

Research and Evaluation Strategy Final Internal Audit Report

October 2024

Public Health Wales NHS Trust



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Audit and Assurance Services conform with all Public Sector Internal Audit Standards as validated through the external quality assessment undertaken by the Chartered Institute of Public Finance & Accountancy in April 2023.

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Executive Summary

Purpose

The overall objective of this review was to consider the implementation and delivery of the Research and Evaluation Strategy.

Overview

We have issued reasonable assurance on this area.

A Research and Evaluation Strategic Oversight Group (RESOG), made up of senior management and executives from across the Trust, is in place, and meets regularly to review and monitor the implementation of the Research and Evaluation Strategy. Regular updates on the implementation of the strategy are reported to the Business Executive Team (BET) and the Knowledge, Information and Research Committee (KRIC).

The Research and Development (R&D) Office, which resides within the Data, Knowledge and Research Directorate, provides extensive guidance and support for research staff.

Three key matters were identified which are shown in the table below. We also identified a low priority matter which is included in Appendix A.

Report Opinion

Reasonable Some matters require management attention in control design or compliance.



Low to moderate impact on residual risk exposure until resolved.

Assurance summary¹

Objectives	Assurance
1 Identification, approval, ownership and monitoring of projects	Reasonable
2 Manage performance, assess impact and realise benefits of the strategy	Substantial
3 Maximising opportunities, working with external partners and internal advice and support	Substantial
4 Identifying risks that impact achieving the strategy objectives and action to mitigate them	Reasonable

¹The objectives and associated assurance ratings are not necessarily given equal weighting when formulating the overall audit opinion.

Key Matters Arising

		Objective	Control Design or Operation	Recommendation Priority
1	Routine research and evaluation project monitoring	1, 4	Design	Medium
2	Clarification of the alignment between research and evaluation projects and the Trust's published Areas of Interest	1	Design	Medium
3	Improvements to data gathering by the R&D office	1	Design	Medium

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Our audit in relation to the research and evaluation strategy was completed in line with the 2024/25 Internal Audit Plan for Public Health Wales NHS Trust (the 'Trust').
- 1.2 The purpose of strategic management is to define the direction of an organisation. It involves setting goals and milestones, specifying how to achieve them, deploying assets and resources, implementing actions and evaluating results. Strategic management is a means to an end, but it is also an iterative process that responds to a changing business environment.
- 1.3 Research and evaluation are fundamental components of healthcare and to the development of NHS Wales. In July 2023, Welsh Government (WG) released a Welsh Health Circular which placed expectations on NHS organisations to have a positive culture of continuous improvement, thereby ensuring that research is embedded into core healthcare services. It provides guidance for developing strategic research plans and for working collaboratively with external partners. The requirement set by WG is part of the Ministerial Priority 6 – 'Developing the public health system in Wales'.
- 1.4 The Trust's research and evaluation strategy for 2023-26 (the 'Strategy'), was approved in the summer of 2023, and sets out the following broad aims:
- to build a culture of research and evaluation;
 - to improve the way we manage and support research and evaluation;
 - to work together with others and share our findings with everyone; and
 - to ensure that partners, stakeholders, and the public are included in our research and evaluation.
- 1.5 The research and evaluation vision set out in the Strategy has been aligned to the Trust's six strategic aims within its long-term strategy. As part of our fieldwork we read the Strategy and considered the achievements to date from data research and evaluation activities undertaken by the Trust.
- 1.6 The relevant lead for the review is the National Director of Knowledge and Research.
- 1.7 The potential risks considered in this review were:
- failure to deliver / achieve desired strategic outcomes;
 - organisational structure and resources do not effectively support the strategic focus;
 - sub-optimal use of research, evaluation and evidenced-based interventions leading to risk of harm to the population; and
 - reputational damage to the Trust as a result of inefficient use of financial resources leading to outcomes not being achieved.

2. Detailed Audit Findings

Objective 1: There are appropriate processes in place for the identification, approval, ownership and monitoring of projects that contribute to the vision and broad aims set out in the implementation plan for the strategy.

