2 Using Evidence, Data and Strategic Foresight for Policy Development and Long-term Policy Issues in Ireland

This chapter examines the availability and use of relevant evidence, data and strategic foresight for policy development purposes and includes an analysis of the public sector's collaboration with academia. It highlights a number of progress areas in leveraging evidence and data for policy development and points to several areas that can benefit from further improvement.

The collection and use of evidence to inform policy is the first pillar of the "Strengthening Policy Making in the Civil Service" framework for policy development. Policy development relies on the availability of the right sorts of evidence and data – including real-time data, to enable prompt decision making and action – and the use of them for policy purposes. Their use requires the capacity to properly understand and assess available evidence and to translate it into policy insights. Moreover, systems, standards and protocols must be in place to allow for understanding, leveraging and sharing the available data, as demonstrated by the recent work on Ukrainian refugees. As highlighted by the "Strengthening Policy Making in the Civil Service" framework (Government of Ireland, n.d.[1]), "[e]vidence alone does not make policy. But it is an enabler and key starting point for analysis, appraisal and the weighing up of policy options and priorities which is the responsibility of policy-advisers."

Efforts to enhance the evidence base to inform policy are an important addition to the good policy equation. Thanks to the introduction of the Open Data Strategy in 2017 and the Data Sharing and Governance Act 2019, Ireland has significantly improved its policy and governance framework for open data, which has greatly increased data availability since 2017. This includes generating a substantive evidence base (such as the Growing Up in Ireland Longitudinal study) as well as mechanisms to ensure that information from a variety of sources – data, evaluation, and insights from stakeholders, civil society and citizens – is made accessible and able to inform policy design and development. Interviewees for this project reported benefits stemming from better guidance and practices for stakeholder consultation and a greater awareness of the need to draw on user or citizen insights in the policy development process (this is discussed in more detail in Chapter 4 on legitimacy).

Another important step is to continue leveraging existing good-quality administrative data for policy development. Better use of experience from policy implementation (see Chapter 3) as well as the involvement of the people likely to be affected by policy (see Chapter 4) will enhance the effectiveness of policy solutions. Interviewees reported improvements in the availability and use of data for policy development in departments. The current discussions on the development of consistent data models could further support the availability of multidimensional data across government. In that regard, the 2021 OECD Recommendation on Enhancing Access to and Sharing of Data recommends that governments "strive to ensure that data are provided together with any required meta-data, documentation, data models and algorithms in a transparent and timely manner, supported by appropriate data access control mechanisms" (OECD, 2021[2]). A uniform model across the Irish public sector should be based on an agreement on how dataset properties, structure and inter-relationships are displayed.

To further increase the availability and use of data, as well as data accessibility, in the public sector, it is necessary to also focus on data generation. Data mining may require particular skills, and not all data assets are easily discoverable and accessible. In relation to the type of data used, data on inputs is often more readily available than data on outcomes, which can lead to imbalance and an incomplete capture of the impact of policies. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine have shown a growing need for the use of real-time data on daily or weekly developments to formulate appropriate policy responses.

Regarding data-sharing, government data are not naturally harmonised in many OECD countries, because government entities have different datasets and formats. Moreover, a lack of standards and guidelines – e.g., on data security and stability, data disclosure, data link and exchange, data confidentiality, open data, personally identifiable information, data innovation design, and data governance assessment – in addition to limited human resources capability can make the process of data management and analysis challenging. A comprehensive and coherent approach towards organising, classifying, categorising and integrating government data with common standards and protocols could help overcome challenges related to the heterogeneity of data and the complexity of data integration. It could thus provide the leverage to develop data sharing and reinforce collaboration across the government.

> *"There's been much better use of data over the last number of years and I also think that there's better multi annual analysis as well."*

Interviews for this project consistently mentioned the availability of quality data facilitated by the National Data Infrastructure (NDI), led by the Central Statistics Office, as an important element of the policy infrastructure, especially when combined with developing mechanisms to share data across public organisations. The design and implementation of the NDI and the Public Service Data Strategy 2019-2023 (Government of Ireland, 2019[3]) are supporting a stronger data ecosystem with better information for policy professionals.

The NDI is a work in progress. A number of data-linking initiatives have already begun across areas including housing, incomes and educational outcomes. The presence of skilled data-savvy and statistical staff at the departmental level allows for full exploitation of the departments' statistical resources, although significant challenges remain in accessing data across departments and in obtaining linked files. While coverage of common identifiers to merge datasets was low in the past, today's Personal Public Service Number (PPSN) coverage is relatively high, and the Eircode coverage is improving. A common identifier for citizens already exists with the PPSN; however, the Unique Business Identifier has not yet been fully rolled out across the system, beyond its use in the Central Statistics Office (CSO) and in the Office of the Revenue Commissioners.

