Executive Summary

The current multi-faceted challenges that governments are facing have increased demand for better policy design, co-ordination, implementation, and evaluation to address crises more effectively. Government decision making must be agile and robust, based on reliable real-time data and effective policy design and development processes, and supported by a cadre of highly skilled policy professionals. In this context, the Government of Ireland is working to increase the public service's ability to develop and implement complex policies and to ensure better outcomes for citizens. This OECD Assessment Report analyses the current policy development process in Ireland, highlights its strengths, and identifies current gaps. It takes as its starting point a framework for policy development that has been endorsed by the Civil Service Management Board in Ireland. This framework comprises three inter-linked pillars of evidence, feasibility and legitimacy and seeks to build upon the work to date and establish further coherence among them. It offers examples of good practices and suggests areas of opportunity and action that can further bolster the policy development system.

Strengthening the three pillars of policy development in Ireland: Evidence, implementation and feasibility, and legitimacy

The report highlights the numerous initiatives underway in areas falling under the three pillars of Ireland's framework for policy development. While there is currently no single model or vision for policy development in Ireland, a number of strategies guide and frame the Irish vision for policy development in the civil service and in the public sector more broadly.

Policy development relies on the availability and use of relevant evidence and data. Ireland has demonstrated significant progress in using evidence and data for policy development at the department and agency levels. The Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Service (IGEES) and the Irish Government Statistical Service (IGSS), for example, are key elements of the strategic policy infrastructure. Strategic foresight is being incorporated into policy analysis in a more sustained way. Links between researchers and policymakers are being forged through the establishment of a Civil Service Research Network. However, Ireland's public administration could benefit from stronger attention to data-based reform initiatives. Developing data-sharing networks through external partnerships and strengthening data skills across the civil service would allow Ireland to harness the potential of both data and evidence-based decision making. Furthermore, there is a clear, growing appetite for strategic foresight in Ireland that underscores the civil service's ambition to strengthen strategic policy discussions.

The quality and impact of policy advice and decisions are determined by how effectively they are implemented. A number of good practices have emerged in Ireland to reflect implementation in the policy development process and help make policies easier to implement, such as co-designing policy with civil servants charged with implementing; integrating implementation criteria, monitoring practices and feedback loops into policy design; and using insights from policy evaluations, pilot projects and behavioural evidence. In the area of feasibility, the government is helping public organisations provide user-centred services by sharing design principles. A Programme for Government commitment will create Strategic

Policy Units across Departments to ensure data insights influence policy decisions. The Irish civil service has recognised the importance of programme and project management skills for policy delivery, but still struggles with conducting impact assessments across policy sectors and departments and modelling impacts across different policy dimensions. Implementation can also be supported by collaboration among departments to ensure feasibility is considered at the design stage. While there are numerous examples of good practices, the culture of collaboration across departments could be strengthened, particularly to increase cross-departmental communication, visibility, and the consideration of the impacts proposals might have in other policy areas.

The legitimacy of public policy is also grounded in the support that a government has from stakeholders and citizens. The nexus between the civil service and political actors in relation to policy development has become increasingly challenging to navigate, given the 24h news cycle and increased stakeholder engagement. The legitimacy of policies – whether they reflect the public interest -- has been under increased scrutiny in Ireland. The Government Information Service has played a pivotal role in public communication around key government priorities and has earned a reputation as a trusted source of public information. Work is underway to clarify the role of the civil service in policy development and it is recognised that it is timely to review how public engagement is conducted across departments to improve consistency. However, additional training and support in public engagement and communication is needed across the civil service, as well as standardised guidance and rules of engagement among politicians, political advisors and civil servants.

Key enablers for policy development

Effective policy development cannot be achieved without the right set of skills and capabilities in the public administration; these include technical skills as well as expertise in project management and political achievability. Ireland's civil service is well equipped in general skills and knowledge but could develop stronger skills and capabilities in areas such as data, strategic and systems thinking, foresight, external communication, monitoring and evaluation, economic/impact modelling, legal drafting, and regulatory impact assessment. Despite rich training and development programmes, there is a high demand within the civil service for additional training and capacity development activities for new and highly technical skill profiles. Ireland could further streamline the training and professional development offerings and nurture a culture of evidence-based policy development across the system.

A policy development system must be supported by standard processes and practical tools to assist policy practitioners in their day-to-day work. While Ireland does not have a benchmark instrument for policy development, a range of process requirements, formal guidance and tools for policy development are employed by policymakers across government. Closing gaps in support and guidance for areas such as behavioural insights, user-centric insights and design methods, planning tools for policy development, foresight, and stakeholder consultation and adopting a consistent, repeatable and scalable approach for policy design can help ease cross-departmental work and clarify quality standards.

The report provides findings and recommendations that can be translated into structural improvements in policy development. It highlights that civil service leadership is important to maintain momentum for strengthening policy development in Ireland. The establishment of the CSMB is an example of Ireland's efforts to build sustainable and comprehensive leadership in this area. The report also proposes that Ireland could make the most of its policy development strengths and address gaps by developing a broad policy capability infrastructure and vision underpinned by relevant tools and processes, including a supporting toolkit and a community of practice bringing stakeholders together from across government.