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Towards a Modern Policy Capability Infrastructure and Policy Toolkit in Ireland

This chapter provides a number of insights and pointers on how the Government of Ireland could develop a policy capability infrastructure, which may serve as a narrative for socialisation across the civil service to kick-start and build momentum for the change process in policy development. It also proposes the development of an accompanying toolkit as part of a broader good practices hub and suggests a number of steps that could be considered.

This assessment report underscores current strengths in Ireland's policy development system, including in relation to evidence-informed policy development, policy co-ordination and stakeholder engagement in the co-design of policies, as reflected in examples of sound policy across various domains. The Irish government has several important reform strategies and programmes in place to further develop the capability of the policy development system to deliver effective policies, such as the strategy for Civil Service Renewal 2030, the National Data Infrastructure, and the public service reform plan Our Public Service 2020. The report highlighted some of these reform initiatives and the civil service leadership can lend its support and momentum behind these efforts and help establish coherence between them for the sustainability of reforms.

At the same time, this assessment suggests a number of areas of opportunity and action that can further bolster the policy development system. Systems, protocols and standards need to be in place to allow for better understanding, leveraging and sharing of data, including in relation to the growing need for real-time data to inform timely and effective decision making. Policy implementation can be improved by taking a stronger feasibility perspective in the design phase, focusing on co-design, building implementation alliances, and reinforcing feedback loops from monitoring and evaluation. Legitimacy may benefit not only by applying a partnership approach between political staff and civil servants but also by strengthening the capabilities of the civil service in shaping the public policy debate. Articulating policy skills and linking those with the competency framework and the training offer is another important avenue for reform, as well as creating a one-stop shop for policy tools and instruments to support the daily work of policy practitioners.

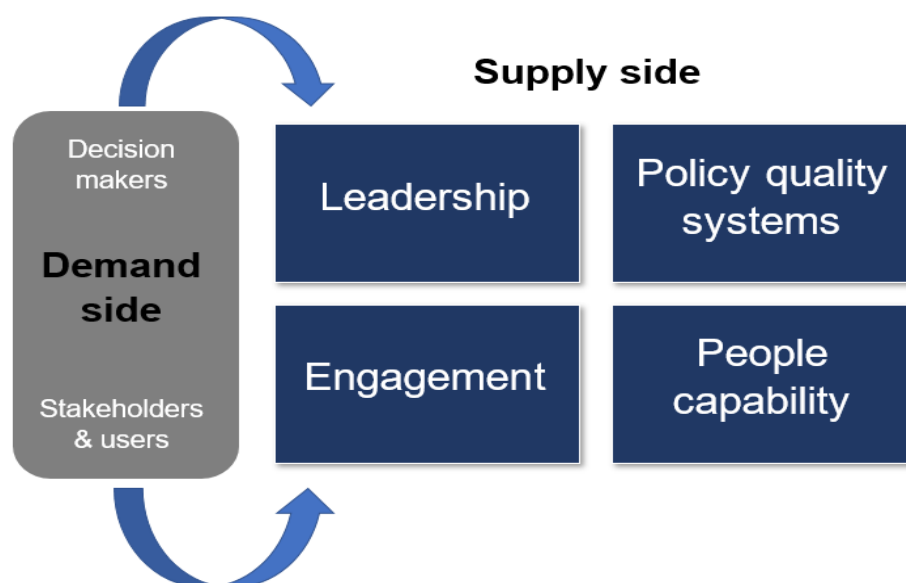
This brings us to the next step: how can these observations and action points translate into structural improvements in policy development in a comprehensive manner? How can the identified policy development strengths be leveraged across the system and the gaps addressed? It may be useful to recall the lessons on the process of developing such an improvement journey (Washington, 2022^[1]), shared during a peer learning session as part of this project, and some of the key insights in policy capability change programmes (Washington, 2022^[2]):

- agree on a vision and powerful narrative
- develop a model of the policy process as an organising framework
- articulate what great policy advice looks like and what goes into it.
- bring together guidance, methods, tools and capabilities to support policy professionals in their day-to-day work
- describe the characteristics of a high-performing policy shop (team and organisation)
- encourage and support leaders and departments to assess their policy capability and kick-start an improvement trajectory
- spell out the skills required for policy professionals and take a system-wide view of people's capability
- present the programme as a whole-of-government change process
- leverage and support other reforms.

Applying these insights to the Irish context, a useful and comprehensive way forward could be to develop a policy capability infrastructure building on the 3-pillar framework (data and evidence, feasibility/implementation/ legitimacy) as well as on the Civil Service Renewal 2030 Strategy.

An example of such a policy capability infrastructure can be found in Figure 7.1. The demand side reflects the public interest of public policy, underscoring the expectations from citizens as end-users of public services and their democratic representatives as well as civil society, professional organisations and the private sector as stakeholders of public policy. The supply side consists of 4 interlinked and mutually reinforcing elements of a sound policy capability infrastructure: leadership, policy quality systems, engagement and people capability.

