Data Sustainability: Broad action areas to develop data systems strategically

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Abstract

There is an increasing recognition, across multiple sectors, of the importance of understanding and reporting on children’s lives. In order to ensure this can happen in a sustainable way, appropriate systems and processes must be in place. Such systems require a strategic approach to assessing data and research needs, identifying gaps in the knowledge base and setting out a detailed plan to meet those gaps. This paper focuses on meeting data gaps and reports on a broad action areas that emerged in the course of developing a national strategy for research and data on children’s lives. These areas include the collection of additional data, improving analysis, compiling administrative and service data, standardising and harmonising various measures, carrying out comparisons and strategically disseminating findings. When applied in a strategic way, these broad action areas can provide a framework for the development and sustainability of data and research. Concrete examples of individual actions are presented in this paper, highlighting, in particular, the potential for meeting data gaps by making better use of existing information, including survey and administrative data sources.

Keywords

Data sustainability; Administrative data; Data systems; Ireland, Children
1.1 Background

There is an increasing commitment by statutory and non-statutory organisations, across many countries, to develop child well-being indicator sets and to report on them. Many different approaches to developing such indicator sets have been adopted and these have been broadly categorised by Bauer et al., (2003, p.107) as data-driven, policy-driven and theory-driven. Data-driven approaches, they note, select indicators on the basis of the availability of data. This means that existing data are exploited to best characterise the state of the subject area under investigation. This type of approach, is dependent on the availability of comprehensive data which may not be available in the absence of a sustainable and strategic approach to its availability. Consequently, adopting this type of approach can result in poor construct validity, where only a small number of areas of children’s lives are measured and where the predominant perspective is that of stakeholders other than children themselves. For the policy-driven approach, indicators are developed for those phenomena that are currently on the political agenda and for which data are requested by policy-makers. Ben-Arieh et al (2001) suggest it is essential that indicators are useful for policy-makers and they therefore stress the importance of including policy-makers in the process of developing indicators. While this approach ensures the indicator set is accepted by, and relevant to, policy-makers, the policy imperative of today may not be the policy imperative of tomorrow and consequently, adopting a policy-driven approach requires considerable planning and foresight to ensure the appropriate data are in place when needed. A theory-driven approach is generally defined as one that focuses on selecting the best possible indicators from a theoretical point of view. There has been considerable theoretical development since the 1970s particularly in areas such as children's resilience, pathways, life course, outcomes and children's voice. Given the emergent nature of the literature in these areas, it is not surprising that can be difficulties in identifying appropriate indicators and supporting this with valid and reliable measures. This has been identified as an issue by others including, for example, Niemeijer, (2002) and Rigby and Kohler, 2002) who noted many restrictions on the outcomes of this type of approach. The literature recommends that all three approaches be combined in order to ‘arrive at measurable, meaningful indicators that are considered in the policy-making process' (Bauer et al, 2003, p. 107). One example of how all three approaches were combined can be seen in the development of a national set of child well-being indicators in Ireland (Hanafin and Brooks, 2005).

The development and availability of sustainable data systems for reporting on children's lives is important because without this, the capacity to report on child wellbeing will be limited. Indeed, it is clear that irrespective of the approach adopted to indicator development, for
child wellbeing indicators to be valid, reliable and comprehensive, consideration and strategic development must take place around data systems.

There is some agreement that, irrespective of the approach adopted, it can be challenging to ensure that appropriate data are available to report on child well-being indicator sets. Moore (1997) suggests that indicator sets need to meet criteria such as:

- comprehensive coverage;
- information about children of all ages;
- positive as well as negative areas of children’s lives;
- subjective and objective understandings;
- geographically detailed;
- reliable;
- cost-efficient;
- comparable over time;
- easily understood;
- reflect social goals.

