

# **EU PROJECT – HEALTH INFORMATION SYSTEMS IN EUROPE**

## **COUNTRY REPORT**

### **IRELAND**

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**The Irish HIS strategic plan as a benchmark**  
**for planning HIS in other EU countries**

Among participating MS, Ireland has produced a strategic document concerning the overall development of HIS, titled *Health Information's Guiding principles. The health context of the National Health Information Strategy* and published as an interim paper by a Working Group of the Department of Health and Children in June 2001. The document sets out a “constitution” for the Irish HIS development, i.e. a number of key principles which should guide and govern health information strategy formulation and implementation. Principles were conceived for different steps in the HIS processes. For example a principle relevant to collection is “Persons who enter the data should ideally benefit from this data entry, either because they will use the data later on or because it will improve the quality of their work”. A second principle, devised for the analysis phase, is “Information should be gathered and analyzed in ways which support its potential uses” and a third one, important for the dissemination step, is “Data should be made available as soon as is appropriate and possible and in appropriate formats with clear protocols governing the access to the data and confidentiality”. Agreement, among main stakeholders, about governing ideas such as those mentioned above represents a precondition for the sustainability of a major HIS revision implied by a strategic plan.

The document also explicitly considers on one hand general and health policy's implications for the National Health Information Strategy, such as the National Development Plan, the Programme for Prosperity and Fairness, the National Anti-Poverty Strategy, the Action Plan for an Information Society and the National Health Strategy, and on the other hand the implications of information and communication technologies' evolution for the development of a National Health Information Strategy.

The document provides a comprehensive overview of the health information needs and priorities of key stakeholders, such as policy-makers, public health practitioners, health board and hospital managers, hospital administrators, clinicians and citizens. It addresses, for example, the information needs of policymakers on equity, quality and accountability, the needs of public health practitioners for data on population health status, the needs of managers and administrators for data to support clinical governance and health service data on inputs, access, activities, waiting lists and outcomes, the

need of clinicians for information to support evidence based practice and the need of citizens for information on eligibility and access to health services.

The document makes use of the customer concept, recognizing that different users require different informations and diverse dissemination channels. For example, the Department of Health and Children, health boards and other health agencies are identified as customers of the National Disease Surveillance Centre. Furthermore the Irish strategy addresses the issue of HIS fragmentation, i.e. that some HIS components were established for one particular purpose and do not fully support the use of data for other aims. The plan devises approaches leading to a comprehensive HIS by integrating many of the existing data sources.

The document also underlines information gaps, especially in the area of health determinants and provides specific examples with possible solutions, for instance inequalities in the occurrence of child accidents. The Irish Plan explicitly confronts the critical issue of using evidence to formulate policies and manage individual patients, the importance of ensuring that, at all levels of the health system, professionals involved in the decision making process use best available evidence when making decisions.

The document considers the infrastructural requirements of a health information strategy. It emphasises the importance of treating information technology as a tool or a means to facilitate the collection, analysis, dissemination and use of health information, but not as an end in itself. Finally the document calls for additional work to develop a coherent vision of the role ICT in the Irish health service together with work on short, medium and long-term implementation strategies. In summary, the Guiding Principles document confronts, in an orderly way, key issues both intrinsic to the HIS and related to its information, socio-political and technological context.

### **Recent HIS developments in Ireland: proposal to establish a Health Information & Quality Authority (HIQA)**

The Guiding Principles document was intended to inform the discussion among those involved in the preparation of a National Health Information Strategy. Work on the national strategy has been completed and a draft document has been submitted to the Minister for Health & Children for consideration by Government. This strategy document has not as yet been formally agreed and

published. However, the Government's overall health strategy *Quality and Fairness* was published in 2001. The *Quality and Fairness* document includes a recommendation to establish a Health Information & Quality Authority (HIQA). This recommendation was subsequently endorsed in the critical 2003 health strategy implementation document: “*Audit of structures and functions in the health system*”, (<http://www.doh.ie/publications/hsreform.html>) The latter document recommends that the HIQA should be required to publish an annual report on the performance of the health system overall against key quality indicators. The audit document addresses the rationale for the establishment of the HIQA, emphasizing the need to deliver a high-quality service, based on evidence-supported best practice.

