Health can offer it is necessary to communicate the nature of such roles and the contributions that they can provide for each department. This is highlighted in the following statement where one department does not seem to realise the potential contribution of Population Health:

Our focus is on preserving the security of the population and it is difficult to see how Population Health can contribute to our work in this area.

4.4.3 Demonstrate Effectiveness of Activities

Population Health is requested to demonstrate the effectiveness of the activities that it implements which positively influence the determinants of health. This is reflected in the following:

...to contribute to the department Population Healths' appraisals of the overall effectiveness of these services and programmes on the health of the Irish population.

4.4.4 Demonstrate Value for Money

Population Health is asked to demonstrate the value for money that can be achieved through initiatives that positively influence the determinants of health and enhance the health of the population. This is reflected in the following statements:

A key question with regard to public expenditure is whether or not services and programmes are achieving value for money.

...quantify the value of improvements so that any premium on particular choices can be justified in expenditure or investment decisions.

4.4.5 Develop a Methodology/ Framework

Population Health could develop a user friendly methodology / framework to assist departments in developing policies that have a positive influence on the determinants of health. This is reflected in the statement:

A methodology for identifying and maximising the positive determinants of health in policy choices.... It should be so designated as to be accessible and easily applied so that it does not become an add-on, used only under duress and post facto.

4.4.6 Distribution of Health Information

Department representatives suggest that various options for distributing health information to the public should be considered. This is reflected in:

One agency to have responsibility for the dissemination of nutritional health information. Consumers [are] easily confused by the plethora of messages coming from health professionals, food manufacturers and the media.

Stakeholders to work in partnership on developing education programmes for consumers.

4.4.7 Conduct Further Research

It is also suggested that Population Health could engage with government departments in conducting further research in specific areas of interest. This is reflected in the following statements:

More research to be conducted, in particular on the effects of diet and child behaviour and learning.

We would be interested in further information that Population Health might garner during its work regarding applications of broadband/ICT services to health issues.

...conduct research in relation to the health aspects of social security payments... identify what the department could be doing to address health issues for those in receipt of payments.

Any information or feedback which the HSE can give in relation to the recommendations of the HLG [High Level Group] report on Traveller issues and their implementation would be useful.

We would seek to interact with Population Health...in promoting and protecting, within the resources available, the health of prisoners.

One practical way...is through the development and management of an effective new national drugs awareness campaign which is currently being prepared.

5 SURVEY OF REPRESENTATIVES FROM POPULATION HEALTH

5.1 Introduction

The survey of representatives from Population Health sought to identify:

- Practical contributions which Population Health could provide to enable government departments to have a positive influence on the determinants of health.

Forty-eight per cent (n=11) of respondents to the questionnaire were from Population Health.

5.2 Existing Resources Available to Population Health

In their replies, the respondents first outlined Population Healths' current roles and resources that contribute to efforts to positively influence the determinants of health. The examples provided reflect the following themes:

- Data on the determinants of health and their impact on health
- Health status information on the Irish population
- Contribution and access to an available evidence base
- Experience in co-ordinating and implementing activities
- Experience in engaging with a variety of stakeholders
- Possession of strong skills base
- Advocacy skills
- Ability to facilitate the development of key links between stakeholders
- Promotion of knowledge and skill development

5.3 Influencing the Determinants of Health

Population Health respondents detailed their perceptions of government departments' and Population Healths' influence on the determinants of health. The following findings emerged.

- **Government Departments and Health**

Respondents perceived that health is not a priority for government departments. This is reflected in the following:

Government could be doing better.

Health is not at the centre of public policy yet.

*...have not seen any evidence of health being at
the centre of public policy.*

Health is not an objective...if health benefit occurs it is a side effect.

- **Challenges for Government Departments in Positively Influencing the Determinants of Health**

Population Health respondents have suggested that challenges exist which hamper the attempts of government departments to positively influence the determinants of health and protect the health of the population. This is reflected in the following:

Decision makers not aware of the population health approach.

