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Closing the Policy Development and Implementation Divide in Ireland

This chapter examines how the implementation perspective is reflected in policy development processes and presents how project management, regulatory oversight and cross-departmental collaboration can help make policies easier to implement. It highlights various factors such as co-designing policy with civil servants charged with implementing; integrating implementation criteria, monitoring practices and feedback loops into policy design; and leveraging using insights from policy evaluations, pilot projects and behavioural evidence and presents areas of opportunity to support better linkages between policy development and policy implementation.

The second pillar of the “Strengthening Policy Making in the Civil Service” framework for policy development focuses on the implementation and feasibility of policy. The quality and impact of policy advice and policy decisions are determined by the extent to which they are effectively implemented. Good policy advice includes how it will be delivered and how it will be monitored, evaluated and adjusted in the light of new evidence about whether it is working or not. Traditionally, policy professionals have “closed off” policy projects once political decision making is complete. This may be because the implementation is moving to a different part of the organisation or to a delivery agent outside of the system and/or because policy professionals are moving to new policy projects. This view has changed considerably in more recent times, with a realisation that implementation is a critical part of the policy cycle and that reporting on progress on implementation or follow-on action planning is an integral part of the policy or strategy.

However, it is also important that policy designers keep an ongoing involvement in the policy to ensure the intent is maintained. The civil service generally relies on the wider public service to implement policies and programmes, although it has a number of significant operational/delivery arms itself too. This requires a deep understanding of conditions at the operational level and effective relationships between the sectors, especially on the part of the civil service policy developers. Policy development professionals need to ensure that implementation, and the people charged with implementation, are included in policy design and that feedback loops from frontline operations and users/citizens/stakeholders (what is working and what is not) are deliberately and systematically captured and built into future policy.

The “Strengthening Policy Making in the Civil Service” framework (Government of Ireland, n.d.^[1]) identifies a number of causes that may lead to failures in policy implementation in Ireland:

- Design stage
 - incomplete risk assessments conducted, failing to identify correct challenges and policy outcomes
 - incorrect assumptions around human behaviour in response to policy enactment
 - poor design testing/assessment of whether the policy design is realistic and fit for purpose.
- Decision and implementation stage
 - lack of resources (including headcount) provided to support implementing policy procedures
 - poor planning and co-ordination: unrealistic timescales for legislative or programme implementation
 - lack of monitoring protocols or evaluation mechanisms; lack of ownership and accountability from parties, regarding various aspects of policy implementation
 - overspending due to incomplete/ineffective budgetary assessments versus actual costs incurred during the implementation phase
 - lack of arrangements to report “early warning” difficulties and/or the flexibility to respond early to stop delivery from going off-track
 - non-delivery of information and communication technology requirements during the implementation and reporting stages
 - unexpected changes in the external environment, deeming the policy partly or wholly ineffective.

Furthermore, interviewees and survey respondents for this project highlighted a policy-implementation gap but also recognised that this could be bridged and offered some solutions.

In the area of local government, one interviewee highlighted: *“We write very good strategies and policies but where they fall down is they’re never delivered. Most of the policies are delivered through the local authority system. That in itself is a challenge. They are independent and democratic institutions. You can’t direct them to do something per se.”*

“In the design stage, if you’re bringing regulations, you would do a public consultation exercise. Draw their attention to that and seek their input on regulations where they worked and didn’t and why didn’t they work. “

Concerning the link from implementation to evaluation and back into future policy, an interviewee said: *“We have to be able to come back around and ask what’s working and what isn’t working, and what difference that makes”.*

There has been an assumption that the Irish civil service is “good at policy and poor at delivery”. However, the problem is more complex than good policy falling apart. A first question arises: Is the policy actually good if it struggles with implementation? Indeed, problems with delivery often stem from poor (or rushed) policy development. And what about the efficiency of management methods or delivery expertise? Usual project management methodologies, typically designed for more linear projects, do not lend themselves to the iterative and “messy” nature of policy design and delivery.