It is clear, however, that in the absence of a strategic and considered approach to building good data systems, the criteria outlined above are unlikely to be met. Indeed, the challenges in meeting these criteria in reporting on child well-being in Ireland have been well documented (e.g. Hanafin and Brooks, 2009; Brooks et al, 2010). The identification of these challenges resulted in a process to develop National Strategy for Research and Data on Children’s Lives for the purpose of ensuring the availability of good quality, comprehensive data on children's lives. The Strategy was published in 2011 and has as its overall aim that children and young people will benefit from improved understandings of their lives. During its formulation, a number of broad action areas emerged and these proved to be very helpful in meeting information gaps in a systematic way. In addition, they provided a consistent and robust structure for the process of negotiating and agreeing actions across a range of agencies and organisations with various remits in the domains of research, policy-making and service provision.

The outcome of this process led to notable improvements in the data used to report on child well-being in Ireland (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2013a) and also to improvements in research and data on children’s lives more broadly. Some improvements were implemented in the process of developing the Strategy (2008-2011), while others will be implemented over the lifetime of the Strategy (2011-2016). An update on the implementation of the Action Plan for the National Strategy for Research
and Data on Children’s Lives has recently been published (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2013b).

The broad-ranging, inclusive and multi-faceted approach taken to the development of the Strategy facilitated the emergence of key action areas that, it is suggested here, are transferrable across geography, age group, focus and stakeholder.

### 1.2 Methodology for development

A number of key questions were used to guide the generation of a robust and appropriate evidence base to support the development of the National Strategy for Research and Data on Children’s Lives. These were:

- What does a research and data strategy include (for example, what are the core elements, the nature, scope and content of existing research and data strategies)?
- What are the critical issues that need to be taken into account in the development of a research and data strategy?
- How do good data and information systems operate – what are the challenges and enhancers and how can these be reflected in a strategic approach to research and data?
- How can policy relevant to children’s lives and, in particular, the information needs generated by such policy be taken into account in the development of a research and data strategy?
- What is the scope and extent of the existing body of data and research on children’s lives?
- Whose views need to be reflected in the development of a strategy for research and data, and how best can we ensure that the views of children and young people are included?

A systematic and iterative approach was taken to developing an evidence base with elements that could address each of these questions. An overview of these is presented in Figure 1 and described in more detail below.
A summary of each of these elements is now presented.

A review of national and international research and data strategies with a focus on social statistics was conducted with the purpose of providing guidance on the vision, components, objectives and overall structure for this National Strategy for Research and Data on Children’s Lives. A total of 15 strategies was included in this analysis, 5 of which were published by Government departments in Ireland and the remainder from international sources. While there was much variation in the type and focus of these strategies, common themes were evident and a number of overarching areas for development were identified. These areas, which were instrumental in scoping out the initial set of broad action areas, included:

- workforce development;
- improvement in evaluation and research;
- development of registers and clinical information;
- knowledge development;
- knowledge creation;
- sharing data;
- capacity and resources;
- maximising the value of existing data;
- promoting the effective use of statistics;
- data holding and maintenance;
- promoting evidence-based policy-making;
- promoting data awareness and analytical competency;
- agreed priorities;
- development of action plan for agreed areas.

A small number of other areas were also identified within the overall structure of the data strategies reviewed, although they appeared only once or twice. These were areas relating to categories of information, typologies, international obligations, critical success factors, cross-cutting issues and broad infrastructures required.

A comprehensive literature review was carried out to examine the national and international literature and highlight key points for consideration in the development of a
strategy for research and data. This included consideration of the literature on data integration models, the legislative context in Ireland, data protection and other ethical considerations. Existing international data strategies were considered, as were selected models of research utilisation (Gavin et al, 2011).

_A cross-national case study using multiple case sites_ showed how data structures and processes can influence the utilisation of data on children's lives by key stakeholders across a range of data systems in Ireland, the UK, Finland, Sweden and Canada. These countries were identified as having, or being in the process of developing, a national data system incorporating at least one of the following: children's outcomes, the relationships around children, formal services available or the links between these components (Clerkin et al, 2011).