- 2.1 Research and evaluation activities are spread throughout the Trust. Staff across directorates have the opportunity to undertake these activities, provided that the activity contributes and align with the Strategy and the 'Areas of Research and Evaluation Interest for Public Health Wales' document, which aims to help researchers, funders and collaborators understand public health priorities and focus their efforts to have the desired impact. The 2024/25 Areas of Interest were developed using workshops within the Trust with input from external consultants. These areas were presented to the BET and the KRIC, and then adopted by the Research and Evaluation Strategic Oversight Group (RESOG).
- 2.2 The Research & Development (R&D) Office resides within the Data, Knowledge and Research directorate and provides a central support function for research and evaluation activity across the Trust by providing advice and support to researchers. Research and evaluation guidance is readily available on the Trust's intranet and support for researchers takes place through a number of mediums, including drop-in sessions, which aim to advise staff and guide them to sources of research and evaluation information.
- 2.3 The process for the identification, approval and monitoring of research and evaluation projects is undertaken within the respective directorate with input and oversight from directorate management. However, once research and evaluation projects start the approach to monitoring and feedback on the status and/or outcome of projects back to the R&D Office is inconsistent. In addition, the terms of reference for the RESOG identifies that it has monitoring responsibilities, although we did not see clear evidence of this for individual research projects.
- 2.4 Before starting a project, researchers must complete an initiation protocol document and submit this to the R&D Office for review. The protocol requires the following key information to be included:

- research and evaluation objectives;
- method of research;
- how the results of the research will be assessed;
- key project risks, and
- an assessment of the impact and benefits to be realised upon completion.

We note that the current initiation protocol does not explicitly require a link to be made to the Strategy or the area of interest relating to the project. **(Matter Arising 2 – Medium Priority)**

- 2.5 Financial costs and funding information relating to research and evaluation projects are documented on grant application pro forma. However, where projects are

internally funded, financial information is not being captured by the R&D Office. **(Matter Arising 1 – Medium Priority)**

- 2.6 Furthermore, an additional template covers the various practical matters which should be considered when undertaking externally funded research.
- 2.7 The R&D Office maintains a spreadsheet of research queries and protocols which have been submitted to them. Our review of the spreadsheet identified gaps in the information recorded and fields which required updating. **(Matter Arising 3 – Medium Priority)**
- 2.8 The R&D Office also retains a 'bid and collaboration' tracker to record external bids, including outcomes, and can be used to facilitate lessons learnt to improve future bids. We note that this tracker is shared at the monthly RESOG meeting.
- 2.9 We reviewed governance documentation including meeting notes, agendas and action logs for the RESOG for the last 12 months and confirmed that the group has considered the implementation of both the relevant parts of the Trust's IMTP and of the Strategy.

Conclusion:

- 2.10 Identification, approval, ownership and monitoring of research and evaluation projects is undertaken within the respective directorates and this is aided by a wide range of support by the central R&D Office. However, the RESOG's Terms of Reference states that it has monitoring responsibilities although we did not see clear evidence of this for individual research projects. In addition, the current initiation protocol does not explicitly require a link to be made to the Strategy and there is inconsistent feedback to the R&D Office on the status and/or outcome of projects once research and evaluation projects start. Furthermore, the spreadsheet maintained by the R&D Office of research queries and protocols which have been submitted to them includes gaps in the information recorded and fields which require updating. We have provided Reasonable Assurance for this objective.

Objective 2: Mechanisms are in place to manage performance, assess impact and realise benefits of the strategy, which are evidenced through data research and evaluation.

- 2.11 The Strategy is supported by an implementation plan outlining the steps and actions to be taken to accomplish the vision and goals of the Strategy. The plan sets out the following key work streams:
- research and evaluation strategic partnerships;
 - research and evaluation infrastructure and support; and
 - research and evaluation communications and engagement.
- 2.12 The implementation plan was developed and agreed by RESOG, which is a cross organisational senior leadership group responsible for developing and supporting research and evaluation within the Trust. RESOG has up to date terms of reference, and produces an agenda with supporting papers, minutes and action logs. RESOG meets each month and has a direct reporting line to both the BET and to the KRIC.

