

Research strategy 2020-2023

Using research to measure and assess delivery of the Commission's objectives



1. Introduction

The Commission's *Research and information management strategy 2015-2019* set out to establish baselines against which the Commission's statutory objectives could be measured and evaluated.

During the timeline of the original strategy two major themes emerged which were not as prominent when the strategy was launched. These were a significant court of appeal judgment, and the emergence of safeguarding within charities as a substantial issue of concern for the public and charity regulators. Additionally the COVID-19 pandemic emerged while the current strategy was being developed.

Over the next two years the Commission's main focus will be on implementing any Ministerial decision arising from the Court of Appeal judgment in February 2020 in the case of *McKee & Others v Charity Commission for Northern Ireland*. This judgment addressed a technical point of law, namely that all decisions must be made by the Board of Commissioners or a committee to include Commissioners with delegated authority, rather than Commission staff following manuals approved by Commissioners. The Commission welcomed this judgment as a vital clarification of the law, which is imperative to enable us to undertake our statutory duties and give charities confidence in the regulator and its powers.

In the years since the last research strategy was in operation the charity landscape has seen a number of significant developments, including the introduction of the *General Data Protection Regulations* and the creation of the *Fundraising Regulator*. During this period the Republic of Ireland also established the *Charities Regulatory Authority*. This is significant as many charities regulated by the Commission work in and across both jurisdictions.

Other significant factors which will influence the new research strategy include the need to assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the charity sector and the impact of safeguarding issues, within the charity sector, on the public's trust and confidence.

1.1 Developing Research strategy 2020-2023

The development of this strategy was informed through internal consultation with Commission staff, liaison with colleagues at the Charity Commission for England and Wales (CCEW) and the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator (OSCR), the Charities Regulatory Authority, and a review of existing strategies of other charity regulators.

A review of the implementation of the *Research and information management strategy 2015-2019* identified what was achieved, what was reprioritised and

what factors impacted delivery of the strategy. The recommendations of this review have informed the development of *Research strategy 2020-2023*.

The review of the previous strategy made five recommendations for the new strategy:

1. Conduct another extensive public trust and confidence survey among the Northern Ireland public. Assessing whether the baseline of public trust and confidence in the sector and Commission, established in 2015/2016, has changed. We will also examine whether the factors that influence this trust and confidence have altered.
2. To increase the Commission's contribution to the Open data portals and encourage the use of our data by third party researchers. The Commission is committed to making the data which we collect and process available to other stakeholders through the [open government licence for public sector information](#). As part of this research strategy we will increase the amount of data that is available under this licence and in accordance with the Data Protection Act 2018.
3. Renewed focus on stakeholder satisfaction surveys, including quality assurance of the Helper group programme and assessing the impact of the Commission's Communications.
4. The continuation of the various 'pop up' surveys used by the Commission after they have been reviewed and assessed for ongoing relevance.
5. Include consultations related to any legislative amendments arising from return of the Assembly and the Charities Protection and social investment Bill. Since the review was completed it has become clear that legislative amendments which follow the Charities Protection and Social Investment Act (England and Wales) are unlikely to be brought forward during the period of this plan. Likewise any consultation related to the outworking's of the legislative fix resulting from the Court of Appeal judgment is also unlikely to fall within the period of this plan. If the need for a consultation does arise it will be managed in accordance with the Commission's Participation Strategy.

Four of the reviews recommendations have been included in the new research strategy, which is subject to a number of constraints. Foremost of these is the likely impact on Commission resources of dealing with the legislative amendments designed to address the court of appeal judgment. Resources may also be required to address the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the sector, in terms of processing requests for mergers, closures or other amendments to how charities operate. The constraints on public sector budgets which have been a feature for several years are also expected to continue as the financial costs of the pandemic are addressed.

The *Research strategy 2020-2023* reflects these constraints and is primarily focussed on commissioning an extensive piece of research into the levels of

public trust and confidence in charities and identifying the drivers of this trust and confidence. It is also focused on the internal analysis of data held by the Commission and expanding the availability of this data to other stakeholders, third party researchers and the general public.

Primary elements of the strategy have also been designed to gauge the impact of the COVID-19 emergency, the Court of Appeal judgment and the issue of safeguarding on the public's trust and confidence.