The Public Service Data Strategy 2019-2023 has helped establish a data ecosystem to improve the availability and use of data across government activities. First, it led to the creation of an application programming interface-led (API) interoperability platform based on a service-oriented architecture to enable public service bodies to co-operate in sharing and reusing data. Second, it promotes a structured approach to data analytics to encourage evidence-based policy development. Third, by supporting data-sharing agreements accessible to citizens in the public domain and a Data Portal for citizens and by publishing open datasets, it promotes a culture of transparency.

A good co-ordination practice related to the NDI is the National Data Infrastructure Champions Group, which spans the civil and public service, and has been expanded to include agencies with high-value data. The Group developed a dashboard to measure NDI maturity for public sector entities. The dashboard allows the assessment of key data holdings for departments and agencies and highlights opportunities for further improvement.

The NDI and Public Service Data Strategy, coupled with better legislation to promote and encourage data sharing between public bodies (the Data Sharing and Governance Act 2019), have driven greater and more in-depth, innovative use of data across the public service, and they will allow the public service to further enhance its data infrastructure.

Ireland intends to be a leader in using open data and in creating an environment that recognises its economic, social and democratic benefits of Open Data are recognised. To this purpose, the Open Data Initiative, which is another key element of the public service reform agenda, has involved significant engagement with the public, businesses, researchers and public bodies and has worked towards greater outreach and closer collaboration with all stakeholders. This has been done via several conferences, seminars, workshops and competitions as well as with traditional means of communication and social media. The Open Data Governance Board, established in 2016, provides leadership on how to improve the capacity and capability of public bodies in implementing open data and makes recommendations to the government on how this can bring about long-term economic, social and democratic benefits. As such, the Open Data agenda can be considered a contribution to greater policy legitimacy.

Interviews consistently highlighted the improvement in evaluation and economic analysis. They attributed it to the work of the Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Service (IGEES), the subject of previous OECD analysis and recommendations (Government of Ireland, n.d.[4]). How its expertise can be employed

further is discussed later in this report in relation to policy skills development and developing centres of expertise.

There are a number of excellent case examples at the department and agency levels, such as the use of impact evaluation data at the Department of Social Protection of Ireland (see Box 2.1).

Box 2.1. Impact assessments for social protection in Ireland

The Department of Social Protection of Ireland plays a fundamental role in promoting two types of impact assessment of policy proposals: poverty and social impact assessments. Impact assessments are a crucial component of policy design and implementation and contribute to the well-being of the citizenry through three main channels. First, they highlight which policies are capable of having the intended impact on the targeted population, their possible spill overs and which components of wide policy programmes are most effective. This informs ex ante programming for future interventions, provides evidence for debate in the legislative arena and highlights directions for better targeting. Second, impact assessments allow for better spending by reducing the waste of resources in ineffective or counterproductive policies and by maximising investments in beneficial activities and policies. This permits more cost-effective planning and budgeting. Third, they contribute to the replication of good practices by identifying specific characteristics of successful policies, e.g. delivery methods and partnerships.

Poverty impact assessment

Poverty impact assessments (PIAs) are required by several official documents of the Irish government, such as the Updated National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2015-2017, the Revised Regulatory Impact Assessment Guidelines 2009 and Section 3.4 of the Cabinet Handbook for preparing Memos for Government.

As highlighted by the Cabinet Handbook, PIAs are necessary before submitting memoranda to the government, as they clearly indicate the impact of such proposals. All departments, even those not directly involved in service delivery, undertake these assessments. PIAs are also carried out in the preparation of strategies, plans and reviews at the departmental, state agency and local levels. These include, for instance, the Strategic Management Initiative Statements of Strategy, the National Development Plan, European Union plans and programmes, and County Development Plans and Strategies. Finally, they are completed in all stages of policy proposals and changes, and they should always be performed as an integral part of the development process.

Social impact assessment

The social impact assessment (SIA), unlike the PIA, takes a holistic view of the possible impact of policies on household incomes, families and poverty. SIAs have tested the distributive impact of changes in certain crucial policy areas, e.g., welfare and income tax. They have used a sample of around 5 000 households drawn from the latest (2019) CSO household survey, complemented by more up-to-date data about population, employment and incomes. SIAs have been conducted on all fiscal policies proposed in the budget laws since 2013. The related research briefings have been published in an easy-to-read format to inform the public about the cumulative effect of budgetary policies on income, wealth and social inequalities. The most recent SIA was carried out for the tax measures proposed in the Budget Law 2022.