Part of the issue is that a deep understanding of policy feasibility usually sits with the implementing agencies, the subnational partners or the community and voluntary sector and that policy proposals are developed by the civil service. Various interlocutors mentioned the “implementation gap” as a result of the lack of institutional channels to assess the implementation feasibility at an early stage and how that affects decision making, the lack of time to test-run the implementation, or the unavailability of ex post evaluation insights or data.

Good practices to strengthen the feasibility of policy options also emerged from the interviews and include the following:

- Ensuring that **people charged with implementing a policy are involved in the upfront design** of the policy. This includes bringing in agency staff and external experts in the early stages of the policy discussions, as early as the discussion and definition of the policy “problem”.
- Bringing in **public communicators in policy development** help develop a holistic and realistic understanding of the intended beneficiaries of a policy through insights from social listening, knowledge of public attitudes or analysis of public discourse. Involving communicators early on in the design of the policy can also help ensure it is more inclusive and facilitate its implementation or the compliance of citizens. The gathering of increasingly more sophisticated insights and listening is a key way in which communication can channel citizens’ voices to policy.
- **Checking assumptions** in the policy design phase, through the use of focus groups or expert interviews. This may result in specific mitigation measures for unintended consequences. It entails bringing the views and lived experience of people for whom the policy is designed into the policy process, either directly in a co-design or consultation process, or by using user-centred design methods to understand how the policy will work “on the ground”. This can also help surface and mitigate unintended consequences.
- Applying various lenses to **test the desirability and feasibility** of policy options (“design testing and troubleshooting from various perspectives”) – legal, financial, socio-economic, behavioural and differential impacts on different population groups (gender, age, ethnic analysis).
- **Good governance and effective project management** are essential for end-to-end policy, from identifying the problem or opportunity to designing possible options to ensuring decisions taken are implemented and have the desired impact. Implementation criteria need to be part of policy design.
- **Performance indicators and monitoring and evaluation** need to be built into policy design, and adequate resources need to be foreseen. (At the same time, a number of interlocutors mentioned that an overemphasis on monitoring and reporting has a negative impact on the time and resources for implementation, which can be understood as an incentive to make monitoring and reporting systems as user-friendly and efficient as possible).

- Ensuring **feedback loops from policy evaluations**, by conducting a policy evaluation or taking forward the lessons learned from previous evaluations. In the long run, enhancing evaluation expertise may be needed.

“A key challenge is to feed the results of ex post evaluations back into the ex-ante rationale of policy development.”

“I think that takes courage. It takes bravery and commitment to say, ‘Well we set out the policy at the outset. Our intentions were justified, and our objectives were very clear. We implemented it. We learned from that implementation what went right and what went wrong. And we’re prepared to iterate the policy and accept that just when you set something that it isn’t set in stone, but that there is an opportunity.’ Now I just don’t think our mindset has shifted into that space.”

- Ensuring **realistic planning for programme implementation and legislative processes**, to avoid over-optimistic timelines and public expectations.
- Providing **realistic budgetary assessments**, as the costing of policy options can be considered as a partial feasibility exercise. Similarly, the budget expenditure framework is an important implementation tool.
- Building **implementation alliances**, bringing together departments, agencies, political parties, and end-user organisations, to shape a broad consensus around the policy options and to be able to adjust where needed while being still in agreement about the broader policy direction; This is conducive to both implementation and legitimacy of policy (to be discussed in more detail in the next chapter).
- Ensuring **monitoring arrangements** that allow for spotting implementation issues (“early warning system”) and for adjusting where needed.
- Understanding the **political implications** and dynamics of policy options (discussed in more detail in Chapter 4).

A number of tools and methodologies exist to assess the context and preliminary conditions for feasibility. In particular, the Public Spending Code provides guidance on methodologies such as cost-benefit analysis, economic appraisal parameters and regulatory impact assessments. With these methodologies, a number of implementation risks, constraints and unintended consequences can be identified before rolling out the policy. A remaining challenge relates to conducting impact assessments across policy sectors and departments. Modelling impacts across different policy dimensions was highlighted as a specific challenge, but cross-departmental collaboration (discussed below) can offer part of the solution.