*...policies often deal with immediate needs...meet the requirements for
their own domain...don't see the effect on health determinants.*

*Turf issues are challenging a 'whole of government' approach to
health and social gain.*

*The government are aware of the evidence but they see
difficulties in relation to addressing it...areas are government
driven rather than being health driven.*

Departments do have a vested interest in policies.

- **Health Sector Influence on the Determinants of Health**

Population Health respondents perceive that actions by the health sector on influencing the determinants of health could be improved. This is reflected in the following:

In terms of influencing government policy...not doing enough.

Work has been sporadic and ineffective.

*Action and work on the determinants being done
sporadically at the moment.*

There is a lot of parallel working within the HSE and in other sectors.

- **The Future Direction**

Respondents also suggested broad guidelines to shape the direction of future Population Health actions. These are reflected in the following:

...work with the healthy population to keep them healthy.

We need to direct efforts where we will get the most benefits.

Multiple strategies are required.

We need to show every success.

We need to learn from successes.

...need to come up with ideas.

*Population Health needs to be present
...we need to present practical ideas and actions.*

5.4 Suggestions for Practical Contributions

Respondents from Population Health suggested the following specific contributions that Population Health could provide to enable government departments to positively influence the determinants of health.

5.4.1 Develop a Population Health Approach

It has been suggested that there is a need to develop a population health approach for the Irish context that can guide the development and delivery of services by Population Health. This is reflected in the statement:

*...need to get agreement about what is an effective
population health approach for us within Population Health.*

5.4.2 Reorientate Beliefs

One respondent suggested that a reorientation of beliefs is required to move the delivery of services away from influencing specific illnesses and conditions to a service which focuses on keeping the population healthy. This is reflected in the statement:

*There is a need to shift beliefs and services from addressing
specific conditions and what-ever is on the day's agenda,
to a focus on keeping people healthy and away from hospital.*

5.4.3 Educate Government Departments

It is suggested that there is a need to enhance the awareness and knowledge levels of government and its departments in relation to health, the determinants of health and the interaction between them. This is reflected in the statements:

There is a need to paint as clear a picture as [we] can and provide consistent messages to government regarding the determinants.

For government departments we need to educate, educate, educate.

5.4.4 Develop and Demonstrate the Evidence Base

Respondents identified a need to enhance and communicate the evidence base that is available for government departments to use. This is reflected in:

*Develop health intelligence and present it in a powerful way.
However this is difficult as it is not intuitive to Population Health.*

*Supply health intelligence on how education,
housing etcetera influence health.*

Supply health status information.

*Need to put the evidence before people so that they
are addressing the determinants of health.*

Informing people.

Need to deliver an annual pitch to government.

...draw attention to government of the impact that public policy has.

Further research required.

...epidemiological analysis and synthesis of research.

Provide assistance with evaluation and review.

*Population Health is best placed to critically appraise the
evidence, synthesise it and present it.*

*We need to 'show' rather than 'say' in relation to
health and methods of working.*

5.4.5 Develop a Toolkit

To assist government departments to positively influence the determinants of health, it is suggested that a toolkit be developed for them to use. This can assist them in translating the evidence into policy and practice. This is reflected in:

Develop a toolkit for them to use.

*We have the capacity to develop a
Framework for working with each other.*

5.4.6 Demonstrate Value for Money

Another suggested method is to show evidence of the value for money that can be achieved by investing in actions which positively influence the determinants of health and promote the health of the population. This is reflected in:

*We can write reports on the impact of determinants but
unless we support this with specific actions,
the costing and benefits; it will not be taken on board.*

*The message can be correct regarding the impact of the determinants
but we need to attempt to do costing...link with health and
suggest specific actions to improve measures.*

...benefits of actions in financial terms.

...demonstrate value for money which is supported by evidence.

...costing for government.

5.4.7 Involve Population Health in the Policy Making Process

Another way in which government departments could influence the determinants of health is for them to engage with Population Health in policy development so that their vast knowledge and evidence base could be used for the maximum benefit of the population. This is reflected in:

Population Health to be involved in policy development.

