Benchmarking:

International comparisons of health care systems and their performance have been produced for several decades, however the conclusions that one may draw from these comparisons are often fraught with methodological complications. The publication of the World Health Organisation report on health in 2000 marked a bold step in comparative health policy research and despite the criticism that it generated, the report has helped raise some key issues related to comparative health policy.

- There is a wide array of data on health outcomes, health system characteristics and processes, health expenditure and performance, population health and outcomes. These terms are often confused with one another and lumped into the single term “health” or “policy”.
- These various measures have not necessarily been evidence-driven, nor articulated within a cohesive framework.
- The methodology and empirical findings established so far in international benchmarking are contentious.
- The policy implications of international comparisons are significant; therefore benchmarking documents need to be assessed scientifically and politically.
- The contribution of indicators and targets (for example, the National Service Frameworks (NSF) in the UK, or Performance Assessment Framework (PAF) measures) to actually improving the health of a nation and the quality of the health policy process is as yet unproven.
- We need to look at indicators and health policies and evaluate them over time - in terms of incremental changes to the health care system.

Within this context, the Policy Futures team determined the need to address the question of: “How do you benchmark health policy and with what results?” The objective is neither to duplicate the work of others who are already engaged in the development and critique of indicators of health system performance and quality, nor to propose another set of indicators to add to the vast array of indicators already in existence. Instead, it was felt that there is a need to take a step back from the intricacies of evaluating health care systems and determine the appropriate conceptual framework for assessing health policy both over time and between health care contexts. Once that conceptual framework has been established, the project will identify specific indicators (amongst those already existing in the literature) that can be used to assess policy over time, using the trends and priority areas of health policy identified in the Futures report as a guiding template. Finally, a third part of the project would involve a comparative assessment of these policy measures in selected areas of interest with the aim of guiding future health policy specifically within the UK and its four devolved states (England, Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland).
AIMS AND OBJECTIVES:

The principal objective of this research is to contribute to the area of policy assessment and evaluation by addressing the question: “how does one benchmark health policy and with what results?”

The aim is to come up with a robust independent framework for evaluating national health policies. The style of the work will be that of a demonstration project, testing the conceptual framework and methodology for indicator development, data collection, and the application of benchmarking in England, Ireland, Scotland, Wales, France, Canada and Sweden. These countries are selected to represent a post-devolution UK along with significant European and North American comparators, which differ on the organization and financing of health care, but have comparable populations and economic prosperity. The approach will be to reflect on what we know from existing literature on benchmarking and performance and on the recommendations and issues raised in the Policy Futures report. The aim is to provide a consistent framework that builds on issues raised in the Policy Futures work, makes use of existing quantitative and qualitative data from within the UK and abroad in relation to health policy, and makes periodic assessments of policy towards 2005. The final part of this project will evaluate specific areas of health policy against these measures and assess how policies are related to existing outcomes and performance measures in the hope of better guiding future health policy in the UK in these areas.