_A review of national policy recommendations_ was carried out for the purposes of ensuring support for current and future policy developments. This review, focused on national policies published between 2000 and 20081, identified recommendations made in national policy that were relevant to children's lives and focused particularly on recommendations that referred to research or data. A database of these recommendations (n=1,800) was compiled and each item was coded in a way that allowed for comparison with the findings emerging from the other sources of information such as the inventory of data sources and the consultation.

_An inventory of national data sources_ was compiled to allow for analysis of the extent and type of existing data collection on children's lives and to provide a basis for systematic comparison between policy information needs identified and existing data available. This inventory consisted of data sources identified as having relevance to children's lives, being national in coverage and expected to be conducted regularly or continuously. An analysis of the variance in collection of key socio-demographic measures across data sources was conducted and a summary of meta-data for each data holding was prepared and made available as an online inventory of data sources on children's lives. This is available at [http://www.dcyta.gov.ie/inventory-of-data-sources-on-childrens-lives](http://www.dcyta.gov.ie/inventory-of-data-sources-on-childrens-lives) (Brooks et al, 2012).

_A structured consultation process_ was conducted to obtain the views of a wide range of stakeholders, including children and young people, data users and producers, policy and service personnel, the research and academic community, and the general public. A range of mechanisms were employed for the consultations, including facilitated workshops, an

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1 This period aligned with the period covered in the National Children's Strategy (2000) up to the commencement of the development of the National Strategy for Research and Data on Children's Lives.
on-line structured consultation and targeted bilateral discussions. An analysis of responses to the structured on-line consultation and of the proceedings of the consultation with children and young people has been published (Roche et al, 2011).

1.3 Identification of gaps

The next stage in the process of developing the research and data strategy set out to identify the main research and data gaps arising, which required an integration of the findings from each of the key stages above. This was done using a triangulated approach, underpinned by a conceptualisation of childhood that has been informed by current theory and policy concerns on children's lives.

This conceptualisation acknowledges the complex, multidimensional and interlinked nature of children's lives and has been embedded within Irish policy since the publication of the National Children's Strategy in 2000, where a conceptualisation of children's lives, called the whole-child perspective, was described. This conceptualisation is coherent with current thinking around children's lives and is consistent with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) work in this area, which draws attention to the various systems that interact together as important influences on children's lives. These systems include proximal and distal environments, as well as the relationships between them. Bronfenbrenner's later work (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 1998) and that of other authors such as Lerner (1998) highlight the interlinked contexts, dimensions and relationships that influence children, while also explicitly recognising that children and young people influence (as well as being influenced by) the context within which they are situated. These influences were operationalised in the process of developing the Research and Data Strategy through making them explicit in the coding process. Specifically, codes were applied where information was required, already existed or people wanted in respect of:

- the child / young person
- Immediate family
- Wider family/friends
- Community / voluntary / statutory sector

One example of this is where information was available at the level of family or household but not available at the level of the child. The solution to this is presented below in example 1 below where, in addition to analysing data at the level of the household, it was also analysed at the level of the child.
Domains relating to the active developing child as well as key influences, services and supports were also incorporated into the coding frame. These took account of areas such as health, active learning, relationships, safety and participation.

There was also coherence with the life cycle approach adopted within national policy in Ireland which categorises the population children, people of working age, older people and people with disabilities. Since this approach was first set out by the National Economic and Social Council (2005), it has guided much policy and strategic development (e.g. Department of An Taoiseach, 2006) and it has been instrumental in privileging children within the overall context of Irish society. Within this overarching framework, it has been possible to further consider different periods in children's lives, thus allowing for a focus on the pre-natal, infancy, early and middle childhood periods, followed by adolescence and transition to adulthood. Although each of these periods have commonalities, they also have features unique to that time in children's lives and this was particularly useful in assisting the identification of gaps in the research and data. For example, it was clear that despite some developments, there were still data deficits in respect of key areas in the middle childhood period. Again, this was an area that was highlighted for development across a number of strategic action areas.