Source: (Government of Ireland, 2022[5])

The OECD survey undertaken for this project looked at the sources policy practitioners use for thematic data, evidence and insights to feed into policy development. Responses highlighted that the mainly used sources are department data, data from CSOs, and informal contacts within one's department, while the least used are private sector data, academic insight, and evidence from think tanks and civil society sources (see Figure 2.1). As part of department data, audience insights as collected by public communicators can be a source of regular, updated and easy to get insights on the motivations, impeding factors, fears or barriers citizens have, as well as their understanding of particular subjects and their media consumption habits.

Figure 2.1. Sources feeding into policy development in Ireland
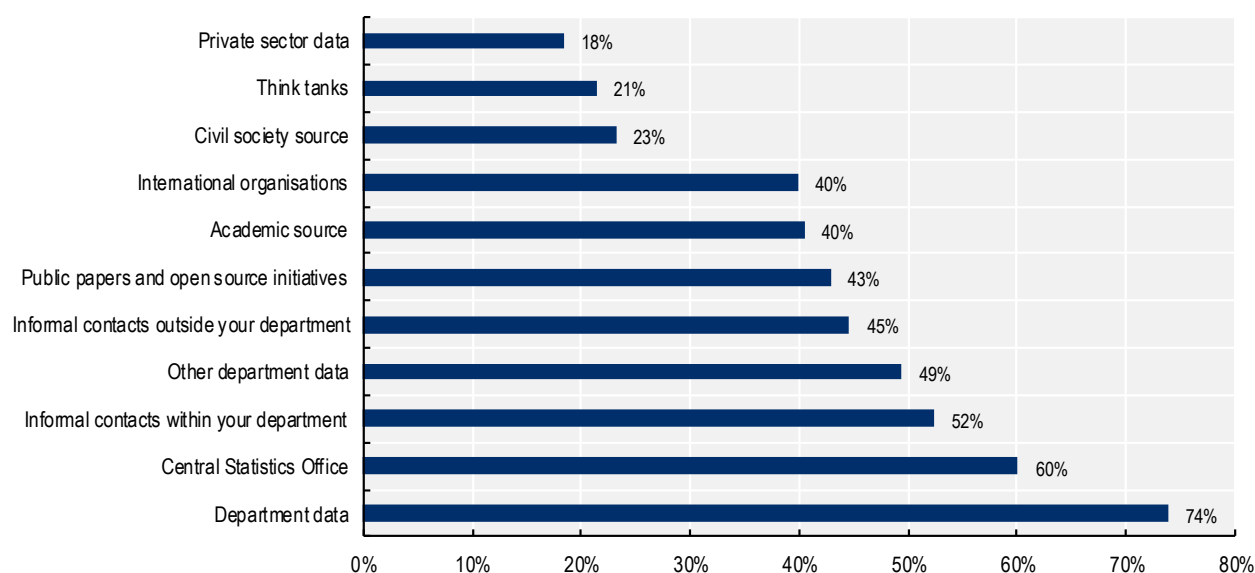
Note: n=168. Respondents to the OECD survey were asked, "What are the sources you use for thematic data, evidence and insights to feed into policy development?".
Source: (OECD, 2022[6]), OECD Survey on Policy Development in Ireland (unpublished).

Strengthening the evidence base to address long-term policy issues

The Irish response to the COVID-19 crisis was seen by interviewees as a good example of the administration's ability to respond quickly to immediate policy demands. However, many felt that they were reacting rather than shaping the response to the crisis or to ministerial demands for advice, with little bandwidth and sometimes little incentive to focus on the medium- and longer-term policy challenges outlined above.

There are a number of strategies or statements of strategic direction across the government. Project Ireland 2040 covers the National Planning Framework, the National Marine Planning Framework and the National Development Plan 2021-2030, which can ground the work on long-term priorities. Project Ireland 2040 is the government's long-term overarching strategy to make Ireland a better country for all and to build a more resilient and sustainable future. It sets out the national strategic policy objectives for the next two decades. However, it is challenging to operationalise these strategies into specific policies and work plans for each of the departments involved, as well as to ensure that new policies are aligned with those strategies (as they are often the result of departmental work).

OECD analysis (OECD, 2018[7]) suggests that this is a challenge shared by most jurisdictions, noting common weaknesses in developing whole-of-government strategies and strategic planning and in

embedding futures thinking and risk management in planning and policy processes. Even agencies at the centre of government (prime minister's/president's offices) with the most influence over priority setting and strategic alignment tend to have more of a co-ordination and oversight role than one of helping to set a strategic policy agenda. Few governments have developed the institutions, processes and practices to focus on the long term, including the necessary frameworks, methodological tools and institutional capabilities to assume a longer-term stewardship role while at the same time respecting the strategic direction of their elected governments. Futures thinking and a focus on the long-term become all the more important for finding responses to multi-faceted 'polycrises' such as COVID-10 or the war in Ukraine that simultaneously affect several policy domains.

