

# College of Occupational Therapists

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Dear Gail

## **Re: *Research for Better Health and Social Care***

Thank you very much for providing the opportunity for the College of Occupational Therapists to contribute to your consultation on the Implementation Plan for the new HSC R&D Strategy *Research for Better Health and Social Care*.

This document resonates closely with the interests of occupational therapists in Northern Ireland, who contribute to the delivery of health, social care and public health services. The profession has a number of high profile research leaders in Northern Ireland and we are keen to support the development of a workforce that has increased access to lead and undertake research, to develop research careers and to work within settings that enable patients and carers to have involvement with research activity.

The 5 objectives that have been identified to underpin this new strategy resonate clearly with the occupational therapy profession and its own research drivers. The need to be able to offer evidence-based services that can deliver effective outcomes for an increasing population of older people and those managing long-term conditions are also closely aligned with the occupation-focussed approach that occupational therapists bring to the workforce.

In response to the questions posed in your consultation document we would like to provide the following responses which reflect comments received from members of the College of Occupational Therapists:

### **What do you think our implementation priorities should be?**

The wording of Objective 3 is most pertinent here:

*To support all those who contribute to health and social care research, development and innovation by enhancing our research infrastructure, across the health and social care community benefitting from local, national and international partnerships.* This would involve encouraging occupational therapists to go into research and supporting those clinicians that want to participate in research and can bring excellent clinical research topics by matching them with researchers who have skills in methods and statistical analysis.



By developing a robust clinical academic career pathway for occupational therapists and other AHPs who can learn research skills alongside their clinical development.

**What will help us to get furthest, fastest?**

- Part A - What works well and what could be done better?

Supporting clinicians to develop research skills and career pathways is key to progress. Clinical academic careers for nurses, midwives and AHPs work exceptionally well and need to be developed better in Northern Ireland. Alongside this is the need to develop workplace cultures in which engagement in research or other evidence-based activity is encouraged and expected.

- Part B - Opportunities for and threats to success?

Creating opportunities for occupational therapists and other allied health professionals to become engaged with research activities as part of their roles is vital to progress. AHPs provide high value for money and are all at graduate level entry to their professions so have a level of existing research skills that they bring to the workplace.

There have so far been few opportunities for occupational therapists in clinical services to have involvement in research. Where this does happen, it is usually on top of existing work duties and is likely to involve activity done at home, out of work time and with no opportunity for time off in lieu. It has been noted that social workers and nurses can access protected time out to complete their research but this is not an opportunity that is available to allied health professionals. We identified in our 2013 British Journal of Occupational Therapy publication *A review of occupational therapy research and development activity in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales* that barriers to progressing research activity include time and research topic prioritisation, alongside workplace cultures that do not support or promote research-related activities.

The primary barriers to success are resources, time and lack of access to appropriate IT support. It is also difficult to create links with experts already involved in research and access to finding out about and accessing funding. The funding issue can be a significant issue where a research post may not be substantive or involves a considerable drop in income compared with a clinical role – either full or part-time.

**What do you see as your role in helping us deliver these priorities?**

The College of Occupational Therapists produces a considerable range of resources that members can access to support their research-related activities. This includes funding that is available from the UK Occupational Therapy Research Foundation to support the development of research capacity in the profession at doctoral or post-doctoral level.

Occupational therapists individually can assist delivery of the priorities by developing increased opportunities for clinical therapists to become involved with research and by close working relationships with academic partners at Ulster University.

I hope that this information will be useful as you implement the key objectives in your Research Strategy.

Yours sincerely

Dr Elizabeth White  
Assistant Director of Education and Research