Collaboration in planning and policy development.

Population Health proof government policies.

...reach a point where government departments would routinely send policies and documents to Population Health as a critical part of the consultation process.

5.4.8 Enhance the Practice of Health Impact Assessments

There is need to increase the practice of Health Impact Assessments and their use in policy development. This is reflected in:

Health Impact Assessments are not used enough in health and the status of these could be dramatically improved upon ...need to use it properly and cost it.

Need to develop on the use of Health Impact Assessments.

Need to direct efforts into Health Impact Assessments.

Need to work through Health Impact Assessments to have changes made.

5.4.9 Continue Locally Based Activities

It is suggested that building on the successes of locally based activities which protect and promote health can continue the bottom-up approach to influencing the determinants of health. This is reflected in:

...build on the successes of local activities.

...concentrate locally and see if a bottom-up approach can work in relation to health and methods of working by Population Health.

5.4.10 Engage with the General Public

It is suggested that engaging with the public can help them to realise the determinants of their own health and thus inform the development of strategies to address their identified needs. This is reflected in:

Need to develop our own communication with the public.

...increasing public awareness and public education.

Need to develop strong communication with the public so they become allies and this therefore can help the politicians to make decisions

5.4.11 Develop Relationships with a Variety of Sectors

Population Health is requested to develop, enhance and drive relationships with a variety of sectors and assist them in protecting and promoting health. This is reflected in:

...create working relationships with the departments.

We...need to drive and create relationships with other sectors.

*...look at the private sector and [in]
developing partnerships with this sector.*

*...provide help with consultation among community members,
stakeholders and service providers.*

*...can support other sectors to develop their capacity in
translating determinants of health knowledge into
policy and practice...health proofing...and in the
development of supportive environments for health.*

5.4.12 Build Capacity of Population Health

It has also been suggested that there is a need for Population Health and the health sector in general to be aware of and manage the deficits in their own capabilities and capacities. This is reflected in:

*We need to be clear about what we have to offer
...simplify what Population Health can offer.*

...detail the contributions that Population Health can provide

*...what's our capability...we need to have a skilled workforce
...so when they [departments] say...'we'll do it'
...we need to have [the] time and skills to help.*

*To overcome partnership challenges we need
education and training in partnership skills.*

The Department of Health needs to be more proactive.

*We don't have access...to...methods of
working by government departments.*

6 DISCUSSION

6.1 Introduction

This study aimed to identify the unique practical contributions that Population Health can provide to government departments so as to enable them to positively influence the determinants of health. A review of a selection of publications was conducted, in addition to a survey with representatives from government departments and Population Health.

6.2 Health and Government Department Policy

Achieving a healthier population requires strong political commitment and action (WHO, 2005). This can be facilitated during times of economic growth or health reform, as this provides a window of opportunity for original ways of viewing and acting on the determinants of health (Health Canada, 2001). Both of these facilitating factors are currently being experienced by Irish society. This study's findings suggest that there is room for improvement in the extent to which government departments integrate health into their strategic objectives and actions, and also in how Population Health can facilitate this. The current Health Strategy has called for *'statements of strategy...of all relevant government departments [to] incorporate an explicit commitment to sustaining and improving health status'* (Department of Health and Children, 2001, p61). It was established that only 33% of government departments referred to using the current Irish Health Strategy to inform the development of their 'Statement of Strategy' publications. This may be related to the interpretation by departments of the Health Strategy request whereby they have not considered themselves to be among the *'relevant'* departments that can contribute to improving health status. This deficit is also reflected in the findings of the review of the 'Statement of Strategy' publications, where only 33% referred to the influences on health and 53% stated that they aimed to improve the health, quality of life and well-being of the Irish population. As a result, in 67% of government departments' 'Statements of Strategy', their strategic objectives do not incorporate current knowledge of the determinants of health. As a result, it is no surprise that the deliberate improvement of health outcomes for the population is not made an explicit aim in almost half of the departments' 'Statement of Strategy' publications. In addition, 41% of respondents from government departments have stated that their department's strategic objectives and actions do not directly aim to influence the determinants of health and improve health outcomes for the Irish population. Just

over a third of respondents from Population Health have also perceived that health is not a priority for government departments.