In addition to the issues raised above, some consideration was given to a life course perspective (Kuh et al, 2003; Kuh and Ben-Shlomo, 2004), which focuses explicit attention on trajectories, transitions, turning points and adaptive strategies, as well as the cultural and contextual interlinkages already taken into account by Bronfenbrenner's model. MacMillan & Copher (2005), define Trajectories as the "The temporal continuity of roles or experience that vary in duration" (p859) with parenthood as one example of a role in life. Pies et al. (2012) in presenting an overview of the life-course conclude that this perspective allows for a focus on cumulative risk over time of the complex interplay of various behavioural, psychological, environmental and social risk and protective factors for any individual. This type of analysis requires longitudinal methodologies that can measure these appropriately and accurately and this was reflected in the findings of the gap analysis which identified a number of areas which required longitudinal studies including, for example, with those children in the care of the State.

The dynamic nature of these elements facilitated a focus on the breadth of experiences and outcomes around children's lives and on the different outcomes that can be achieved despite similar pathways.
Gap analysis using triangulation

Stake (2000, p. 443) writes that ‘triangulation has been generally considered a process of using multiple perceptions to clarify meaning, verifying the repeatability of an observation or interpretation’. It has also been argued that use of triangulation increases the probability that findings and interpretations are credible (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). At the outset of this development, triangulation was identified as a means by which data from each of the studies carried out could be merged for the purpose of ensuring comprehensiveness as well as credibility. Figure 2 shows the steps taken.

Figure 2: Steps in triangulation process

Policy recommendations designated ‘data’ or ‘research’ were examined and the related data or research need documented. These were separated into two listings: one relating to content and the other to data and research processes.

Other policy recommendations were examined to identify any additional data or research needs arising.

Consultation responses were examined to identify any further data or research needs arising, not identified in the review of policy. The findings from this analysis were collated with those from the policy recommendations.

The inventory of data sources and related key variable analysis were scrutinised to identify any data sources that could meet the needs identified. Coding was applied to each variable and, together with a keyword search, was used to interrogate the inventory.

Two sets of proposed actions were drafted according to data content and data processes.
The approach adopted allowed for:

- data and research priority areas, as presented in policy documents and in the consultation, to be categorised according to a holistic conceptualisation of children and linked to current national policy, to be identified across each of the strands in this policy development;
- a comparison to be made between these emergent areas and data and research already in place;
- identification of key areas remaining to be prioritised;
- development of a set of broad action areas to meet gaps.

Two issues emerged throughout this process. First, some gaps identified subsequently turned out to arise from a lack of knowledge about the availability of information. In other words, some submissions made in the consultation highlighted gaps and priorities for which data and research were already available but of which people were unaware. The systematisation of the process of comparison between gaps identified and the data available in the inventory meant that these areas were easily identifiable. Secondly, as the development of the National Strategy did not take place in isolation, in some instances research and data developments taking place concurrently were found that met particular needs that had been identified. Information on such actions emerged during the bilateral consultations and subsequent ongoing dialogue. However, the absence of a central repository meant that this information was not available in a coordinated or comprehensive way and again, this was identified as an area for action in the Strategy.

1.4 Preliminary broad areas emerging to meet data and research gaps

The development of a preliminary set of broad areas for meeting these data and research gaps was helpful and in setting these out, research and data are differentiated (see Table 2). For the purposes of guiding the development of the Strategy, the following definitions were used:

- **Research** is defined as ‘the search for new knowledge using scientific methodologies and approaches’ (Iwaniec, 1998).
- **Data** is defined as ‘the physical representation of information in a manner suitable for communication, interpretation or processing by human beings or by automatic means’ (Eurostat, 2010).
Table 2: Preliminary broad data and research action areas

### BROAD ACTION AREAS TO MEET DATA NEEDS

1) **Collect additional data** through adding question(s) to existing survey; continue and develop established data collection; develop new administrative datasets, link datasets; develop new data sources; develop new methodologies; extend and link existing data collection.