To improve feasibility, the government is also assisting public organisations to deliver user-centred services by developing and embedding design thinking through the publication of Government Principles (Government of Ireland, 2022^[2]) (starting with service design and moving to system design) based on good practices in academia as well as in the public and private sector in 2022. The government is currently also development life events to test out the prototyped principles through active delivery as well as the development of a design action plan.

Various policy examples underscore the value of broad stakeholder consultation and dialogue to bring the implementation and feasibility perspective into the design process. A good example of policy “fit for implementation” is the National Cancer Strategy 2017–2026 by the Department of Health (see Box 3.1), with a multi-stakeholder consultation in the design (e.g. Cancer Patient Forum) and implementation phase (e.g. Cancer Strategy Steering Group) as well as the use of annual monitoring reports.

Box 3.1. Ireland's National Cancer Strategy 2017-2026: Evidence-based care for patient-centred cancer services

The National Cancer Strategy 2017-2026 was established following a comprehensive process involving policymakers, scientists, researchers, organisations working on cancer services and the public. In 2015, the Department of Health established a steering group under the guidance of academics to provide direction in the development of the new cancer strategy. The Evaluation Group supported the steering group with a special report (2016), as it was meant to inform the development of the new strategy. In 2015 a Cancer Patient Forum was established to represent the views of patients in the development of the strategy. In particular, the Forum and its members, who represented patients or organisations specialised in cancer-related services, were expected to contribute to the steering group and facilitate the input of front-line perspectives into the development of the strategy, while informing members of the forum. This is an example of how end-user views and evidence were captured and used to shape policy.

The National Cancer Strategy takes a co-ordinated and holistic approach to step up efforts to improve the quality of cancer health services across functions and systems. This is made possible due to an articulated plan to strengthen the governance of the sector in several dimensions and by supporting an evidence-based approach across all activities. First, the Strategy reinforces the governance and management of the National Cancer Control Programme (NCCP), which was established in 2007 in the Health Service Executive, the publicly funded healthcare system of Ireland. The NCCP works with a variety of entities, such as the Department of Health and Hospital Groups, to adopt and implement an effective approach and harness research and data to deliver policy responses, ensure the equity of and quality of services, and deliver improved care for all. The Strategy reinforces the central role of the NCCP to support its implementation across the health service, using service-level agreements and through a more direct financial role towards hospital groups. Moreover, the NCCP will be further supported and incentivised to co-operate with the private sector to collect more quality data on cancer, as well as reporting of outcomes.

Source: (Government of Ireland, 2017^[3])

A second example relates to the funding model in Ireland for early learning and care for children, which has been developed through an extensive consultation process with service providers, front-line staff and parents (see Box 3.2).

Box 3.2. A new funding model in Ireland for early learning and care and school-age childcare

In December 2021, the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth published the Expert Group's report "Partnership for the Public Good: A New Funding Model for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare", following acceptance of its recommendations by the government.

The Expert Group was independently chaired and included national and international experts in early learning and care, funding and quality, and economics, along with relevant policy experts from the government departments involved in implementing the new funding model. During its work, the Expert Group engaged in an inclusive consultation and engagement process to take account of the voices of providers, the workforce, parents and other stakeholders within the sector. Research to inform the Group's work was undertaken by an external research partner. The outputs from these processes are publicly available on the webpage of the department.

The Expert Group also drew on national and international evidence from a wide range of sources and bodies to inform its report and recommendations.

Source: (Government of Ireland, 2018^[41])

A third example is the Local Government Management Agency (LGMA), which represents all 31 local authorities and the local government sector in Ireland and provides support to and acts as a point of contact for the County and City Management Association. The LGMA advises on and supports strategy and policy development across the local government sector, addressing policy issues from rural development to waste management to libraries. The LGMA actively engages with local authorities and service providers to solve implementation problems and to offer advice to policymakers based on implementation experience. The LGMA participates in various committees (including parliamentary committees) on policy development (e.g., housing, waste management) to provide a local governance perspective. For example, the LGMA gives feedback on draft circulars.