On a positive note, 58% of respondents from government departments have acknowledged that sectoral activities and Ireland's changing context can impact on health, highlighting the fact that they are aware of the variety of factors that can influence health. A range of activities has been suggested by respondents from government departments which they consider as positively influencing the determinants of health. Most of the suggested activities influence living and working, and general socio-economic, cultural and environmental conditions. This suggests that the policies of government departments, whether intentionally or not, currently can and do influence the determinants of health at policy level. However, as highlighted by 33% of respondents from government departments, there is no structured plan to influence health directly and *'the extent to which it does is secondary and not purposeful'*. This implies a need for government departments to provide explicit examples of where their knowledge of the determinants of health is translated into strategic objectives and actions. There is also a need for them to realise that activities which they currently implement have the capacity to target determinants at a variety of levels and so extreme changes in workings are not required. Respondents from government departments and Population Health suggest that the availability of a framework or methodology could facilitate the translation of this knowledge into objectives, policy and practice. One such example, developed by HSE West, is a series of flash cards containing text that can facilitate the integration of a population health approach into the development of policy and practice (Jones et al., 2004). Integrating a population health approach into policy and practice development can ensure that the protection and promotion of health will become an obvious concern for government departments. It is therefore clear that Population Health can provide the resources for this process.

6.3 Health at the Centre of Public Policy

For health to be at the centre of public policy, it is dependent on numerous factors: knowledge of the determinants and their impact on health, the availability of human resources, and the need for health to be a high priority for government, policy makers and other stakeholders (Sihto et al., 2006). This study has shown that government departments use a range of national policy publications to inform the development of their strategic objectives. Two out of the top three national publications which have been used to inform the development of each department's 'Statement of Strategy' have recently been updated. The publications, 'Towards 2016' (Department of the Taoiseach, 2006) and the 'National Development Plan 2007-2013' (Department of Finance, 2007), aim to improve health outcomes for the population. Other national policy publications also have an explicit concern for health and quality of life issues in their rationale for objectives and in their

proposed actions, in comparison to the objectives and actions outlined in government departments 'Statement of Strategy' publications. Therefore to achieve the goals contained in the national policy publications which strive to improve health outcomes, government departments will be required to reorientate their objectives and actions toward those that when implemented will bring about an improvement in health outcomes for the population. It is important that government departments are enabled to integrate the objectives of national publications into their own activities.

Population Health respondents perceive that health is not yet at the centre of public policy. However, the placing of health at the centre of public policy is not just the responsibility of government departments. Population Health respondents have suggested that Population Health in particular is not doing enough in terms of health and public policy. It has been stated that the actions of Population Health can occur sporadically and in parallel to each other in influencing the determinants of health at policy level. As a result there is a need for Population Health to explore and address these shortcomings. Respondents from government departments suggest that conducting further research and showing the effectiveness of activities can enable them to recognise the wide benefits of investment in health. In addition, respondents from government departments and Population Health state that it is important to highlight the financial benefits that can be achieved by keeping the population healthy and that can justify the use of resources. Population Health also suggests that the emphasis of some current government policies and practices is on meeting the needs of each government department, but that some policies and practices have a negative impact on health. The use of Health Impact Assessments can highlight such situations but Health Impact Assessments do not seem to be '*used enough in health*'. In relation to this, Population Health respondents have suggested the need to increase the carrying-out of Health Impact Assessments and thus enhance their input in the development of healthy public policy. As suggested, it is anticipated that at some time engagement between policy makers and Population Health or the health proofing of policies would routinely occur. To support this study's findings, it has been identified that barriers exist which prevent policies that tackle health inequalities from gaining more political recognition in Ireland (Closing the Gap, no date):

- Lack of awareness and understanding by policy-makers outside the health sector.
- Lack of resources.
- Lack of, or gaps in, the evidence base.
- Lack of recognised standards or methodology.
- Other health-related priorities/ commitments getting in the way.
- Complexity of tackling underlying socio-economic determinants.