2) **Improve analysis of existing data** by examining the potential to re-analyse existing data; carry out new analysis of existing data and/or extension of data collection; undertake an assessment of administrative data.

3) **Make better use of existing data**: Compile administrative data on services; compile directory of services.

4) **Standardise and harmonise**: Establish standard measures/harmonise measures across surveys.

5) **Carry out comparisons**: Undertake local, national and international comparisons.

6) **Strategically disseminate findings** through best practice in knowledge transfer.

### BROAD ACTION AREAS TO MEET RESEARCH NEEDS

1) **Make better use of existing material** through synthesis of literature; mining existing research sources, including longitudinal study data; carry out policy analysis; review and identify best practices.

2) **Carry out new research** by undertaking new studies; adopt multidisciplinary approaches to give new insights; carry out scoping studies on key issues.

3) **Improve service evaluation** by adopting better methodologies.

4) **Build knowledge transfer capacity**.

Using the preliminary broad areas identified in Table 2 potential actions were identified to meet each of the gaps outlined. Overall, this process resulted in approximately 900 potential actions for development and improvement of information on children’s lives. These potential actions were then subjected to review through a policy–research knowledge exchange process, using a number of different consultative approaches including bilateral consultations and thematic consultative workshops with key actors and experts.

The overall aim of the Strategy was to set in place a comprehensive and sustainable infrastructure, and many of the actions specific to improving reporting on children’s well-being through indicators sets were agreed under Area 1 of the preliminary broad Area 1 (collecting additional data through different means) and Area 2 (improve analysis of existing data). Some examples of how these actions have been implemented in practice are now presented.
Example 1: Improved analysis of existing dataset using EU-SILC survey data

The Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) is an annual survey conducted by the Irish Central Statistics Office (CSO) to obtain information on the income and living conditions of different types of households. The survey also collects information on poverty and social exclusion. A representative random sample of households throughout the country is approached to provide the required information. This data collection first commenced in 2003 and is now conducted throughout the European Union, where the output is harmonised to facilitate European comparisons (see http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics_explained/index.php/Glossary:EU-SILC).

The European Council and European Commission have given high policy priority to fighting poverty and social exclusion, and these data are used to provide comparable and timely statistics to monitor progress. Data are collated in both cross-sectional (pertaining to a given time in a certain time period) and longitudinal (pertaining to individual-level changes over time) dimensions, and consequently, certain households are surveyed on an annual basis.

In Ireland, annual SILC data have been published from 2004 to 2010 on income, poverty and deprivation rates. The unit of analysis, however, was the household, rather than children. A new analysis of the dataset over these years has now been carried out by the CSO, looking specifically at the circumstances of children aged less than 18 years (Central Statistics Office, 2011). The findings proved valuable in disentangling the challenges for households with children compared to those without children. This is illustrated below in the improved understandings achieved from the operationalisation of this specific action.

Some of the key findings were:

- In 2010, the at-risk of poverty rate for those living in households with children was 18.7% compared with 11.8% for those in households without children. A similar pattern was evident between these two household types across all years (2004-2010).
- Excluding family allowances from the analysis for 2010 would increase the at-risk of poverty rate for people living in households with children, from 18.7% to 38.6%. This shows the effect that such family-related social transfers had in shielding individuals from poverty in households with children.
- Among children, the highest at-risk of poverty rate in all years occurred in the 12-17 age group. In 2010, this rate was 26.1%, compared with a rate of 19.2% for children aged 6-11 and 12.0% for children aged 0-5.
- Again, in 2010 the level of enforced deprivation (lacking two or more basic items) for people living in households with children was 28.2%, compared with a level of 14.6% for those living in households without children.
- In all years, the rate of consistent poverty was higher for people living in households with children than for those living in households without children (8.0% compared with 3.8% respectively in 2010).