- 2.13 In addition, at the time of our fieldwork, a Research and Evaluation Review Committee (RERC) was being developed whose purpose is to undertake peer reviews of the Trust's research and evaluation proposals.
- 2.14 We confirmed that timely updates are provided to both the BET and the KRIC which cover the progress against the implementation plan and the Strategy. Our review of the governance documentation identified that over the last year, the RESOG has considered:
- the Research & Evaluation Strategy and implementation plan;
 - Research & Evaluation areas of interest, which the Trust has set out on its website, and which link to the Trust's IMTP strategic priorities;
 - reviewed research bids and collaborations across the Trust in order to get a wider perspective of what is happening; and
 - evaluation update – to provide guidance regarding research evaluation best practice to be applied to research projects.
 - Research & Evaluation Review Committee draft terms of reference, which appear comprehensive.
- 2.15 Due to the technical nature of much of the research, responsibility for managing performance, assessing impact and realising benefits lies with the individual directorates. We selected a sample of three research and evaluation projects that started in 2023 and reviewed the initial research protocols to ensure that the information had been documented accordingly. We met with the researchers to discuss the approach for each project, the governance arrangements followed by the respective directorate to manage performance, and the outcomes of the research. We confirmed that protocols had been completed and there were governance mechanisms in place within the directorates to manage performance, assess impact, and realise benefits of the projects.

Conclusion:

- 2.16 The Trust's RESOG has been set up which has appropriately worked on implementation and delivery of the strategy and feeds regular and comprehensive updates into the KRIC meetings. Furthermore, research projects have mechanisms in place to manage performance, assess impact, and realise benefits of the strategy which is evidenced through data research and evaluation. We have provided Substantial Assurance for this objective.

Objective 3: Plans are in place for maximising opportunities, working in collaboration with external partners, and providing research and evaluation advice and support within the Trust.

- 2.17 The Strategy provides a definition for research and evaluation activities and recognises the Trust's positioning within the national landscape, recognising the importance of academic and other research partnerships to strengthen population health.

2.18 RESOG has developed three implementation streams to maximise collaborations with external partners and opportunities for the Trust. These are: R&E Strategic Partnerships; R&E Infrastructure and Support; and R&E Communications and Engagement. The implementation stream covering R&E Strategic Partnerships includes the following advice and support:

- Development of areas of research and evaluation interest on the Trust's website which provides information aimed at external organisations, and is linked to the Trust's strategic priorities.
- Work undertaken on Academic Public Health Research in Wales has explored the breadth and scope of public health research activity in Wales with the goal of facilitating co-production with partners of a strategy and vision for the public health research system in Wales.
- Guidance on developing strategic partnerships.
- A historic database of academic centres and contact links for which the Trust has engaged with over time.
- Procurement of research and evaluation activities e.g. external Expression of Interest for collaboration.

2.19 Our fieldwork confirmed the progression and development of these areas leading to strategic partnerships with collaboration agreements covering respective responsibilities.

2.20 The implementation streams covering Research & Evaluation infrastructure and support, and communications and engagement include:

- Evaluation standards, prioritisation and support.
- Research career development, evaluation job families, Health and Care Research Wales and Expressions of Interest.
- Update on publications and communication of research.
- A quarterly Research & Evaluation Forum.
- Development of a communication and engagement coordinator role.
- Review of bids and collaborations across the Trust.

2.21 Our review of RESOG meeting papers confirmed the progress and development of these areas.

2.22 A key support mechanism for collaboration with external partners is the R&D Office intranet page which provides guidance and information covering areas such as:

- Research Updates - Latest News.
- Templates and Guidance Documents.
- Summaries of research undertaken and reports produced.
- R&D Office drop-in sessions and contacts for queries or requests for further support.

2.23 We note that the summaries of research undertaken, and reports produced had not been updated for a period of time. **(Matter Arising 4 – Low Priority)**

Conclusion:

2.24 RESOG has developed implementation streams which cover strategic partnerships, infrastructure and support, and communications and engagement, to maximise opportunities for the Trust. We have provided Substantial Assurance for this objective.

Objective 4: The Trust has identified risks that impact the achievement of the Research and Evaluation Strategy objectives and action is being taken, where applicable, to mitigate these.