Project management

Part of the work to ensure successful policy implementation rests on an effective approach to project management and delivery from the beginning of the policy development process. The Irish public service has recognised the need to embed programme and project management skills in the system, both as a profession and as an integral part of the work of all involved in policy implementation. From a broader perspective, sound project management skills are not only helpful for policy implementation but for the entire policy development process. They offer a deeper understanding of critical aspects throughout the project life span, including resources, communication, stakeholder engagement, ownership, co-ordination, risks, and monitoring and evaluation.

There are a number of resources to support project management, including the Project Management Network (PMN) which was originally established under the 2014 Civil Service Renewal Plan and has since broadened to the wider public service. The PMN promotes the practice of project management within the civil service and public service and provides opportunities for both practising and potential new project managers to connect with peers and forge connections across the system. In addition, OneLearning provides foundation-level training and a practical project management training course. Civil servants can also pursue accreditation from the Project Management Institute and the Institute of Project Management. The Public Service Project Management Handbook provides a detailed guide to project management in

Ireland. There are also programme management offices (PMOs) in government departments and agencies, whether for individual projects or for major programmes of activity. PMO structures exist across the civil and public service but with differing levels of maturity and operation.

The challenges of project management delivery relate to how well-embedded the processes and structures are in different government departments and agencies; how well-developed the culture of programme and project management is; and the availability of resources to commit to this area. Interviewees also highlighted the disconnect between those with project management skills and those who are developing policies, which could be reduced, as well as the need to consult with project implementation specialists early on in policy development. As an example, the importance of a project management discipline has been highlighted by the Public Spending Code for major public investment projects.

Regulatory oversight

Feasibility, also, means a good fit within the existing regulatory and legal framework. The 2012 OECD Recommendation of the Council on Regulatory Policy and Governance calls for countries to “establish mechanisms and institutions to actively provide oversight of regulatory policy procedures and goals, support and implement regulatory policy and thereby foster regulatory quality”. It defines the core functions of regulatory oversight (these do not necessarily have to be carried out by the same body) as including:

- **Co-ordination of regulatory policy:** Promoting a whole-of-government approach to regulatory quality and ensuring internal co-ordination across departments in the application of regulatory management tools.
- **Quality control:** Monitoring compliance with guidelines for RIAs, stakeholder consultations and ex post reviews. Reviewing the quality of those regulatory management tools.
- **Guidance, advice and support (capacity-building in the administration):** Issuing guidelines, offering guidance and providing training.
- **Systematic improvement of regulatory policy (scrutiny of the system):** Monitoring and reporting, including reporting progress to parliament/government to help track the success of the implementation of regulatory policy.

There are a number of areas where regulatory oversight could be improved in Ireland for policy proposals requiring legislative expression (through primary legislation, changes to the regulatory framework, significant statutory instruments, and proposals for European Union regulations and directives). Since the Better Regulation Unit (BRU) in the Department of the Taoiseach was abolished, and the different aspects of regulatory policy split between different departments, the Irish civil service lacks a strong centre-of-government body to co-ordinate the regulatory process. In addition, there are few quality control mechanisms for RIAs, stakeholder consultations or ex post reviews – other than the traditional clearance processes within departments – to report on whether departments are actually following the various requirements and check on the quality of the RIAs. Furthermore, whereas training and guidance used to be co-ordinated by the BRU, including a two-day training course on RIA, it is not apparent that such training is available nor systematically taking place at the present time. The RIA system is also missing a reporting function, whereby reports are compiled of the performance of the whole RIA system over the year, setting out data on compliance rates per department and the quality of the RIAs produced.