1.2 Structure of the strategy

The research strategy is set out in five sections:

- Research objectives
- Resources
- Stakeholders
- Implementation
- Evaluation

2. Research objectives

The Charities Act (Northern Ireland) 2008 sets out six statutory objectives for the Commission, these are the:

- **Public confidence objective** - to increase public trust and confidence in charities.
- **Public benefit objective** - to promote awareness and understanding of the operation of the public benefit requirement.
- **Compliance objective** - to promote compliance by charity trustees with their legal obligations in exercising control and management of the administration of their charities.
- **Charitable resources objective** - to promote the effective use of charitable resources.
- **Accountability objective** - to enhance the accountability of charities to donors, beneficiaries and the public.
- **Delivery objective** - to manage the Commission as an effective and efficient non departmental public body.

The Commission sets out how it proposes to meet these objectives in its Strategic and Business Plans. The following research objectives have been drawn from these plans as developed for 2020-2023.

1. To gauge levels and drivers of public trust and confidence in charities, and in the Commission as the independent regulator of charities, in Northern Ireland.
2. To gauge awareness and understanding of the public benefit requirement.
3. To gauge the use of data collected by the Commission by a wide range of stakeholders.
4. To monitor the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the charity sector in Northern Ireland.
5. To identify emerging trends and patterns within the charity sector, particularly in terms of risks to charities.
6. To monitor engagement with the charity sector to identify potential improvements to the effective and efficient delivery of services to them.

3. Resources

Most of the research strategy objectives can be achieved through internal analysis of data gathered through the Commission's information management system. The key resource here is staff time. There are, however, some objectives that cannot be achieved without commissioning external research.

Commissioners acknowledging the significance of the *Public Trust and Confidence research* agreed at their meeting on 18 May 2020 to the assignment of significant research funds in advance of agreeing a full three year research strategy. A budget of £40,000 was then assigned to research for 2020/2021.

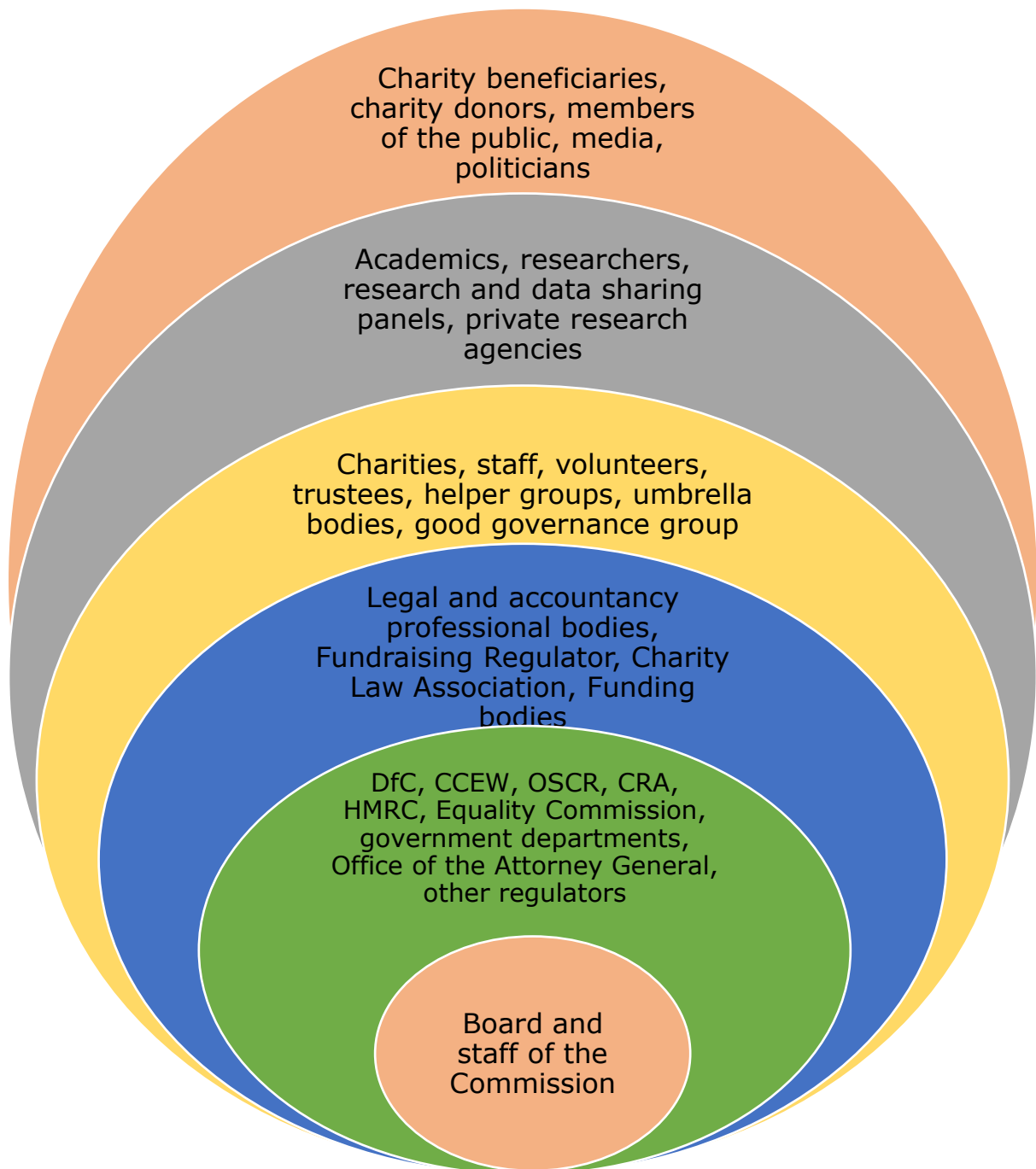
The budget was allocated as set out below:

Product / service	Commissioning cost (including VAT)
Bespoke questions added to nfpSynergy's ongoing Celtic Charity Awareness Monitor survey conducted in June/July 2020	£5,000
Public trust and confidence survey, commissioned from an independent external agency, Cognisense, with fieldwork beginning in January 2021.	£35,000
Total	£40,000

It is anticipated that the research budget for the last two years of the strategy will not exceed £10,000.

4. Stakeholders

In preparing the research strategy a range of stakeholders have been identified. In some cases, these groups and individuals are the audience for the research reports we publish. In other cases, they are a key source of information. A number are potential partners or collaborators on research projects.



5. Implementation

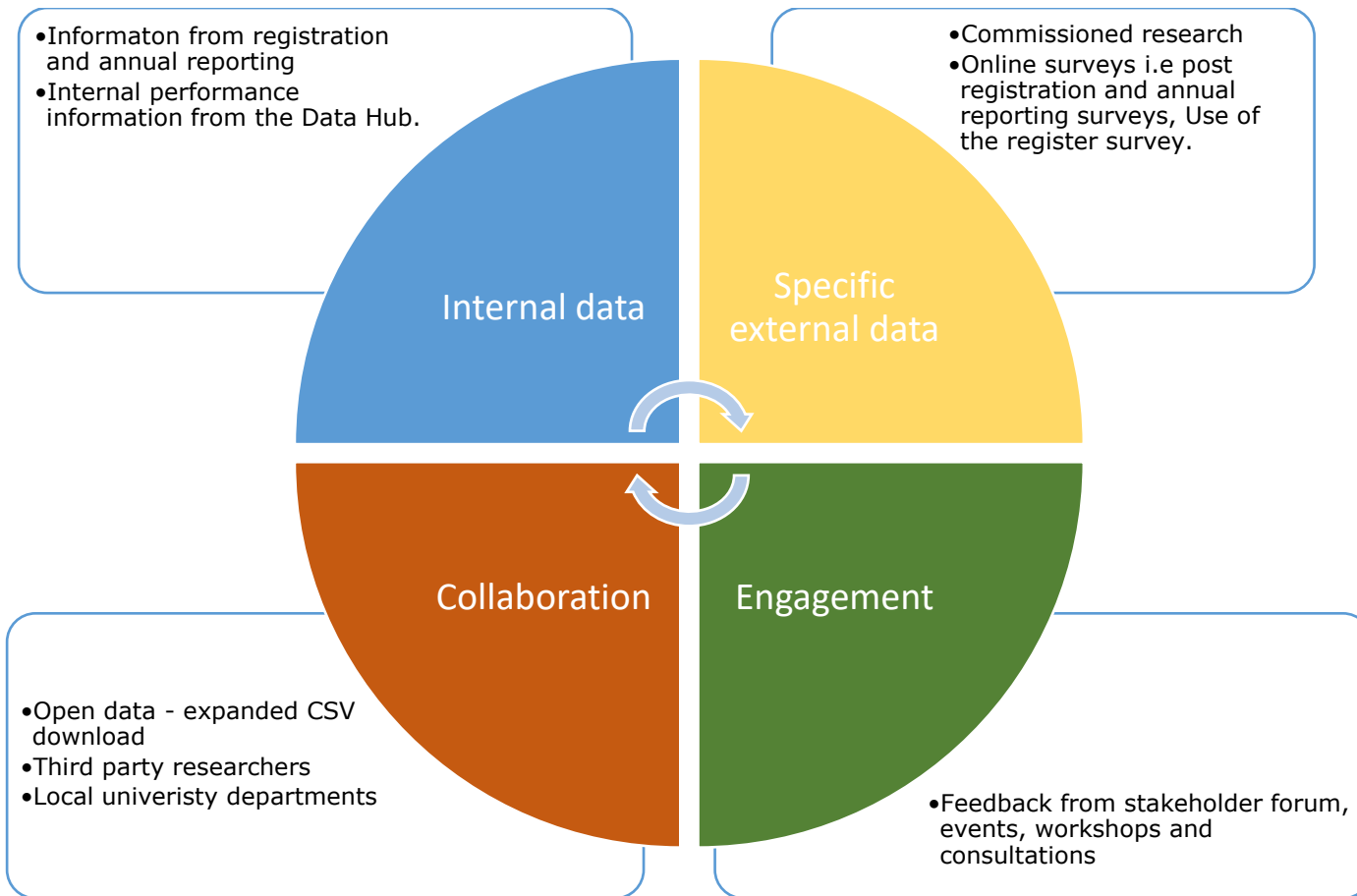
Implementation of the strategy is aligned with the Commission's strategic planning cycle and will be programmed and delivered as part of the Commission's policy development plan (PDP). Delivery will be managed through the policy and research team, including project management of a significant piece of external research to be conducted independently by a research company appointed by the Commission.

5.1 Tools

Specific tools that may be employed will include:

- Analysis of CRM / internal database information for specific programmes
- Analysis of logs, for example general enquiries log
- Online questionnaires and website pop-up surveys
- Commissioning of independent external research
- Expansion of Open data sharing.
- Work with academics and PhD researchers

The research methods used to deliver the strategy are primarily surveys and questionnaires, through which we will gather both quantitative and qualitative data. The research strategy relies on four main sources of information as set out in the diagram below:



5.2 Research plan

The tables below set out how we intend to achieve each of the research objectives. The table links the research objective to the relevant strategic objective set out in the Commission’s strategic plan and records the activities we will undertake to achieve the objective, what we will measure and a timeline for completion. Each objective has also been assigned a level of priority, either essential or desirable. If circumstances arise, for example the budget is reduced or internal resources become stretched, this prioritisation will help us to amend the research strategy in response.

Research objective 1: To gauge levels and drivers of public trust and confidence in charities, and in the Commission as the independent regulator of charities, in Northern Ireland.					
Aim	Strategic objective	How we will achieve this	What we will measure	Timeline	Priority
Measure the level of public trust and confidence in charities and the Commission as the charity regulator.	3, c 3, d	Commission extensive survey into reported levels of public trust and confidence among a representative sample of the Northern Ireland population.	<p>The survey will measure:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Reported levels of trust and confidence in charities operating in Northern Ireland. 2. Identify what factors influence trust in a charity for example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Existence of a charity regulator • Register of charities • Personal experience of charity • Reputation of a charity • Impact of negative/positive media coverage • Charity’s use of resources • Charity use of personal information 	Begin in Q.3 2020/2021 and complete by end of Q.4 – 2020/21.	Essential