Figure 7.1. Policy Capability Infrastructure



Source: Adapted from work and presentation delivered by Sally Washington (Executive Director, ANZSOG, Aotearoa New Zealand) during the OECD Ireland Policy Improvement Workshop on 10 November 2022, (Washington, 2022^[2]) (Washington, 2022^[1])

As illustrated by an initial mapping exercise below (see Table 7.1), the elements of the policy infrastructure model can be linked and applied to the 3-pillar framework, the CSR 2030 and other elements of the Irish policy system.

Table 7.1. Dimensions of a Policy Capabilities Infrastructure

Policy Project - Policy Capability Infrastructure dimensions	3-pillar framework Ireland with enablers	CSR 2030	Other linkages with the Irish policy system
Demand side: decision makers, stakeholders and users	Legitimacy	Guiding principle: the public at the centre	Stakeholder participation practices / co-creation / user-centric design
Leadership	Legitimacy	Guiding principle: leadership and culture	CSMB PSLB
Engagement	Feasibility/implementation	Delivering evidence-informed policy and services Guiding principle: outcome focused Guiding principle: alignment with the public service	
People capability	Enablers: skills and capabilities	Building the Civil Service workforce, workplace and organisation of the future	Competency framework renewal OneLearning IPA strategy renewal
Policy quality systems	Data and Evidence Enablers: tools and instruments	Delivering evidence-informed policy and services Harnessing digital technology and innovation	Data infrastructure

Source: Author's own elaboration

This mapping can be further completed to serve as a basis for defining a vision for a policy capability infrastructure in Ireland. This vision may serve as a narrative for socialisation across the civil service to kick-start and build momentum for the change process.

The policy infrastructure may be underpinned by a policy toolkit as part of a broader good practices hub. The toolkit would aim at supporting policy practitioners in their day-to-day policy work. Several operational and practical considerations may shape the toolkit:

- The toolkit should serve as a one-stop shop for policy professionals, and in terms of format, it should be simple, easy to understand and navigate, user-friendly and available online. (The design workshops and tests with end-users are expected to provide inputs and feedback on the format.)
- The toolkit should feature good practices and case studies from Ireland and other countries to illustrate the broader practices or principles. A number of good practices and case studies from this assessment report can feed into the toolkit. The toolkit can be envisaged as a living document, reflecting new tools and case examples whenever they become available.
- The toolkit should include links and references to existing tools and instruments for policy development. The present project is not expected to build new tools or instruments, although the preparation of the toolkit may help to identify gaps.
- In order to be as practical as possible for policy professionals, the toolkit can be structured around the stages of the policy development process (rather than around more abstract concepts), highlighting policy needs and challenges that policy professionals may face.

Furthermore, a future Community of Practice on Policy Development at senior civil service level could drive the policy infrastructure and provide guidance and leadership for its implementation across the government. Initial discussions suggest that:

- Strong demand and interest for a community of practice were expressed by various interlocutors from both inside and outside (agencies, academia) the civil service.
- A triple objective can be set: (1) strengthening policy development capacity across the system, through peer learning and the exchange of good practices, methodologies and lessons learned; (2) building linkages between various parts of the policy development system and driving organisational culture change towards collaborative approaches and evidence-driven policy development; (3) increasing informal networks and relationships across the policy development system;
- The community of practice at senior civil service level should build on existing networks and capabilities and, if deemed useful, create synergies with the strategic policy units established in a number of departments;
- In terms of the technological aspects, building on the OneLearning “Learning Management System” can be envisaged, in particular as this system features platform functionalities.

The plan for a modern policy infrastructure, the toolkit, as part of a broader good practices hub, and the community of practice will require sufficient **resources** to be launched, managed and co-ordinated, as well as leadership to ensure high-level support (as a point of reference, both New Zealand and the United Kingdom have small, dedicated project teams to support the capability build). One area for attention is the **institutional anchorage** of the plan for a modern policy infrastructure and of the community of practice, in terms of presence (where it sits) and **stewardship** (who is sponsoring it). A key success factor will be to portray this package of initiatives as a whole-of-government improvement plan.

Areas of opportunity for a modern policy capability infrastructure and policy development toolkit as part of a broader good practices hub

Moving forward, a number of steps can be considered:

- define a vision for a policy capability infrastructure that can serve as a **narrative for socialisation** across the civil service to kick-start and build momentum for the change process (use OECD assessment report as an anchor)
- establish supporting **mechanisms to ensure change is socialised and sticks**: anchorage at senior civil service level; a communication strategy; communities of practice;
- allocate a **leadership role and ownership of the agenda with dedicated resources** so that the material will be updated and include the wider policy profession in the change process (collaborative operating model);
- map the **relevant networks in the policy development sphere** (e.g. Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Service network, Project Management Network, Government Communications Network, Assistant Secretary Corporate Network) in order to create synergies with the envisaged community of practice at senior civil service level;
- develop a **community of practice on policy development at senior civil service level**, to further strengthen policy development capacity across the system.

References

- Washington, S. (2022), “An infrastructure for building policy capability – lessons from practice”, [1]
Policy Design and Practice, pp. 1-16, <https://doi.org/10.1080/25741292.2022.2139952>.
- Washington, S. (2022), *Presentation delivered during OECD Ireland Policy Improvement Workshop, 10 November*. [2]



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