In response, Ireland may consider strengthening the regulatory oversight function to carry out core oversight roles, such as co-ordination and quality control of ex ante RIA, stakeholder management and ex post reviews. Some countries have placed this oversight function in an arms-length regulatory oversight body; examples of regulatory oversight bodies from across the OECD are set out in Box 3.3. The regulatory oversight function could publish opinions on whether due process and the core steps of the RIA/consultation/ex post review process have been followed. The regulatory oversight function could also

produce publicly available advice on the quality of the RIA documents. Annual reports could be published on compliance rates and the quality of RIAs by department to gently incentivise the enhancement of RIAs. Departments could potentially be prevented from taking a draft legislative proposal to cabinet if an RIA is deemed to be of poor quality or if the department has failed to publish an RIA for stakeholder consultation. Furthermore, the body could co-ordinate RIA training across the government, ensuring a regular programme of RIA training for new and existing civil servants. There are different ways in which this body could be established:

- **Within the centre of government by effectively re-establishing the BRU in the Department of the Taoiseach** with the same functions as before – although potentially with an additional power than previously, to prevent RIAs deemed low quality from going to cabinet.
- Give certain **oversight functions such as quality control to an arms-length body** with a degree of operational independence, to verify and publish publicly available opinions on the quality of the RIA/consultation/ex post review process for draft regulations. It should be highlighted that the External Assurance Process has been added to the Public Spending Code for major public capital projects in excess of EUR 100 million involving Independent Expert Reviews focused on issues such as cost, risk and ability to deliver at two key decision gates in the project lifecycle.
- The Law Reform Commission of Ireland has previously made a recommendation for the government to establish a **Regulatory Guidance Office** with membership drawn from government departments and regulators, to be established with a remit to provide guidance and information on regulatory matters, including national and international best practices in economic regulation, the content of RIAs (or comparable documents) and lessons learned from relevant case law.
- **Other key public institutions could play a role.** These include the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General, which could carry regular evaluations of the RIA process, for example. The Law Reform Commission, an independent body which was set up to examine specific areas of the law as directed by the government and to make practical proposals for its reform, carries out necessary underlying work (including statute law restatement) to ensure that the Irish Statute book is effectively reformed.

Box 3.3. Examples of regulatory oversight bodies in Australia, Germany and the Netherlands

Oversight body located in the centre of government

Australia – Office of Best Practice Regulation (OBPR): The OBPR is located at the centre of government, in the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, and reviews about 1 500 policy proposals every year. OBPR focuses on two areas: scanning efforts to identify upcoming proposals that require RIA, as well as proactive engagement with ministries on the benefits of RIA. It uses information flows, decision making processes of government, and its central position to assess if RIA is required for new proposals. However, much more effort is dedicated to the OBPR's capacity-building focus. In 2019-20, it delivered over 2 250 structured training hours to public servants on how to conduct robust impact analysis and evidence-based decision making – in addition to emails, calls and meetings to provide agencies with the support and skills to produce high-quality impact analysis. The OBPR is also developing a bespoke information technology system for RIA aimed at improving workload management related to overall RIA scrutiny as well as the quality of impact analysis advice. In addition to standard consultation processes related to RIA, OBPR meets with stakeholders on a regular basis to gather feedback on RIA processes as well as on policy areas facing challenges in bringing together high-quality evidence or analysis.

Oversight bodies located at arms' length

Germany – National Regulatory Control Council (NKR): The NKR, established by law in 2006, scrutinises draft impact assessments accompanying primary and secondary law proposals, with regard to underlying assumptions on compliance costs. It normally provides initial advice at the pre-consultation stage during the inter-service consultation with all ministries. The final opinion is released after the post-consultation (final) stage, when the proposal is ready to be tabled at and adopted by the cabinet (council of ministers). In between these stages, there is a working-level exchange between the NKR Secretariat and lead ministries. The parliament may request the NKR's opinion on the quality of an impact assessment for a parliamentary proposal, even if the initiation of laws by the prime minister is rare. The NKR has other functions including the “one in, one out” approach, Cutting Red Tape efforts and the scrutiny of evaluation clauses in the legal acts (obligatory for all regulations that induce compliance costs of over EUR 1 million). The NKR also publishes an annual report that provides a comprehensive view of the Better Regulation policy. The members of the NKR are nominated by the federal government and appointed by the Federal President. The chancellor of the federal government designates the chair of the NKR. The NKR committee is supported by a 15-civil servants' secretariat and a EUR 1.5 million budget.