The contributions suggested in this study can go towards addressing the barriers outlined above.

6.4 Population Health and the Population Health Approach

Two key elements of the population health approach are a focus on the health, not illness, of the population, and the need to address the interaction between this and the determinants of health (Health Canada, 2001). As highlighted in this study's findings, gaps exist in the degree to which these two elements feature in national policy publications and in government departments' 'Statement of Strategy' publications, as almost half the government departments do not deliberately set out to influence the determinants of health or to improve the health of the population. It has been perceived by Population Health respondents that decision makers are not aware of a population health approach nor of the role and resources that Population Health can provide to each individual department. Population Health has suggested the '*need to get agreement about what is an effective population health approach*' for their own workings. It has been suggested in the publication 'Transformation: Programme 2007-2010' (HSE, 2007), that a model is currently being developed which focuses on the prevention and management of chronic diseases. However a Population Health representative has expressed caution about such a model and of strategies which essentially do not seem to embrace the key elements of a population health approach and aim to keep people healthy. It is suggested that reorientation in the health beliefs of government departments and of Population Health is required on which to base actions that protect and promote health for all the population. Population Health is required to identify and decide upon the key elements which underpin its workings and incorporate these elements into the workings of all³ bodies involved in Population Health. Following this, Population Health will be in a stronger position to engage with government departments and with other sectors, to enhance their knowledge of the population health approach, of Population Health and its roles, and the resources it can offer them.

6.5 Infrastructure for Health

To facilitate the development of policies and actions which can positively influence the determinants of health, it is necessary that the issues discussed so far are also combined with the other contributions which have been suggested by all respondents. Population Health and government departments are not the only areas of society that have the capacity to positively influence the determinants of health. The WHO (2005) believes that the health sector has a key leadership role in the building of policies and partnerships for health promotion. Population Health

³ Emergency Planning, Environmental Health, Health Intelligence, Health Promotion, Health Protection, and Strategic Planning and Evaluation.

has an array of resources which can be used to support all sectors to positively influence the determinants of health. The findings of this study suggest that Population Health is required to create and drive relationships with other sectors of society, such as the private sector and the public in general. Engaging with the public and enhancing their knowledge base in relation to the determinants of their own health, can inform the development of strategies to address their identified needs. This may also have the knock-on effect of enabling the public, with support, to influence the policy makers and, fundamentally, the policies which affect their lives. Population Health respondents have highlighted the need to maintain the implementation of locally based activities which can continue the bottom-up approach towards influencing the determinants of health. On a related issue, it is also suggested that Population Health become involved in regulating health information which is distributed to the public. This will ensure that health information released to the public is factual, accurate and consistent. However, it is important that Population Health also reviews its capacities and capabilities to implement the suggested contributions. By managing deficits it can minimise any delays and obstacles which could be experienced during this process of enabling government departments to positively influence the determinants of health.

7 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, this study has described a variety of contributions that Population Health can provide to government departments so as to enable them to positively influence the determinants of health. It seems that government departments and Population Health could be doing more to enhance the opportunities for action in relation to the determinants of health. There is a need for a population health approach to be integrated into the workings of government departments, and more importantly and comprehensively into the workings of Population Health. However challenges exist and need to be managed so as to achieve the social and economic benefits that are associated with protecting and promoting the health of the population.

The following recommendations have been made:

1. Acknowledge the activities of government departments and Population Health which are positively influencing the determinants of health.
2. Assert the use of a population health approach within the workings of Population Health and government departments.
3. Engage Population Health and government departments in the development and implementation of a toolkit/framework.
4. Communicate the roles and resources that each partner, especially Population Health, can offer.
5. Continue enhancing and making obvious the determinants of health evidence base of Population Health.
6. Increase the practice of Health Impact Assessments and incorporate their use into policy development.
7. Quantify financially the value of health promoting policies and activities.
8. Engage Population Health and other sectors of society in the creation of relationships that protect and promote health.
9. Identify challenges that can hinder the process of positively influencing the determinants of health and implement strategies that prevent or address them.