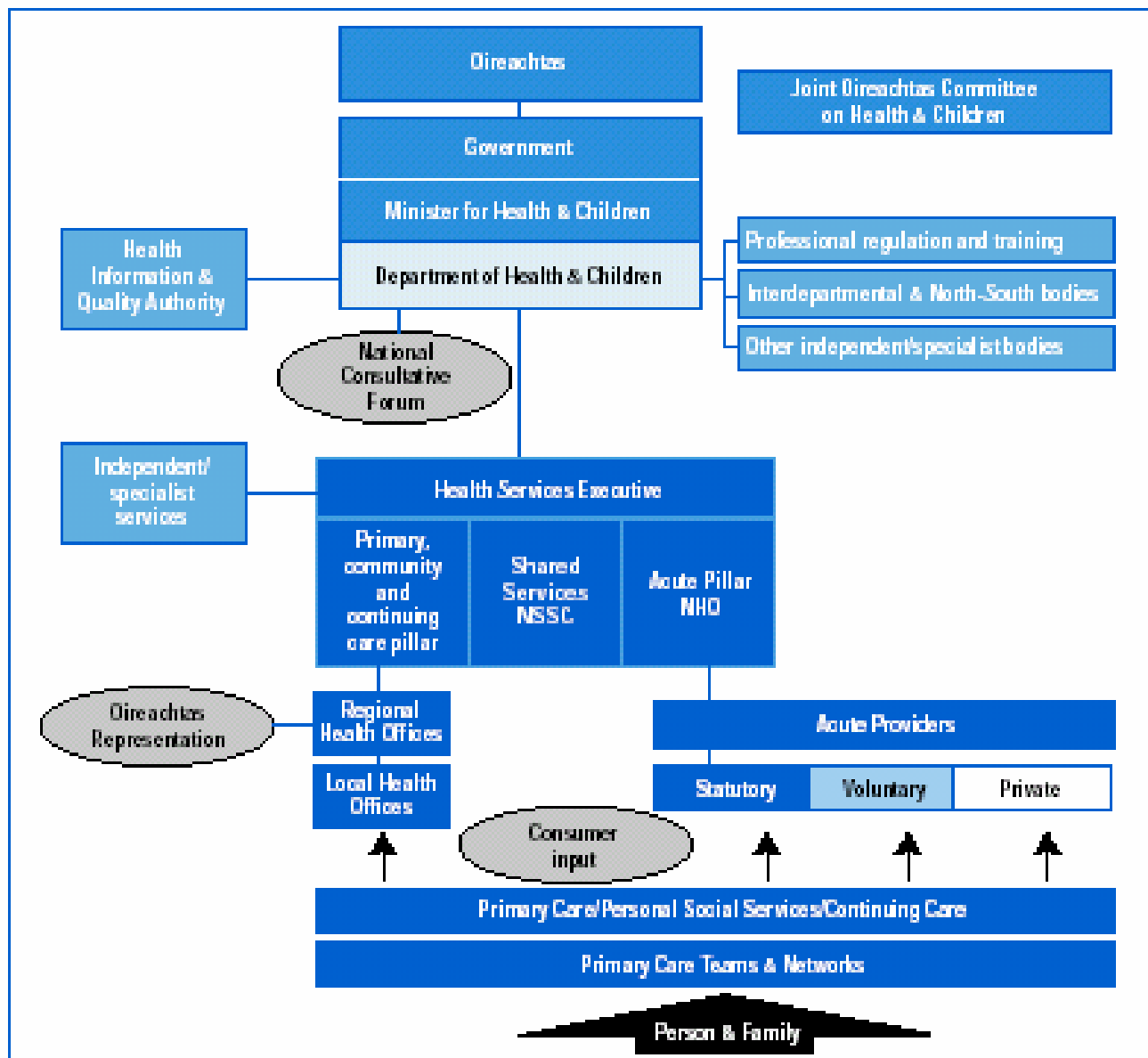
It is proposed that the HIQA be assigned three distinct but related functions:

- Developing health information systems;
- Promoting and implementing quality assurance programmes;
- Developing health technology assessment.

### **HIQA — Role in revised health system structure**

The audit document makes extensive and detailed recommendations on the structures and governance of the Irish health system. These recommendations have been accepted by Government and will be implemented. A revised “consolidated” structure is proposed, **Figure 1**, and the proposed governance arrangements are summarized in **Figure 2**. The revised structure represents a significant reduction in the number of health agencies. In this context the central role of the Health Information & Quality Authority in the revised governance arrangements is noteworthy. Given its independent oversight role, the health Information & Quality Authority will be set up as a statutory agency with its own governance structures, funded by the Department of Health & Children.