		<p>Benchmark results with findings of research conducted by other charity regulators: CCEW, OSCR, CRA and ACNC.</p> <p>Disseminate results through launch of research report on findings, publication of three snapshot reports and by using these factors to inform our own communications and reports.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Charity approach to safeguarding • Registered with other regulators, i.e. Fundraising Regulator <p>3. Identify what factors influence trust in the Commission as charity regulator, for example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - awareness of COA judgment - media coverage 	<p>Begin in Q.3 2020/2021 and complete by end of Q.4 – 2020/21.</p> <p>Begin in Q.1 2021/2022 – complete Q.4 2021/2022</p>	
		Conduct an online survey of charity stakeholders.	Measure levels of trust and confidence in the Commission as a regulator and whether this has	Q.4 in 2021/2022	Desirable

			increased, decreased or stayed the same during the previous 12 months.	repeat annually	
Monitor the visibility of the Commission and awareness of its campaigns.		Place bespoke questions in ongoing surveys (i.e. Celtic Charity Awareness Monitor Survey) to assess awareness of Commission among the public.	<p>Bespoke questions to measure awareness of :</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Commission's Logo 2. Role of the Commission as charity regulator. 3. Legal requirement for charities in Northern Ireland to register with the Commission. 4. Issues of concern to the public. 5. Awareness of Commission campaigns. 4. Qualities most likely to increase the public's trust and confidence in a given charity. 5. Benchmark with previous surveys. 	Begin in Q.1 and complete by end of Q.3 - 2020/21	Essential
		Gather feedback from events and training workshops.	Analyse feedback from Commission feedback forms and online surveys.	Annually	Desirable
		Monitor impact of the Commission's Communications plan.	Analyse number of hits on news page of website, twitter followers, retweets, online/newspaper coverage.	Annually	Essential
		Place bespoke questions in ongoing MLA research provided by external research companies such	Awareness of Commission and its purpose.	Q. 3 2022/2023	Desirable

		as Ipsos Mori, Stratagem NI or CCAM.	Impact of COA judgment and effectiveness of Ministerial steps to remedy the issues raised.		
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Research objective 2: To gauge awareness and understanding of the public benefit requirement.					
Aim	Strategic objective	How we will achieve this	What we will measure	Timeline	Priority
Monitor levels of awareness and understanding of the public benefit requirement and identify factors that impact on this awareness and understanding.	3, a 3, b 3, c	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Identify indicators of awareness and understanding 2. Baseline charity awareness and understanding at point of registration using a post-registration survey and feedback from registration workshops. 3. Track awareness through post AMR submission survey. 4. Monitor changes in awareness and understanding over time <p>Gather feedback on public benefit guidance, identify who</p>	<p>Analyse responses to feedback from:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Registration workshops - Post-registration survey - Post AMR submission survey - Question re public benefit statement in <i>Use of the register</i> survey. <p>Analysis of number of <i>Concerns</i> received by Commission relate to Public Benefit.</p>	<p>Ongoing – report quarterly in 2020/2021 and biannually thereafter.</p> <p>Begin Q.3 2021/2022 and report biannually.</p> <p>Begin Q.3 2021/2022</p>	Essential

		is using the guidance, and whether there are any gaps that need to be filled.		and report biannually.	
		<p>Use online surveys and feedback forms to research awareness and understanding amongst other key stakeholders:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Professional advisers – legal and accountancy professionals, especially those in contact with Commission re: registration and annual reporting. 	<p>Analyse awareness of the public benefit requirements.</p> <p>Measure the use of the Commission’s public benefit guidance, toolkit and online tutorial.</p> <p>Measure awareness before and after reading the Commission’s guidance.</p>	Begin Q.2 2022/2023 and report annually.	Desirable
		Monitor quality of support from Helper group programme to the sector by surveying random sample of those who on the post registration, post AMR report being supported by a Helper group.	Analyse what support they sought, received, whether public benefit was included and their overall satisfaction with this support on public benefit.	Begin Q.2 2022/23 and annually thereafter.	Desirable

Research objective 3: To gauge the use of data collected by the Commission by a wide range of stakeholders.					
Aim	Strategic objective	How we will achieve this	What we will measure	Timeline	Priority
Publish a range of open data and research reports reflecting the size, diversity, operations and funding of the charity sector.	1, d 3, d	Analyse data held by the Commission through the registration and annual reporting programme. Liaise with IT Assist programme for identification of postcodes. Publish a snapshot report: picture of the charity sector in Northern Ireland for use by a range of stakeholders.	Analyse data from post registration online survey. Analyse data from online post AMR submission survey.	Biannually Biannually Annually	Essential
		Expand the amount and type of information available on the CSV download from the <i>register of charities</i> .		Begin scoping expansion in Q.2 - 220/2021 and complete and go live by Q.2 - 2021/2022	Essential