Example 2: Build on current surveys

Many organisations have made investments in conducting large-scale surveys that focus on specific areas of children's lives and that have cross-country comparability. Examples of studies used to report on children's well-being in Ireland are the Programme of International Student Assessment (PISA) and the Health Behaviour of School-aged Children (HBSC) surveys, each conducted every 4 years. Both of these surveys comprise self-report, self-completion questionnaires completed by children in schools. The PISA survey also includes an assessment of reading, mathematics and science literacy. On request from the Research Division within the Department of Health and Children, additional questions were included in both these surveys (2009 and 2010 respectively) on ethnicity and immigration. In respect of ethnicity, a question was included on whether the child was a member of the Traveller community; children were identified as Traveller children if they answered ‘Yes’ to the question ‘Are you a member of the Traveller community?’ 2% of respondents in the 2009 PISA Survey indicated that they were. The same question was also included in the HBSC survey. Another question included in the 2010 HBSC Survey was whether the child had a long-term disability; these children were identified if they answered ‘Yes’ to the question ‘Do you have a long-term illness, disability, or a medical condition (like diabetes, asthma, allergy or cerebral palsy) that has been diagnosed by a doctor?’

As a result of this intervention, as well as being able to report on the numbers/rates/percentages of Traveller children and children with a chronic illness or disability, it was also possible in the 2012 State of the Nation’s Children to report on areas of their well-being (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2013a). The benefits of doing this are illustrated below in the findings below from the PISA (2009) and HBSC (2010) surveys, which clearly

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2 The term "Traveller community" is defined in Irish law through the Equal Status Act as: "the community of people who are commonly called Travellers and who are identified (both by themselves and others) as people with a shared history, culture and traditions including, historically, a nomadic way of life on the island of Ireland."
demonstrate differences in their well-being, challenge stereotypes and identify areas for intervention:

- When compared to other children, children with a disability and/or chronic illness were less likely to report that they find it easy to talk to their mother when something is really bothering them. This difference was statistically significant. There were no significant differences observed between Traveller and other children (HBSC Survey, 2010).
- The percentages of Traveller children and immigrant children who reported that their parents spend time just talking with them several times a week did not differ significantly from the corresponding percentages for other children (PISA Survey, 2009).
- The percentage of children aged 10-17 who report never smoking has increased from 50.8% in 1998 to 73.5% in 2010. Cigarette smoking is significantly higher among Traveller children, who are also more likely to report being drunk at least once in the last 30 days (HBSC Survey, 2010).
- When compared to other children, Traveller children were less likely to report that reading was one of their favourite hobbies. This difference was statistically significant (PISA Survey, 2009).

Example 3: Improvements in administrative data sources by increased standardisation in reporting on children’s services and amenities at both national and sub-national level

One area for development in the National Strategy for Research and Data on Children’s Lives, 2011-2016 related to the increased standardisation in reporting on children’s services and amenities at both national and sub-national level. Commitments to this aim were given by a number of different data holders in Government departments and agencies. Included among them was the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, which committed to examining options for increasing the level of detail on children through analysis of the data from its Triennial Assessment of Housing Needs, conducted every 3 years.³ Data improvements to be made in the Department’s next assessment (2013) will include additional information relating to children, such as dates of birth and number of children in each household.

³ Data represent net need for social housing, meaning households that have been assessed as being in need of either Local Authority or voluntary housing. The terminology used to describe a Local Authority’s housing needs varies. These figures are net of duplicate applications (i.e. applicants who have applied to more than one Local Authority).
Up to now, the biennial reports on the *State of the Nation’s Children* have drawn on data from this source for the following indicator: *Number of households with children identified as being in need of social housing*. The next edition of the report, in 2014, will contain more detailed information on children in these situations.

### 1.5 Final broad areas

Considerable synthesis and analysis of feedback took place in the course of extensive bilateral and group consultations with stakeholders. In addition, the broader literature was reviewed throughout the course of the development and allowed for refinement of the initial broad areas identified.