2.25 The Areas of Research and Evaluation Interest questions provide guidance on the relevant risks which should be considered when the research is undertaken.

2.26 A Research & Evaluation governance checklist has been developed which covers the various categories of risk (Participant rights & safety, Researcher, Completion of study, Reliability of results and Organisation), with further guidance on potential risks under each main heading and space to record appropriate measures to mitigate each risk.

2.27 Our review of the Datix system, which is used to record and monitor risk, confirmed that risks relating to the Strategy were actively managed. We also note that the Strategy is considered to be a mitigating control within the Trust's strategic risk register.

2.28 Our testing of a sample of research and evaluation projects confirmed that arrangements are in place with regards to risk management. Risks relating to each research project had been considered and documented within the initial protocols.

Conclusion:

2.29 While there is no reference to risk within the Strategy, we saw evidence that risk is considered and addressed within individual projects. We have provided Substantial Assurance for this objective.

Appendix A: Management Action Plan

Matter Arising 1: Monitoring of research projects (Design)		Impact
<p>Research and evaluation activities can be undertaken by all staff within the Trust. The R&D Office retain a central register of project proposals and ongoing and completed research. The R&D Office provide guidance and support to researchers and there is an agreed approach to document the initiation, approval and publication of projects.</p> <p>As part of the research project proposal process, researchers are required to complete an initiation protocol and submit this to the R&D Office for review. We understand that following approval in accordance with the relevant directorate/division's procedures, and once the research begins, the relevant directorate/division is responsible for monitoring progress.</p> <p>The R&D Office have no involvement or responsibility unless approached for advice or support by the researcher.</p> <p>The R&D Office's 'bid and collaboration' tracker which records external bids and outcomes is shared at the monthly RESOG meeting and RESOG considered the implementation of both the relevant parts of the Trust's IMTP and of the Strategy. However, while the RESOG's Terms of Reference states that it has monitoring responsibilities, this does not occur for individual research projects.</p> <p>Financial costs and funding information relating to research and evaluation projects are documented on grant application pro forma. However, where projects are internally funded, financial information is not being captured by the R&D Office. For major projects, this would be covered by the IMTP and, for smaller projects, this would be covered within the research directorate's own budgetary system.</p>		<p>Potential risk that the Trust may not be aware of all research being undertaken or of significant issues or risks which could impede completion of the research in a timely manner.</p>
Recommendations		Priority
1.1	<p>A reporting mechanism should be in place between the R&D Office and Heads of Directorate on a quarterly basis to ensure:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Listing the Directorate research which the R&D Office are aware of and asking if the list is complete and accurate. 	<p>Medium</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Asking for confirmation that appropriate and up to date monitoring of the research has been undertaken. Asking for the current estimated completion date for the research. Asking whether there are any significant issues or risks which could impede completion of the research and what action is being undertaken to address them. 		
1.2	Regular reports should be provided to RESOG which summarise all research projects undertaken.		Medium
1.3	Financial costs and funding information should be captured by the R&D Office for all research and evaluation projects.		Medium
Agreed Management Action		Target Date	Responsible Officer
1.1	Quarterly R&E activity, finance and risk spreadsheet developed, shared and completed by Heads of division and/or R&E Leads for live projects, on a quarterly basis. This will be collated into a report and shared with RESOG quarterly.	8 November 2024	Elen de Lacy – Research and Development Manager
1.2	The above spreadsheet shared with RESOG on a quarterly basis.	29 November 2024	Elen de Lacy – Research and Development Manager
1.3	Captured in the above spreadsheet and via the completed Grant Income Proforma for external bid applications. We will also link with PHW finance to ensure that any new research costs and income into the organisation is correctly recorded.	8 November 2024	Elen de Lacy – Research and Development Manager