		Develop pop-up online survey to monitor use of the CSV download.	Analyse number of users, type of users (i.e. researchers, students) and how they will use this data.	Go live by Q.3 – 2021/2022. First report in Q.1 2022/23 and annually thereafter.	Desirable
		Develop pop-up ‘ <i>Use of the register</i> ’ survey. Update and disseminate guidance on how to use the register of charities for research purposes.	Analyse the number of visitors to the <i>register of charities</i> , what they are using it for, and whether they are getting the information they want/need from it.	Operational by Q.2 2021/2022 – analysis complete by Q.3 2021/2022. Annually thereafter. Q.3 - 2022/2023	Desirable
		Develop relationships with local university research department and third party researchers. Liaison with other organisations that hold relevant information and data, e.g. NI Assembly, NISRA.	Analyse contacts with researchers/students and their use of Commission data. Analyse contacts with researchers/students and their use of Commission data.	Begin Q.1 2022/23	Desirable

Research objective 4: To monitor the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the charity sector in Northern Ireland.

Aim	Strategic objective	How we will achieve this	What we will measure	Timeline	Priority
Address new risk issues emerging from the Covid-19 emergency within charities by undertaking targeted interventions such as thematic reviews.	2, d	<p>Establish mechanism to record Covid-19 related contact with the Commission.</p> <p>Twice yearly reports to SMT on issues and risks within charity sector emerging from Covid-10 emergency.</p>	Analyse the number and types of Covid-19 related queries, requests for information, SIRs, MOMs, concerns and closures.	<p>Q.3 2020/2021</p> <p>Q.4 2020/2021</p> <p>Biannually</p>	Essential
		Review and disseminate guidance and FAQs relevant to COVID-19 related issues.	Analyse the number and types of Covid-19 related queries, requests for information, SIRs, MOMs, concerns and closures.	Q.1 2021/2022 and biannually thereafter.	Desirable
Liaise with other charity regulators and umbrella		Include Covid-19 headline figures in half yearly reports to	Data from analysis of Covid-19 recording	Q.3 2021/2022	Desirable

groups re: impact of Covid-19 on their charity sectors.		international regulators group.	mechanism outlined above.		
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Research objective 5: To identify emerging trends and patterns within the charity sector, particularly in terms of risks to charities.					
Aim	Strategic objective	How we will achieve this	What we will measure	Timeline	Priority
Address current and emerging risks within the charity sector by undertaking targeted interventions such as thematic reviews.	2, d	We will publish: - a thematic report on identified risk patterns and trends. - a regulatory snap shot report	Analysis of safeguarding information provided as part of an Expression of Intent. Analysis of Serious Incident Reports received by the Commission related to: -safeguarding - Financial crime, Fraud and cyber crime	Q.4 2021/2022 and annually thereafter.	Essential
		Participate in the annual and UK wide Fraud and	Analysis of incidents of fraud and cyber-crime;	Q.3 2021/2022	Desirable

		cyber-crime survey	what was reported or went unreported; types of charities targeted in this way.		
		Publish research report.		Q.4.2021/2022	
		Scope the potential size of the sector and range of organisations yet to be called forward for registration.		Begin Q.4 2020/2021 complete first phase - research Q.2 2021/2022 formulae or methodology of calculation of size.	Essential

Research objective 6: Monitor engagement with the charity sector to identify potential improvements to the effective and efficient delivery of services to them.

Aim	Strategic objective	How we will achieve this	What we will measure	Timeline	Priority
Monitoring and responding to the needs of charity stakeholders.	4, d	<p>Establish a charity stakeholder forum.</p> <p>Forum to meet quarterly thereafter.</p> <p>Review working of the forum</p>	<p>Survey members of the forum for satisfaction with Commission response to issues raised.</p>	<p>Establish forum by end of Q.4 2020/2021.</p> <p>Q.3 2021/2022 and Q.3 2022/2023</p> <p>Outside the timeline of this plan – Q.1 2023/2024</p>	Essential

5.3 Implementation plan

As noted in the introduction, this strategy has been developed amid the dynamic and challenging context of the COVID-19 pandemic, a significant Court of Appeal judgment, the emergence of safeguarding in charities as a key concern of the public and budget constraints.