Netherlands – Dutch Advisory Board on Regulatory Burden (ATR): The ATR is an independent advisory body established by law with budgetary autonomy. The board consists of three members, who are supported by a director, eight senior policy advisors and two supporting staff. The body decides what it advises on (within its mandate) as well as the content of these opinions. Both government and parliament can approach the body for advice. The ATR advises ministries mainly in the early stages of the policy process, i.e., problem identification. It does not operate according to a proportionality principle but assesses the regulatory consequences on business of all primary legislative proposals and administrative measures. It also scrutinises ministerial decrees with substantial compliance costs. Recently, the ATR has taken on a new role of scrutinising the country's new small and medium-size enterprises (SME) Test.

Source: (OECD, 2018^[5]); (OECD, 2018^[6])

Cross-departmental collaboration

A recurrent theme supporting implementation is co-operation between departments and between departments and agencies. While there are numerous examples of good practices, OECD interviews and responses to the survey suggest that the culture of collaboration across departments and co-ordination of work programmes could be further strengthened. Cross-sectoral and cross-departmental communication and collaboration is needed or even required to address most policy issues nowadays, as their impacts and implications go beyond one particular sector or one institution. In times of multi-faceted ‘polycrises’ such as COVID-10 or the war in Ukraine that affect not only single sectors, but have an impact on a number of policies, it is further important to see across all different policy domains. In Ireland, the Civil Service Management Board, Public Service Leadership Board, Senior Officials Group and many departments are championing this collaborative approach.

As such, this project encountered several examples of cross-departmental policy development work to address government-wide policy issues such as Brexit, COVID-19, the environment and climate change, and accommodation and support for Ukrainian refugees. Some of these policy issues have been driven by specific cabinet committees. Further examples include First 5, a whole-of-government strategy for babies and young children spanning across policy issues including childcare, health and education (see Box 3.4), “Housing for All”, on housing supply, affordability and inclusion, “The Access and Inclusion Model” fostering

an inclusive environment in pre-schools, and “A Well-being Framework for Ireland”, bringing economic, societal and environmental impacts together in one well-being framework. Also, the Water Policy Advisory Committee (Box 3.5), a multi-stakeholder council for water policies, is a notable example of whole-of-government collaboration. These examples demonstrate the ability of the civil service to effectively collaborate across sectors and departments and were generally driven by a combination of leadership, a recognition of a joint problem and joint objectives, and a strong collaborative mindset at the senior management level. A clear political impetus, dedicated resources, and realistic timelines were also reported to be conducive to improved collaboration.

Box 3.4. Ireland's First 5 Strategy

First 5 is a national strategy spanning a ten-year time horizon from 2019 to 2028 to improve the early lives of babies, young children and their families. It is the first national strategy for early childhood in Ireland that develops a cross-departmental approach to support children's development in their first five years of life. The Strategy recommendations and guidelines, stemming from extensive research and multi-disciplinary evidence, set out how to create a holistic system of services that will support babies and their families. Moreover, it articulates a plan for development, funding and operation to address challenges at multiple levels. Given that the Strategy spans various dimensions, a number of departments participate and foster cross-government collaboration.

The strategy builds on and reinforces a pre-existing national policy framework, “Better Outcomes Brighter Futures” (2014-20), which aimed to improve outcomes for children and youth.

The Strategy is based on a whole-of-government, complex structure. The core of the strategy lies in the Children and Young People's Policy Consortium, which oversees the cross-government implementation of the strategy and prepares an annual progress report to be submitted to the Cabinet Committee on Social Policy and Public Services. The Consortium gathers input from and oversees several working groups. For instance, the children and young people's services committees' national steering groups ensure representation and reporting, while the European Union structured dialogue-working group is committed to providing structured engagement. Most importantly, the Sponsors Group drives the implementation of the commitments by proposing priorities and approving programmes of work and receives input from the implementation team which is tasked with the co-ordination and monitoring of implementation. More specifically, the implementation team ensures support and interaction with thematic working groups, establishes the alignment of constituent strategies and implements monitoring and reporting.