The Irish government has some important mechanisms for highlighting and investigating issues that would form part of medium- and long-term policy agendas.

The National Economic and Social Council (Government of Ireland, n.d.[4]) is a representative body that advises the Taoiseach on strategic policy issues relating to sustainable economic, social and environmental development in Ireland. Its current work programme includes deliberations on the Shared Island initiative (Government of Ireland, 2022[8]), sustainable development and climate change, and Ireland's well-being framework. It has also considered digital inclusion, challenges and opportunities for rural Ireland, the agricultural sector, and the future of the welfare system. Having the Department of the Taoiseach chairing the National Economic and Social Council and ring-fencing it to protect it from responding to urgent demands was seen by interviewees as strengthening its ability to deliver on longer-term issues. However, on a number of occasions, interviewees mentioned its historical link with the social partnership during the global financial crisis as limiting its ability to influence across government departments and the political cadre.

To strengthen data stewardship in relation to the evolving data needs of the civil and public service, the CSO has already delivered 37 seconded professional statistical staff (from the Irish Government Statistical Service) to 16 departments and offices across the system. This support has in turn created a demand for further data linkage and integration of services and the expansion of the Data Rooms for policymakers, supported by their internal data science, quality, and methodology support functions. The recent creation of a dedicated Data Science and Statistical Support Unit, comprised of a team of data scientists and analysts who will initially focus on Housing, Healthcare and Climate Change data priorities, will help to meet departmental data needs and can advise on data strategy development, data acquisition and linking, data engineering and data science, methodology, and quality supports.

Also, a number of academic partners are working on mid- and longer-term policy issues. For example, researchers at the University of Galway are addressing issues of disability rights under the United Nations Convention for Persons with Disabilities and have a long-term working relationship with policy practitioners in government departments responsible for the implementation of the Convention. A recent outcome relates to the Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) Bill 2021, which is being examined by the Oireachtas at present and is sponsored by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. Furthermore, the Campus Engage initiative (Government of Ireland, 2023[9]) of the Irish Universities Association fosters research and innovation that aim to improve, understand or investigate societal challenges; community partners and policy practitioners are helping to advance the initiative. Co-creation is central to the Engaged Research approach of the initiative.

Respondents to the interviews and surveys mentioned processes to assess national risk, including national risk assessments conducted by the Department of Taoiseach (which, in 2015, anticipated and considered the potential risk of a future Brexit) and other processes curated by the national defence department which cover events such as natural disasters and pandemics. While a national risk assessment is predicated on the assumption that a lead department will manage the assessment strategically, interviewees noted that, despite the risk register and the risk assessment, there is currently no mechanism to feed those risks into a strategic policy agenda or to help them influence current policy processes.

Developing mechanisms to connect the various parts of the system already focused on longer-term and cross-cutting strategic issues and finding ways to translate those insights into a whole-of-government strategic policy agenda would give the civil service more clarity on where to put their policy efforts. While government develops policy and sets the agenda, this connection would also enable the civil service to take a more strategic rather than reactive approach to policy development to help identify policy gaps or inadequacies, communicate the urgency or need for prioritisation of policy or resourcing decisions, and respond to immediate demands from ministers. The civil service itself should have a more proactive approach to policy work, including anticipating demands for policy analysis and advice.

Civil servants consulted for this project mentioned the lack of time and resources for in-depth policy development as a challenge, citing limited space for identifying problems, for testing policy options with stakeholders to avoid technocratic approaches, for conducting early policy experiments before rolling out programmes, for carrying out in-depth impact assessments, and for collaborating and/or co-creating with other departments or people likely to be affected by policy decisions. The latter is of particular importance, as direct input into policy design by or on behalf of vulnerable communities is uneven at present. It is vital that outcomes of policies, often having an impact on vulnerable parts of the population, are incorporated coherently into review and evaluation. The quality of policy development work was deemed to suffer as a result of perceived time and resource constraints. Examples in some countries include the development of Long-term Insights Briefings, which try to bring some accountability to delivering long-term priorities across departments (Box 2.2). As time and resources for policy development may not increase in the short or medium term, policymakers will have to think about how to adapt to be better prepared and to have better developed and agreed processes and mechanisms before finalising policy advice.