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APPENDIX 1

Questions Asked of Representatives from Government departments

1. What contributions are being made by your department towards tackling the determinants of health and improving the health of the population?
2. What unique, practical contributions can Population Health provide to you so as to enable you to tackle the determinants of health?

Question Asked of Representatives from Population Health

What unique, practical contributions can Population Health provide to the fora and sectors that create and determine the health of the population?

APPENDIX 2

Summary of National Policy Publications

A brief summary of the national policy publications is now presented, outlining the extent to which each considers the determinants of health, the health of the population and the reduction of health inequalities.

- **Social Partnership Agreement – Towards 2016**

This publication (Department of the Taoiseach, 2006) suggests the use of the Lifecycle Framework to guide the development of policy. The Framework seeks to influence the challenges facing children, young adults, people of working age, older people and people with disabilities, by placing the individual at the centre of policy development. This framework seeks to *'address key social challenges by assessing the risks and hazards which the individual person faces and the supports available to them at each stage of the life cycle'* (p40). There is a variety of priority action areas detailed for each life stage, of which the improvement of health outcomes is one. These health actions involve prevention and promotion, early intervention and treatment services. In addition to improving health outcomes, other priority action areas include employability and access to employment, income and housing and thus also tackle the influences on health which are outside the health sector. Reducing health inequalities is not specifically mentioned.

- **The Agreed Programme for Government**

This publication (Department of the Taoiseach, 2002) specifically provides a broad framework for government departments to use when planning their strategic objectives. As a result, a detailed background is not provided in the publication, and neither is acknowledgement of the determinants of health. The health objectives of this publication deal specifically with the development of a world class health service and with influencing the quality, delivery and access to health services. However, it does state that it wishes to bring *'health inequalities to the fore in health policy'* (p21). Other objectives go towards managing social exclusion by reducing and eliminating the barriers to employment, increasing participation in education, promoting social inclusion, and enhancing delivery of and access to transport.

- **The National Development Plan 2007-2013**

This publication (Department of Finance, 2007) describes a programme of integrated investment in Ireland's social, economic and environmental development, which aims to enhance the quality of life for all by enhancing employment opportunities and generating resources. It details a 'Social Infrastructure Priority', of which the building of a 'Health Infrastructure Programme' is one aspect. It acknowledges that a variety of influences affect health and wishes to *'improve health outcomes... by seeking to improve the health and well-being of the whole population'* (p215). The publication also acknowledges that there is a social gradient in relation to chronic illness and seeks to improve health outcomes

by ensuring that there is an integrated delivery of care which is based on equity and quality.

- **The National Spatial Strategy**

The National Spatial Strategy (Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, 2002) provides a framework for the delivery of a better balance of physical, social and economic development as well as seeking a balance between regions in population growth. One aim is that implementation of the strategy should bring a better quality of life for all. It recognises that a broad range of issues can contribute to quality of life by stating that *'development has economic, social and environmental dimensions which together can contribute to a better quality of life'* (p13). Reducing health inequalities is not specifically addressed.

- **Regulating Better**

This publication (Department of the Taoiseach, 2004) sets out criteria to ensure that regulations are developed, implemented, better understood, and more rigorously assessed in terms of their impacts. Specific consideration is not given to the range of influences that can impact on health but it has been recognised that better regulation does have a role to play in affecting the quality of everyday life: *'applying these principles to new and existing regulations will improve the quality of our everyday lives'* (p7). For example, the quality of food and water and the safety of work places as well as the range of products and services available are all affected by regulations made by government departments. Therefore it states that one goal of better regulation is to improve the quality of life for the population. Reducing health inequalities is not specifically addressed.

- **National Anti Poverty Strategy – Building an Inclusive Society**

The National Anti Poverty Strategy (Department of Social and Family Affairs, 2002) recognises that poverty and exclusion are intersecting issues, so targets have been established in relation to a variety of areas, including health. The objective for health seeks to reduce health inequalities by making health central to public policy and by acting on the social factors that influence health.