Source: (Government of Ireland, 2018^[41])

Box 3.5. Ireland's Water Policy Advisory Committee

The Water Policy Advisory Committee (WPAC), as provided by the European Union Regulations 2014 on water policy, is a multi-stakeholder committee in charge of providing advice to the Minister of Housing, Local Government and Heritage on the implementation of the Water Framework Directive and, more broadly, on water issues. The Committee is a successful example of multi-stakeholder involvement and co-ordination. Members of the Committee consist of nominees from five different departments, including those of the Environment Climate and Communications, of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and of Health, among others. In addition to government departments, members of the Geological Survey of Ireland, the Office of Public Works and the Local Authority Waters Programme are nominated to participate in the Committee, making it a truly cross-governmental institution. For meetings on specific issues, the Committee may also invite additional participants as representatives of other organisations, and sub-groups can be created to investigate and discuss specific topics.

The Committee meets regularly, four times a year at least, and meetings are chaired by the Water Division of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, and the secretariat is held by the same institution. WPAC has three specific objectives related to plan-making, funding and resources, and implementation. In particular, the multi-stakeholder nature of WPAC endows it with the capacity to resolve conflicts between local and national priorities as well as between inter-governmental and sectoral priorities, in order to make sound and evidence-based recommendations to the Minister of Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

Source: (Government of Ireland, 2021^[7])

Despite these good practice case examples ("positive deviance"), interviews revealed that more could be done to reduce silos across the Irish civil service, in particular to address limited communication across departments (apart from ad hoc meetings and informal contacts), limited visibility and the consideration of the impacts (or potential synergies) policy proposals might have in other policy areas.

"Challenges are that silos still exist – within Departments and across the civil service."

"Departments can be 'silos' and too often concerned with the urgent rather than the important leading to a lack of 'joined-up' thinking."

"There is a need to break down the silos that still exist within Departments."

"The challenge is ensuring that Departments are not working in silos and, from early in the process, consult with each other."

While there are good examples of strong co-operation, there is insufficient development of a culture of collaboration across departments and co-ordination of work programmes. Contacts across departments are often informal and through personal networks rather than organised or structured. This sentiment was particularly strong with more junior civil servants and with civil servants working deep in their departments (e.g., in highly technical roles).

This lack of systemic and systemised collaboration is a risk to policy effectiveness when policy challenges increasingly cut across the remits of individual departments and require action on multiple fronts. Addressing the lack of economic opportunities in many cities and towns across the country will, for example, require a coherent strategy that brings together policies on education, welfare, business, housing and many other areas that are simply beyond the reach of any one department no matter how well

resourced. Reaching net zero carbon emissions is a similarly transformative aim and will also rely on co-ordinated action across the entire economy.

Interviews suggested that there are few formal and institutional incentives for collaboration with other departments, both at the individual level and at the institutional level. While senior-level civil servants are evaluated as part of their performance assessments on their participation in inter-departmental initiatives and committees, in general incentive structures encourage a focus on the department and its work programme.

“There is the program for government that is agreed every time a new government is formed. Following out of that you have the performance management structures. Each of the departments has to do a statement strategy within 6 months of the programme for government being adopted. Following on from that all of us without exception have to do a goal-setting form at the start of each year which sets out each individual’s broad priorities for that year. That falls outside of the business plan, strategy, role profiling and annual review. In addition, there is a reporting template to be filled out. Within your own department, you can see who is doing what and what goals fall within the remit of other departments.

“Inquiries from other departments are typically what someone does on top of the actual job.”

Moreover, budgets are set at the level of the department with no budgetary incentives for cross-departmental work. Joint targets or policy objectives do not appear to be utilised to encourage cross-departmental work.

“There is a perception that problems are solved by people and policies, and that there is a lack of will to fix the system through investments in shared services.”

Success stories of where departments worked together well – such as the response to COVID-19 and the global financial crisis – depended on high-level leadership from ministers, as well as public acceptance of the need to act.

“In general, if Ministers lead a working group, things move faster.”