Box 2.2. Long-Term Insights Briefings in New Zealand and Australia

New Zealand's Public Service Act 2020 requires chief executives of government departments, independently from ministers, to produce a Long-term Insights Briefing (LTIB) at least once every three years, where they should explore future trends, risks and opportunities. LTIBs are expected to provide information and impartial analysis, as well as policy options for responding to risks and seizing opportunities. The development of such LTIBs is based on eight high-level steps, which include engagement with citizens both on the subject matter and on the draft briefing itself. The first LTIB was presented to a parliamentary select committee in mid-2022. After parliamentary scrutiny, it was made available in the public domain. Public consultation on draft briefings is a requirement of the process.

Prior to the Public Service Act 2020, New Zealand's senior policy community had discussed the challenges of building long-term issues into policy formulation, including the relative dearth of foresight capability across the public service. Under the auspices of the policy project, Tier 2 policy leaders held workshops on a future policy heat map in 2015 and on policy stewardship in 2017. While there is no associated programme to build capability in strategic foresight, the LTIB requirement process may catalyse demand for strategic foresight capabilities.

In order to strengthen policy development and planning, the government of Australia has also expressed its intention to start a process of developing long-term insights. Overseen by the Secretaries Board, these briefings will connect experts from across the public service and will include public consultations with various stakeholders such as citizens, academia, industry and NGOs on specific longer term policy challenges to help identify solutions.

Source: (Government of New Zealand, 2022[10]); (Washington, 2021[11]); (Government of Australia, 2022[12])

Strategic policy units have been set up in a number of departments in order to improve policy development planning at the department level. However, these units have not been rolled out in every department. In addition, their mandate or capacity, which may vary from one department to another, to support government capability across the civil service is not well understood by many stakeholders. It also remains unclear to what extent these units are beneficial to cross-departmental policy development (as opposed to developing sectoral strategic policy frameworks), as there does not appear to be any central co-ordination nor active exchange among them. It may be helpful to identify and map these units in more detail, to shed light on their composition, activities and added value.

Enabling strategic foresight in support of policy development

In this context, the capability of the civil service in strategic foresight deserves particular attention, as it represents important information (rather than evidence or data) contributing to the policy development process. To provide proactive advice to governments and to include future considerations in current policy analysis and advice, the civil service requires enhanced capabilities in perceiving emerging future changes in the present, then making sense of them and using them to shape policy, a discipline known as strategic foresight. While all governments are doing this to some extent, there is great variation in the resources, time and influence devoted to strategic foresight as an explicit discipline, rather than an implicit intuition.

The discipline of constantly perceiving, making sense of and acting on future developments as they emerge is the definition of strategic foresight as used in this project. Times of rapid change, unpredictable uncertainty, novelty and ambiguity highlight the limitations of traditional forecast-based planning. Foresight helps policymakers to challenge and overcome current assumptions about the future and prepare for a broader set of possibilities (OECD, 2021[13]). The value of strategic foresight comes from challenging assumptions, broadening what is considered and inspiring new actions. Like any skill or discipline, it must be practised and developed for individuals and organisations to realise the benefits. Simply reading about how strategic foresight works, or passively studying documents about the future, should not be expected to give an appreciation of these benefits.

In Ireland, there is potential to further develop these capabilities and connect them with the policy development process. The Irish government has already identified this as a capability to be developed.

This project has a parallel focus on embedding strategic foresight in decision making. Futures exercises have been undertaken in the past in Ireland (OECD, 2021[13]), including population projections informed by megatrends analysis, the National Economic and Social Council's work on Approaches to Transition and Just Transition on technology and climate, and the involvement of Irish academia and public servants in the European Commission's IMAJINE scenarios project on territorial justice. While people interviewed for this assessment considered them "useful" or "informative", the resulting insights did not translate into strategic directions or influence policy development. Strategic foresight is not an end in itself. It is only useful if it is used to inform future vision, strategic directions and policy.

Interviews suggested a growing appetite for strategic foresight as an aid for strategic policy discussions and a "way to get people to talk about trade-offs and choices". The next phase of this project, specifically the complementary component on strategic foresight, will recommend ways to build capability in strategic foresight across the Public Service. This will include a focus on strategic foresight, especially for policy practitioners, and a policy development framework and policy platform that recognises the benefits of foresight to policy design and development. In accordance with the above-mentioned need to connect strategic foresight with policy outcomes, these capability-building efforts will target examples of policy areas to make for an applied learning experience.

Resources and good practices are currently limited. No interviewees or any other public servants involved in the project indicated spending all or most of their time on strategic foresight. A negligible number of

public servants had participated in an actual strategic foresight exercise or knew a colleague who had. There are no known analyses carried out by or for any Irish public service with explicit use of exploratory scenarios, horizon scanning, or visioning and backcasting – three of the main methods of strategic foresight. A majority of survey respondents indicated never using these methods or deemed them not applicable to their functions. The methods typically applied in strategic foresight – visioning and backcasting – were among the least frequently used among survey respondents.