Matter Arising 2: Recognition of research links to the R&E Strategy and area of interest (Design)		Impact	
<p>Before starting research and evaluation projects, researchers must complete an initiation research protocol document which sets out key information of the research project such as: the timeframe; resource requirement; and the desired outcomes/objectives of the research. The protocol document does not require researchers to specify the theme of the research, how the project links to the Trust’s research and evaluation Strategy or the ‘areas of interest’.</p>		<p>The Trust may undertake research which is not in line with its R&E Strategy and Areas of interest.</p>	
Recommendations		Priority	
2.1	<p>The research protocol template should be amended so that it requires researchers to record the link to the R&E strategy and area of interest.</p>	Medium	
Agreed Management Action		Target Date	Responsible Officer
2.1	<p>The protocol guidance template on the intranet has been amended to link to the strategic priorities and will also be captured the quarterly spreadsheet.</p>	31 October 2024	Elen de Lacy – Research and Development Manager

Matter Arising 3: Completeness of the research master spreadsheet (Design)		Impact	
<p>The R&D Office maintains a master spreadsheet of research queries and protocols which have been submitted to them. However, it does not appear to be structured so that officers can readily see research project progress and whether research should be classified as 'open' or 'closed'. During our fieldwork we identified information which appeared to be missing:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who and when progress on the research project was last reviewed. • Whether progress on the research project is on schedule, whether significant issues or risks have been encountered and if so what has been done to rectify them. • Planned and actual completion date. • A clear link to the Trust's Research and Evaluation Strategy, the Areas of Research and Evaluation Interest for Public Health Wales document. <p>Similarly, information that needs to be updated includes the outcome of queries, the amount of income generated and whether the National Institute for Health and Care Research's Local Portfolio Management System has been completed.</p>		<p>Potential risk that the progress and status of research cannot be readily ascertained.</p>	
Recommendations		Priority	
3.1	<p>Linking with Matter Arising 1: Monitoring of research projects, the structure of the master spreadsheet should be reviewed so that it readily shows the progress on research being undertaken and whether research should be classified as open or closed.</p>	Medium	
Agreed Management Action		Target Date	Responsible Officer
3.1	<p>This will be captured in the quarterly activity and risk spreadsheet (with a research status column) and checked with Heads of Service.</p>	8 November 2024	Elen de Lacy – Research and Development Manager

Matter Arising 4: Summaries of research undertaken and reports produced to be updated (Operation)		Impact
<p>The summaries of research undertaken and reports produced have not been updated correctly:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The annual research highlights from across Public Health Wales on the public website was last updated for 2018/19. • The annual Research Highlights Report presentation on the intranet labelled as 2023/24 on the cover page appears to relate to 2021/22 when looking at the detailed subsequent pages. 		Potential risk of adverse publicity due to up to date information not being readily available.
Recommendations		Priority
4.1	The summaries of research undertaken and reports produced should be reviewed and corrected / brought up to date where necessary.	Low
Agreed Management Action		Target Date
4.1	<p>The intranet version has been corrected with up to date research and evaluation activity and links to publications and reports added.</p> <p>The highlights report for '23-'24 is in development.</p>	29 November 2024
Responsible Officer		Elen de Lacy – Research and Development Manager

Appendix B: Assurance opinion and action plan risk rating

Audit Assurance Ratings

We define the following levels of assurance that governance, risk management and internal control within the area under review are suitable designed and applied effectively:

	Substantial assurance	Few matters require attention and are compliance or advisory in nature. Low impact on residual risk exposure.
	Reasonable assurance	Some matters require management attention in control design or compliance. Low to moderate impact on residual risk exposure until resolved.
	Limited assurance	More significant matters require management attention. Moderate impact on residual risk exposure until resolved.
	Unsatisfactory assurance	Action is required to address the whole control framework in this area. High impact on residual risk exposure until resolved.
	Assurance not applicable	Given to reviews and support provided to management which form part of the internal audit plan, to which the assurance definitions are not appropriate. These reviews are still relevant to the evidence base upon which the overall opinion is formed.

Prioritisation of Recommendations

We categorise our recommendations according to their level of priority as follows:

Priority level	Explanation	Management action
High	Poor system design OR widespread non-compliance. Significant risk to achievement of a system objective OR evidence present of material loss, error or misstatement.	Immediate*
Medium	Minor weakness in system design OR limited non-compliance. Some risk to achievement of a system objective.	Within one month*
Low	Potential to enhance system design to improve efficiency or effectiveness of controls. Generally issues of good practice for management consideration.	Within three months*

* Unless a more appropriate timescale is identified/agreed at the assignment.



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