In response the strategy sets out a range of research objectives, relating primarily to the strategic objective of promoting increased public trust and confidence in charities. Aspects of the Commission's other strategic objectives are embedded in the research objectives which have been designed to collect some feedback on their delivery and achievement.

During the life of the strategy, elements may be reprioritised in response to a number of factors including available resources, environment and stakeholder needs.

Implementation timeline – this timeline shows the key research activities that will be undertaken for each research objective. The activities are coloured coded: essential , desirable and those being delivered by external agency .

Key research activities for objective 1	2020/21				2021/2022				2022/2023			
	Q.1	Q.2	Q.3	Q.4	Q.1	Q.2	Q.3	Q.4	Q.1	Q.2	Q.3	Q.4
Monitor the visibility of the Commission and awareness of its campaigns. (insert to CCAM survey)												
Dissemination of CCAM research findings – infographic to Helper groups, press release												
Analyse feedback from events and training workshops												
Monitor impact of the Commission’s Communications plan (campaign coverage, retweets/followers)												
External survey into the levels and drivers of public trust and confidence in the charity sector and the Commission as regulator. Including awareness of impact of COA judgment on perception of Commission as effective regulator.												
Dissemination of Public trust and confidence research (Launch and 3 snapshot reports)												
Short survey of charity stakeholders to measure levels of trust and confidence in the Commission as regulator. (Repeated annually)												
Place bespoke questions in ongoing MLA surveys conducted by external research companies.												
Key research activities for objective 2	2020/21				2021/2022				2022/2023			
	Q.1	Q.2	Q.3	Q.4	Q.1	Q.2	Q.3	Q.4	Q.1	Q.2	Q.3	Q.4
Analyse use of <i>register of charities</i> and combined list to enhance trust and confidence in the local charity sector												
Monitor levels of awareness and understanding of the public benefit requirement – through post registration, post AMR and post <i>Use of the register</i> surveys.												

Monitor number of <i>Concerns</i> received by Commission relate to Public Benefit.													
Random survey of those who used Helper group.													
Online survey of professional advisors – legal and accountancy (especially those who have been in contact with Commission re registration and annual reporting) – to gauge understanding of public benefit.													

Key research activities for objective 3	2020/21				2021/2022				2022/2023			
	Q.1	Q.2	Q.3	Q.4	Q.1	Q.2	Q.3	Q.4	Q.1	Q.2	Q.3	Q.4
Publish snapshot report: picture of the charity sector in Northern Ireland – draw on register, post AMR, post registration survey, SIRS, MOMS and EOI Safeguarding questions.												
Mini review of the implementation of the research strategy												
Expand the amount and type of information available on the CSV download from the <i>register of charities</i> .												
Develop pop-up online survey to monitor use of the CSV download.												
Develop pop-up 'Use of the register' survey.												
Disseminate updated <i>Use of the register</i> guidance												
Analyse contacts with researchers/students and their use of Commission data.												

6. Evaluation of the strategy

The research strategy will be reviewed and amended throughout its duration. Key performance indicators will be charted against objectives with progress monitored and reported to the Senior Management Team. Reports will be delivered to SMT:

- on completion of key elements of the strategy.
- in September and March each year. These update reports will include details of outputs and outcomes achieved.
- Emerging challenges and proposed solutions will be raised with the Senior Management Team through the policy development manager's monthly report.

A review of the entire strategy will be conducted to evaluate indicators of success, identify learning which can be integrated into the work of the Commission and to inform any subsequent research strategy. This full review will be conducted within six months of the strategy's end date in 2023.

A mini review will be conducted at the end of Year 1 of the strategy's implementation (by end of Quarter 4 2021/2022). The strategy will also be reviewed if circumstances arise, for example if the budget is reduced or internal resources become stretched. Each objective has been assigned a level of priority, either essential or desirable, this prioritisation will help us to amend the research strategy if required.