**Figure 1: Overview of proposed consolidated structure for Irish health system**

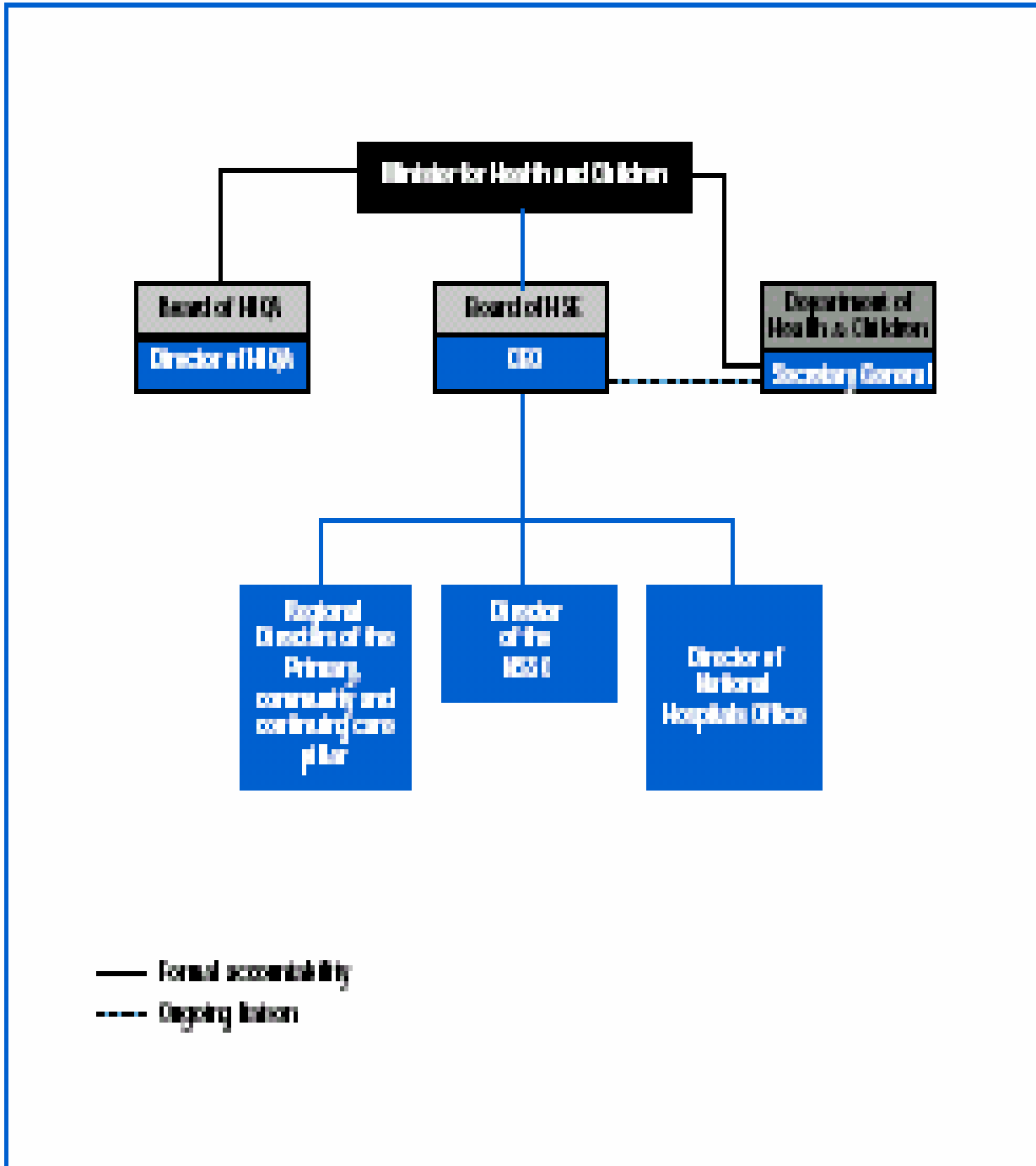


Oireachtas:- Parliment

NSSC:- National Shared Services Center

NHO:- National Hospital Office

Figure 2, Governance arrangements in revised consolidated structure



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