Interviewees and focus group participants in OECD interventions prior to this project expressed views about the nature and practice of strategic foresight that do not correspond to the actual discipline as used by the OECD and other leading organisations. For example, there was an unreasonable expectation that strategic foresight would have been able to predict and avoid the 2008 financial crisis; or that producing a risk assessment would suffice to consider the work of strategic foresight fulfilled. A more subtle misconception was that technology foresight and road mapping served the same purpose as strategic foresight.

Strategic foresight interventions that respondents had undertaken in the past were understood to be useful "informative" tools; however, the outputs of these interventions did not clearly translate into policy development. Therefore, there is a need to equip the public service with strategic foresight skills and practice systems that can stimulate iterative processes for policy development through to implementation.

In spite of the paucity of direct experience and concrete use of strategic foresight in the Irish public service, respondents generally indicated intuitive support of its principles and agreed that it would be in the interest of Ireland's system of governance to increase the use and effectiveness of strategic foresight.

One particular area of note where interviewees identified an important potential for strategic foresight to add value was in fostering interdepartmental and interdisciplinary exchange, with the intention of creating shared language and plans for concerted action. Furthermore, when asked questions relating to the strategic direction and contextual environment of their organisations, interviewees tended to revert to considerations of their present-day problem-solving and their existing agendas, indicating that the cognitive switch needed to create strategic foresight dialogue was not readily accessible to them.

Given both the limited exposure of individuals to strategic foresight thinking and the system's limited experience with it, interviewees understandably had difficulty speculating on details of how and where strategic foresight could be used in practice or how the public service could embed it in its institutions.

A number of other countries have strengthened their ability to embed strategic foresight in policy planning and development (see Box 2.3).

Box 2.3. Strategic foresight in Canada, Finland and Singapore

Strengthening the capacity of the civil service to embed strategic foresight in policy planning activities is crucial to build institutional resilience and adaptability to rapidly evolving scenarios and can empower the public sector to anticipate challenges and analyse policy trade-offs. Several countries use strategic foresight to build stronger policies in the face of an uncertain future.

Canada

In 2010, Canada transformed the Policy Research Initiative into Policy Horizons, a federal government organisation that conducts strategic foresight to help the government develop future-oriented policies and programmes. The organisation reports to the Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Disability Inclusion and receives oversight from a deputy minister steering committee. Policy Horizons focuses on three main lines of foresight – Economic Futures, Social Futures and Governance Futures,

– and works along several dimensions. First, it analyses the emerging policy landscape with its challenges and opportunities. Second, it engages in dialogue with public servants and citizens. Third, it builds foresight literacy and capacity across the public service. For this last dimension, it developed a series of Foresight Training Modules for civil servants and is continuously engaged in building the foresight capacity across departments. Departments throughout the government can draw on Policy Horizons' foresight capacity, and it supports discussions and workshops at high-level meetings across the government.

Finland

Strategic foresight is strongly embedded in Finland's government systems. Firstly, there exists a legal requirement for regular foresight studies and the Prime Minister's Office leads the whole-of-government efforts of strategic foresight. At least once per term, the Prime Minister's Office publishes a report on long-term futures, setting out the main challenges and the government's targets. The institutional setting for this exercise brings together several entities. All ministries are involved in foresight activities through the ministries' joint foresight group, which provides a co-operation network for preparing the "Government Report on the Future". In addition, a group of experts, the Government Foresight Group, supports foresight activities to strengthen the links to decision making processes. Finally, the National Foresight Network brings together foresight data producers and serves as a co-ordination forum for foresight operators.

Singapore

The Centre for Strategic Futures of Singapore plays a key role in conducting and co-ordinating regular cross-government foresight analyses to inform the overall strategic planning. Established in 2009, it is located in the Prime Minister's Office, and it is tasked with building capacities and tools for strategic anticipation in the whole public service, developing insights with innovative methodologies and frameworks, and communicating insights to decision makers. Other individual agencies have set up foresight agencies that build on the role and expertise of the Centre of Strategic Futures. It is common practice to place officials in the central foresight institution to gain experience, and then deploy them across the government. The Centre has an innovative approach to strategic foresight, which revolves around Scenario Planning Plus (SP+) and taps into a set of tools broader than that used in traditional scenario planning. The Centre shares the SP+ toolkit across government through a series of workshops and courses at the Civil Service College and leads a series of conversations bringing together leaders across the public service to strengthen their anticipatory capabilities.