- **Good Friday Agreement**

This agreement (Northern Ireland Assembly, 1998) outlines broad areas of action to be adopted in relation to managing cross-border issues, one of them being health. As this publication provides only guidelines for cross-border sectors to develop, the influences on health, the health of the population and health inequalities are not discussed.

- **Quality and Fairness: Health Strategy**

This publication (Department of Health and Children, 2001) has essentially based its objectives for the health system on the key elements of the population health

approach. The principles of equity and people-centredness, in addition to the emphasis on the determinants of health, ensure that the strategic objectives focus on protecting the health of the population, influencing inequities and health inequalities, and enhancing the quality of life for individuals. The objective of having *'the health of the population...at the centre of public policy'* (p61) is recognition of the role that others, especially policy makers, have in improving the health status of the population and in considering the impact that their decisions have on the health of the population.

- **The National Children's Strategy**

This publication (Department of Health and Children, 2000) uses a variety of health research findings to detail the health status of children at the time of publication. For example it recognises that *'the long term implication for health is... [one]...reason for tackling poverty and social exclusion'* (p21). This sets the scene for its strategic objectives, one of which states that *'children will be supported to enjoy the optimum physical, mental and emotional well-being'* (p55). The promotion of health and well-being for children is emphasised but there is no specific reference to the aim of reducing health inequalities.

- **The Lisbon Agenda – National Reform Programme**

This publication (Department of the Taoiseach, 2005a) outlines a broad range of policies and initiatives, the implementation of which aims to sustain Ireland's strong economic growth and employment performance. The implications that these strategic actions or the existing influences on health may have for the health of the population are not highlighted. However, the aim of the programme is to enhance the quality of life for the population as it is stated that *'ultimately, the objective is to secure improved quality of life and improved living standards for all'* (p5). The tackling of health inequalities is not specifically addressed.

- **HSE Transformation: Programme 2007 - 2010**

This publication (Health Service Executive, 2007) is to be used as a guide for HSE staff to build on the momentum for change and reform in the health service. The mission of the publication is *'to enable people live healthier and more fulfilled lives'* (p9). A generalised overview of the Ireland's changing circumstances is provided but no specific reference is made to the influence on health. However, the publication does outline its six transformation priorities, one of which focuses on the implementation of a model for the prevention and management of chronic illness.

Summary of 'Statement of Strategy' Publications 2005 - 2007'

A brief summary of each publication will be presented, outlining the extent to which government departments consider the determinants of health, the health of the population and the reduction of health inequalities in the development of strategic objectives and actions.

- **Department of Agriculture and Food**

The context detailed in this publication outlines the factors that influence the sector and hence the development of its strategic objectives. The impact that these factors can have on health is not discussed. However, emphasis is placed on the protection of health: *'the protection of the health of the consumers lies at the core of agriculture and food policy'* (p14). This is reflected in one objective that seeks to ensure the highest standard of consumer protection: the production of safe food, underpinned by effective control systems. This is the extent to which the health of the population seems to be considered by this department in its primary strategic publication. The reduction of health inequalities is not considered.

- **Department of Arts, Sport and Tourism**

This department considers the determinants of health and its own work in relation to their impact. This is reflected in its mission statement which states that the department aims to *'support national economic and societal progress and enrich the quality of life of the people of Ireland by facilitating the promotion and sustainable development of the arts and culture, sport and tourism sectors, while optimising the interaction between them'* (p10). The department specifically acknowledges the role of the sporting sector in enhancing the health of the population in the phrase: *'recognising the role of sport in fostering healthy lifestyles'* (p10). The reduction of health inequalities is not considered.

- **Department of Communications, Marine and Natural Resources**

This department's strategic publication does not refer to the variety of factors that can influence health or to the impact that its sector's activities can have on the health of the population. However it does state that it aims to *'optimise the contribution of the communications, energy, marine and natural resources sectors to...regionally balanced development and social inclusion'* (p7). Reference is frequently made to the concept of health and safety and to its provision in these sectors. The reduction of health inequalities is not considered.