The quality of collaboration is also a point of attention. According to a number of interviewees, too often co-ordination meetings serve as a platform for sharing information on what the departments are doing, after which participants go back to work in their departmental silos.

Areas of opportunity to support better linkages between policy development and policy implementation

This chapter discussed how the implementation perspective is reflected in the policy development process and highlighted various factors that may contribute to bridging the “implementation gap”, such as co-designing policy with civil servants charged with implementing, integrating implementation criteria, monitoring practices and feedback loops into policy design, and leveraging insights from policy evaluations, pilot projects and behavioural evidence. Successful implementation also rests in project management and delivery capabilities. Programme management offices exist across the civil and public service but with differing levels of maturity and operation.

There are also a number of good practices that have emerged to ensure the feasibility of policies once they have been developed in the implementation stage, namely with the Cancer Strategy and the Local Government Management Agency’s work to link policies with the implementation at the local level.

Several potential areas of opportunity could be highlighted, namely:

- strengthening and bringing **greater consistency about current and new techniques for co-designing policy options** with those charged with implementation, civil servants, public servants, other front-line service providers (including at the subnational level) and with end-users;
- leveraging the **use of performance information** from schemes, programmes and services;
- integrating **implementation criteria, monitoring practices** (including data capture and other sources of evidence) **and feedback** loops into policy design and review;
- **leveraging insights from policy evaluations, pilot projects, public communication and behavioural evidence**;
- integrating **good practices from project management and delivery capabilities at the beginning of the policy development cycle**;
- **improving accountability and regulatory oversight** by strengthening the regulatory oversight function.

This chapter further highlighted that cross-departmental collaboration has increasingly become the norm to address policy issues in the Irish civil service, and as a result, many excellent examples of collaboration can be found across the system. Yet, there is insufficient development of a culture of collaboration across departments and co-ordination of work programmes, contacts across departments are often informal. Collaboration could be enhanced by setting up joint policy objectives, creating budget incentives for joint work and building a broad *esprit de corps* through staff mobility, communication (“one government” messaging) and public recognition of cross-departmental policy work.

In particular, a number of mechanisms (Scott and Boyd, 2022^[8]) can help break down departmental silos to encourage, enable and support departments to work together:

- **Mandates and expectations** – decision makers and senior leaders setting expectations and the authorising environment for joint work and collaboration. This might take the form of joint policy targets (for example, overall outcome targets such as the Scottish government’s national performance targets (Government of Scotland, n.d.^[9]).
- **Budgets** as incentives (or the removal of disincentives) to joint work, whereby a budget for a specific purpose can be jointly administered by more than one department.
- Building relationships and **relationship capital across the government**, such as finding ways for officials to engage across their departmental boundaries, including to discuss whole-of-government strategic priorities and overall public service capability. For example, in New Zealand the top three tiers of the public service meet collectively several times a year to hear from the public service commissioner and discuss cross-government challenges. More regular weekly sessions are held between the chief executive/Secretary cohort, described collectively as the Public Service Leadership Group. Moreover, **staff mobility schemes** and joint training courses can strengthen networks across departments and can contribute to an organisational culture in favour of collaboration. Communities of practice around specific themes can also strengthen these ties.
- **Structures** are a last resort for driving collaboration. They can be costly and typically require a lot of governance (e.g. joint ventures, interdepartmental boards).
- Messaging from the centre of government to encourage civil servants to see themselves as “**one government**” – engendering a collaborative rather than competitive mindset and culture across the government.
- **Recognition** of cross-departmental policy work, for example through the Civil Service Excellence and Innovation Awards, may also strengthen the collaborative culture.

It is important to learn from good examples of collaboration (some mentioned above) and build on the drivers (e.g. leadership, joint objectives) for collaboration.

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From:

Strengthening Policy Development in the Public Sector in Ireland

Access the complete publication at:

<https://doi.org/10.1787/6724d155-en>

Please cite this chapter as:

OECD (2023), "Closing the Policy Development and Implementation Divide in Ireland", in *Strengthening Policy Development in the Public Sector in Ireland*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1787/cb9eac2d-en>

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