Source: (Government of Canada, 2022[14]); (Government of Singapore, 2022[15]); (Government of Finland, 2022[16])

In order to further mainstream strategic foresight across the policy development system, a pilot programme on strategic foresight has been developed from a number of options presented by the OECD. The options were:

- strategic foresight alongside: a minimum viable setup for strategic foresight, consisting of ad hoc futures practice that nonetheless aims for successful impact on policy development processes and opens the gateway for further expansion
- strategic foresight on demand: a regular foresight function with a mandate from the centre of government that can be readily drawn on to inform work and promote a certain degree of cross-departmental collaboration
- strategic foresight built in: a set of practices systematically embedded in the public service that regularly generates must-have knowledge that is consistently used in decision making.

Throughout the policy development process, it is important to identify users and use knowledge-creation processes, engagement opportunities, leadership buy-in, and management and feedback interventions. These are necessary to implement greater use of strategic foresight in policy development.

Above all, this strategic foresight upgrade depends on a concerted undertaking of strategic foresight work: activities and practices that observe emerging future changes, consider their significance, and apply them to policy development. Getting started with these activities is the only way to test and improve the way strategic foresight will be implemented and valued within the Irish public service.

Collaboration with academia

As highlighted above, no government has the monopoly on policy ideas, and insights for policy can come from the wider policy ecosystem, especially from academia, civil society and the public. In complement to the actions that the civil service can take to further build up its internal data infrastructure, this section addresses the collaboration with academia in more detail.

The university sector and academics are an important part of the policy ecosystem, both in terms of their capacity to produce research insights and their capability to build the evidence base. Academics are also fundamental as sources of intellectual innovation in substantive policies and can act as teachers of innovative research methods (as discussed above).

One significant opportunity cost of quality research is not achieving its deserved impact. Public funding is often used to commission or otherwise support valuable research with significant findings, but the impact on the development of final policy options and/or decision making is variable. This constitutes a waste of both taxpayer resources and the work of academia, which we need to address.

Interviews revealed a wide spectrum of relationships between academia and the civil service. On one side of the spectrum, some departments regularly turn to academia to commission research and evaluations, engage academics in joint research projects to identify policy challenges and involve them in peer learning workshops or other events. Similarly, some departments established structural forms of collaboration between civil servants and academia. These include arrangements such as joint boards, joint advisory councils, quarterly "mixed" meetings and expert groups around certain policy issues.

A valuable example of long-term policy collaboration between academia and the civil service is the bilateral research programmes agreed between the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) and individual government departments and agencies. There are some 30 such programmes in 26 departments and agencies at present. They generally run for a period of about three to five years and contain an agreed set of research projects on specified policy issues. These allow for regular and ongoing interactions between researchers and departments at different stages of policy design and delivery, rather than being confined, for example, to a specific tender for a once-off policy project. Continuing dialogue as the policy develops is key; regular ESRI/departmental meetings can help to ensure the effective review of progress and to identify potential future collaborative work in the policy area. It is worth noting that the ESRI's ability to conduct this work is heavily based on access to Research Microdata Files compiled by the CSO. Data analytics and research, irrespective of who undertakes the research, depend on the availability of high-quality source data that require skillsets beyond data analytics.

Another example of collaboration is a strategic framework of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS), which is working to promote close engagement between policymakers and the public research system. DFHERIS is developing a cohesive strategic framework which will frame activity across policy development in the Irish civil service as a whole, as well as with sectoral agencies and organisations in the higher education sector. A key interim objective is to establish a co-ordinated programme of work to deliver coherent messaging to both the policy and research sides pending the finalisation of the framework.

Within this context, the Irish Universities Association is running the Campus Engage initiative, aimed at helping academic researchers engage effectively with the development of public policy, in terms of agenda setting, policy formulation, implementation and evaluation. The initiative seeks to develop a comprehensive framework and suite of metrics to underpin how research can feed into policy development in Ireland. To date, the project has identified a series of barriers to and enablers for effective collaboration and engagement between academic researchers and policymakers in Ireland. The project is developing a framework and guidelines for helping researchers and policymakers to collaborate effectively so that the impact of research is maximised and becomes an integral part of public policy development.

Some departments have research managers or designated research units that can bridge the gap with academic research and can support the setting of policy agendas, commission research or spur knowledge-sharing activities. For instance, the Department of Justice has a well-functioning research infrastructure, with a "research advisory group", a Research and Data Analytics team and a departmental research programme. The Research and Data Analytics team undertakes research and produces reports and statistics in several relevant areas, such as criminal justice, civil justice, equality and immigration. In addition, it regularly publishes datasets collected by the Department of Justice and works to continuously implement open government initiatives. Other examples include departments with designated roles, such as research managers or designated research units, designed to commission research, engage with academics and academic research, and translate the research for use by practitioners.