- **Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs**

This department discusses a broad range of social, economic and environmental issues in its background and as a result realises its role in *'leveraging community capability to enhance...quality of life'* (p13). Specifically in relation to health it strives to *'enable people with drug problems to...improve overall health and social well-being'* (p49). The reduction of health inequalities is not considered.

- **Department of Defence**

This department does not mention the impact that the influences of its sector (civil defence, national security and emergency planning) can have on the health of the population, neither is the reduction of health inequalities considered.

- **Department of Education and Science**

This department recognises that *'education is a critical driver of economic success and social progress in modern society'* (p12). However, it does not acknowledge that education is also a major determinant of health. The factors which influence education are not discussed, nor how these can also impact on health. However its work is informed by the Health Strategy as demonstrated by collaboration with the health sector on a variety of issues. In relation to the health education that it provides, it states that *'the department is committed to contributing and improving health status in line with the National Health Strategy'* (p65).

- **Department of Environment, Heritage and local Government**

The mission statement of this department says that it aims *'to promote sustainable development and improve the quality of life'* (p5). The department acknowledges that it has responsibility for housing, the environment, physical and spatial planning and for local government and as a result recognises that a variety of influences and the activities of the department can *'impact significantly on the daily lives of all people in this country'* (p20). One objective of the department is to protect human health, with specific reference being made to protection from nuclear materials and to the provision of health and safety. Reducing health inequalities in the population is not considered.

- **Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment**

The environmental analysis outlined in relation to the work of this department does not seem to highlight the effects that these issues can have on health. As a result, the objectives of the strategy do not specifically aim to improve the health of the population or reduce health inequalities.

- **Department of Finance**

The strategy publication of this department outlines the challenges that are posed by Ireland's changing environment, but there is no acknowledgement that these can also influence health. Improving the health of the population or the reduction of health inequalities is not mentioned. However, the department does state that in measuring the progress of its strategy, a broad range of indicators will be used, one of which will have regard to government policy in relation to health status.

- **Department of Foreign Affairs**

The work of this department has a basic focus on protecting Irish citizens abroad, in addition to acting on its foreign policy objectives. Specific considerations for the influences on health, improving the health of the population or reducing health inequalities are not discussed.

- **Department of Health and Children**

Essentially, this department aims to *'enhance the health and well-being of all...by putting health at the centre of public policy'* (p7). Specific reference is made to the determinants and their interaction with health. To address this, one strategic objective seeks to *'provide a policy and legal framework for the protection and promotion of health and well-being which gives active support to improving the quality of life and targets inequalities in health'* (p8). In addition the department also aims to ensure that *'health is a core element of the strategic planning of other relevant government departments'* (p41).

- **Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform**

In this department's environmental analysis, issues that inform the development of strategic objectives are outlined. Their interaction with health is not considered. *'Criminological research would suggest that socio-economic factors...contribute to persistent juvenile offending...tend to be compounded by personal and family based issues...and educational failure'* (p28). However one objective has a specific focus on confronting drug use and trafficking via the National Drugs Strategy, *'with a view to ensuring a high level of health protection, well-being and social cohesion'* (p16).

- **Department of Social and Family Affairs**

Political and economic factors, in addition to the social context, are detailed and stated as impacting on the work of the department. However there is no acknowledgement of the fact that this context and these factors also impact on health. Protecting the well-being of children forms one departmental objective. The aim of reducing health inequalities does not feature.

- **Department of the Taoiseach**

This department acknowledges that inequalities and exclusion are present in society and that they influence life chances and opportunities. The implications for health have not been highlighted but reference is made to a variety of health-related strategies, for example *'Quality and Fairness'*, which will be supported in its implementation.

- **Department of Transport**

This department recognises emerging trends which pose particular transport-related challenges and in addition acknowledges that *'these trends can sometimes have an adverse affect on the health and quality of life of those affected'* (p10). It also recognises that its own work *'can make a vital difference to...the quality of citizens' lives'* (p2).