

# Improving the Policy Development System in Ireland – Policy Challenges and Civil Service Reform

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This chapter introduces the context and discusses the policy development process in Ireland. The report focusses on three main areas that shape policy development: evidence, implementation, and legitimacy. It also discusses the skills, capacities, methods and tools in the Irish public sector that support effective policy development. The report highlights Ireland's strengths, identifies gaps, provides examples of good practices, and suggests a number of areas of opportunity and action to bolster the policy development system and improve policymaking.

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The current multi-faceted and global challenges that governments are facing, from the pandemic to climate change to the impact of the war in Ukraine, have highlighted the importance of better designing, co-ordinating, implementing and evaluating policies to more effectively address crises, ultimately contributing to an increase of trust in government as well. As highlighted by the 2021 OECD Trust Survey, the trust in government is closely linked with the legitimacy of public policies (OECD, 2022<sup>[1]</sup>). The results from the 2021 OECD survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions (OECD, 2022<sup>[1]</sup>) indicate that there is a need to better disseminate the results of government action to citizens in order to increase these trust levels.

The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified the imperative for robust policy development systems and for governments to be able to adapt and change at pace and to deliver policy solutions that have a real and immediate impact on societal well-being. The pandemic has challenged the capacities of governments around the world to both anticipate and respond to crises without losing their focus on longer-term policy goals, all the while maintaining a steadfast commitment to the principles of democratic governance. Responding to and recovering from crises require decision making to be agile and robust, based on reliable real-time data and evidence, effective policy design and development processes, and underpinned by institutional capabilities including a cadre of highly skilled policy professionals. Responses and recovery are also dependent on greater co-ordination across the government in the development of policies as well as more effective public communication<sup>1</sup> and greater stakeholder engagement in the decision making and policy-making processes. While the pandemic brought new challenges to the fore, it also allowed governments to review their current practices and focus on “building back better” rather than reverting to business as usual. Anticipating and preparing for future policy challenges require ensuring strategic foresight capabilities and building a future-focus into holistic policy design.

Senior Civil Service management in Ireland had recognised, even before the pandemic, the need to strengthen their capabilities in policy-development and strategic foresight. The Civil Service Management Board (CSMB) had approved a suite of documents that represented best practice. In particular, a three-framework for policy-development – consisting of the three inter-linked pillars of evidence, feasibility and legitimacy – has been endorsed by the Civil Management Board to build upon the numerous initiatives already underway in areas falling under the three pillars and establish further coherence between them. It had been intended that this framework would be relied upon in everyday practice but it was also recognised that there would be a challenge in embedding a fully coherent approach to strengthening policy-making in a consistent and connected way across the system.

It is in this context that Ireland requested support from the European Commission Directorate-General for Structural Reform Support and the OECD to increase the government’s ability to develop and deliver on complex policy in areas such as climate change, digitalisation, demographic changes, housing and homelessness, globalisation, and long-term healthcare and to contribute to future-proofing such policies. The project aims to do this by providing public servants with the tools, knowledge and skills to strengthen their capacities to develop and successfully implement policy and to reinforce the integration of strategic foresight into the design and implementation of public policies.

This assessment report is a core output of this project and analyses the policy development process in Ireland. Taking as its starting point the CSMB framework for policy development, it focusses on three main areas that shape policy development: evidence, implementation, and legitimacy. It also discusses the skills, capacities, methods and tools in the Irish public sector that support effective policy development. The report highlights Ireland’s strengths, identifies gaps, provides examples of good practices, and suggests a number of areas of opportunity and action to bolster the policy development system and improve policymaking.

It reviews the current policy development process in Ireland, which occurs within a context of a significant and wider reform programme. The programme, Civil Service Renewal 2030, includes an ambitious commitment to “develop a rigorous, professional, and evidence-informed approach to policy development” (Republic of Ireland, 2014<sup>[2]</sup>). The strategy anticipates “strengthening the whole-of-government approach

to policy development”, drawing on the “breadth of experience and expertise from across the Civil Service” to “enable a consistent and collaborative model for addressing local, national and global challenges”.

The Civil Service Management Board identified improved strategic policy development and strategic foresight as priorities in CSR2030. For its part, the Public Service Leadership Board has mandated the Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform to ensure that the next phase of Ireland’s public service reform “Better Public Services” meets the goal of a public service that is fit for purpose to 2030 and beyond (OECD, 2021<sup>[3]</sup>). The next phase of reform will be guided by lessons from the previous one (OPS2020) and the COVID-19 response.

The current Programme for Government requires an effective “policy infrastructure” with consistent and robust policy development processes and a skilled and empowered cadre of policy professionals working in a wider joined-up policy ecosystem. Such an ecosystem will increase the Irish government’s ability to address current and future policy challenges and meet the objectives that the Programme set out (Government of Ireland, 2021<sup>[4]</sup>).

Using the lens of the three-pillar approach, this report aims to:

- assess the current state of policy development activities in the Irish government, including the role of strategic foresight as an input to policy
- identify strengths and weaknesses, gaps, and possible synergies between initiatives to improve policy development efforts to date
- offer suggestions and examples of good practices for enhancing the policy development framework or infrastructure.

The report is based on desktop analysis of relevant policy documents and reports; workshops and interviews with key stakeholders from across the government and the wider policy ecosystem (quotes are set out throughout the report in italics); in-depth engagement with key officials from the Department of the Taoiseach and the Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform; and a survey of 168 civil servants on the policy development and strategic foresight tools and methods currently in use. The report also builds on the meetings and interviews held during the fact-finding mission in May 2022 with ministers, members of parliament, senior civil servants, and representatives of agencies, advisory councils, civil society, training institutions and academia.

The report is divided into three parts. **Part I** focuses first on the context and rationale followed by an assessment of the characteristics and **drivers of policy development** in Ireland. Part I then examines a number of key issues and challenges that shape policy development around the themes of evidence, implementation and feasibility, and legitimacy as reflected in the Civil Service Management Board report “Strengthening Policy Making in the Civil Service”.

**Part II** addresses the **key enablers** for policy development: the skills and capacities in the Irish public service and the methods and tools for policy development. Part II highlights a number of suggestions for a policy development framework and policy platform, including recommendations on how the framework can be leveraged to consolidate, develop and share consistent uses of existing networks, techniques, tools, training and development to underpin the key role of the civil service: to provide impartial, independent policy advice to the government.

**Part III** provides a number of insights and pointers to develop a **policy capability infrastructure** and a toolkit as part of a broader good practices hub.

## References

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## Note

<sup>1</sup> The OECD defines public communication as “the government function to deliver information, listen and respond to citizens in the service of the common good and of democratic principles. It is distinct from political communication, which is linked to partisan debate, elections, or individual political figures and parties.” (OECD (2021), *OECD Report on Public Communication: The Global Context and the Way Forward*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/22f8031c-en>).



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