The final broad areas developed for the National Strategy for Research and Data on Children's Lives incorporates each of the initial areas outlined in the preliminary approach (*see Table 2*), together with additional areas. Each action area is now specifically linked to one of the 5 key objectives, as set out in Table 3.

#### Table 3: Final action areas linked to objectives of the National Research and Data Strategy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Objective</th>
<th>Action area</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A To generate a comprehensive and coherent understanding of children's development, needs and appropriate supports and services</td>
<td>1. Build and improve both survey and administrative data around children's lives. 2. Support and promote maximum use of existing information. 3. Prioritise and inform the generation of new research and data.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B To develop research capacity in the area of children’s research and data</td>
<td>4. Build capacity in the area of children’s research and data, with a particular focus on supporting quantitative analysis.</td>
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<tr>
<td>C To develop, support and promote good infrastructure in the area of children’s research and data</td>
<td>5. Contribute to and inform national developments around research and data on children’s lives. Provide a mechanism for the continued development of appropriate methodologies and concepts in relation to data on children’s lives. 6. Develop an overarching governance structure for research around children, including ethical review.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D To improve evaluation and monitoring of children’s services in Ireland at local and national level</td>
<td>7. Develop coherent approaches to evaluation of services, supports and interventions around children’s lives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E To support a continuum of research and data use within policy and practice settings</td>
<td>8. Improve awareness, knowledge and understanding of the potential of research and data in policy and practice settings. Contribute...</td>
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to change in attitudes, perceptions and ideas in relation to utilisation of information around children's lives. Provide resources and support for utilisation of research and data in policy and practice.
1.6 Discussion and conclusion

There is an imperative today to improve our understanding of children’s lives, particularly with the ever-increasing number of reports that compare child well-being in different jurisdictions, in different life situations and with different life chances. In Ireland, a period of strategic development on measuring child well-being began in 2003 and the route has since included the publication of the following documents:

A National Set of Child Well-being Indicators (2005), in which a multi-stage incremental approach was taken to the development of a National indicator set, in consultation with policy-makers, service providers, academics, parents and children themselves.

Four biennial State of the Nation's Children Reports (starting in 2006) which are based on the National Set of Child Well-Being Indicators, and draw on available administrative, survey and Census data.


Throughout the course of developing a Research and Data Strategy, there have been improvements in data and research, and through these in understandings of children’s lives. It has become possible to comprehensively chart the well-being of children in Ireland, to track changes over time, to benchmark progress in Ireland relative to other countries and to highlight policy issues arising for all children as well as those populations of children with additional needs.

The methodology underpinning the National Strategy for Research and Data included an extensive examination of the existing situation, a study of good practices elsewhere and a consultative and participative approach that included all stakeholders, particularly children and young people. These activities allowed a preliminary set of broad action areas to be developed, which proved helpful in identifying and meeting gaps in the research and data.

Extensive consultation, as well as constant review of the literature in an iterative process, resulted in the final set of actions, which appears at this time to be comprehensive and fit for purpose. The Action Plan in the National Strategy sets out 59 agreed actions, to be undertaken by 23 different organisations, and the recent Action Plan Update report on the implementation of these actions demonstrates both the feasibility and effectiveness of having adopted this type of approach (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2013b).
In examining mechanisms through which research and data gaps can be met, there can be a focus on developing new surveys or administrative data systems. It is clear, however, that much can be done by building on existing developments and this, ultimately, presents a better opportunity to build a sustainable data system. The examples presented here illustrate the extent to which this has been possible and the overall strategic development assists in:

- providing leadership in the area of research and data on children's lives;
- facilitating a comprehensive approach to understanding the lives of all children, with a particular focus on the lives of children with additional needs;
- identifying priority areas, minimising duplication of effort and maximising value for money;
- coordinating research and data developments of relevance to children's lives;
- systematically building research, evaluation and utilisation capacity.

These, ultimately, are the building blocks of sustainable and continuous improvement in data, so that reporting on children’s well-being becomes possible irrespective of whether the approach adopted to indicators is theory-driven, policy-driven or data-driven.
References