On the other side of the spectrum, other departments have more ad hoc relationships often built on personal connections between civil servants and individual academics, which may disappear because of turnover. Thus, these departments lack a system of continuous exchange and feedback with academia.

Overall, the interviews highlighted a strong interest from senior and mid-level officials but also from the civil service leadership and from academic interlocutors to strengthen the relationships between the civil service and academia and the research community in more formally structured ways.

While they acknowledged the importance of academic research for policy development, the interviews also underlined that the civil service and academia operate under different incentive structures and under different timeframes and that the cultural divide ("different language") between the two worlds hinders closer and more efficient collaboration mechanisms. The incentive structures for researchers stress the importance of generating research funding and of publishing in peer-reviewed media, rather than working with policymakers on priority issues. Unsurprisingly, these issues are not confined to the Irish experience (Institute for Government, 2018, 2019, 2020).

Towards a stronger architecture of research for public policy and society

Interviews underscored the main findings of a recent report (Doyle, 2021[17]) and of the Engaged Research policy brief (Campus Engage, 2020[18]) from the Irish Universities Association's Campus Engage initiative on how to build a stronger architecture of research for public policy and society, which spell out clearly some fundamental issues in this regard. A core theme of the papers is the importance of developing a framework of actions to support more aligned activity in the national research ecosystem. As mentioned above, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need for reliable research and evidence that can inform public debate and help decision makers to take evidence-based decisions. The complexity of today's challenges requires that Ireland further enhances the connectivity between the research and policy communities and broadens the expertise base. Important steps in this direction are represented by the Public Service Reform and the Civil Service Renewal frameworks, as well as by the higher education System Performance Framework and the national research and innovation strategy. It is, however, necessary to further strengthen the existing structures, as they should be underpinned by clear leadership, roles, objectives and tools.

Actions should target three distinct yet overlapping spaces: the research community itself, government institutions (specifically the Oireachtas and departments), and public research funders. First, it would be beneficial to consider how the Researcher Career Framework can include a specific focus on policy development relationships and support academics across their careers to engage with the policy development system through induction, coaching and mentoring by (senior) academics. Communication of typical policy processes and practices would be beneficial in this regard, particularly if offered by senior policymakers having a strong background in the realities facing government and policy advisers. Moreover, it would be useful to consider the design of incentives and rewards for academics in the higher education system as well as to reinforce the competency framework for policy practitioners, outlining various types of research skills needed by civil servants.

Second, government departments may include in their strategies a short statement on their areas of research interest, which will facilitate the research community's understanding of what are the most pressing sectoral policy questions. Building on the work of the Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Services, more efforts could be directed towards developing policy capacity and towards two-way secondment pathways between policy and academia. This could be done by scaling up existing mobility and exchange programmes between higher education, the political system, and policymakers, such as the RIA Oireachtas Science Pairing Scheme, the IRC Oireachtas Shadowing Scheme and Science Foundation Ireland's Public Service Fellowship.

Third, the next review of the System Performance Framework of the Higher Education Authority should include specific material and objectives to support the link between policy and research. For instance, existing arrangements such as the Public Appointments Service graduate recruitment process and the civil service secondment policy could be further developed, since having in-house academics can help improve the access to and the understanding of evidence.

In this context, it may be useful to look at examples in other jurisdictions that have sought to draw on academic expertise and literature to inform public policy. Both the United Kingdom (UK) (Government of the UK, 2022[19]) and New Zealand have a network of chief science advisors that are appointed to individual departments but form part of a cohort that can work together on overall government priorities (the New Zealand science advisors have scrutinised budget proposals, for example). Among other roles, they are charged with ensuring that government departments individually and collectively improve the evidence base underpinning their policy development and advice to ministers (see Box 2.4). Another example is the UK government's What Works Network, which ensures that the best evidence on "what works" is available for decision makers working on public administration. Furthermore, the Open Innovation Team in the UK Cabinet Office, which is a cross-government unit, works with academics to generate analysis and ideas for policy. It pairs academics with civil service teams to help officials have better-quality discussions about their policy areas (see Box 2.5).

Box 2.4. Network of science advisors in New Zealand

The Prime Minister's Chief Science Advisor

The role of New Zealand's Prime Minister's Chief Science Advisor (PMCSA), originally created in 2009, is established constitutionally and consists of a single member reporting directly to the prime minister. The PMCSA is seconded from an academic institution, which also physically hosts its office, but it has direct contact with the prime minister and the cabinet. Its responsibilities include strengthening the role of science in policy development, promoting education in sciences, technology, engineering and math, providing scientific advice to the prime minister and commissioning deliberative advice on selected topics.

The Chief Science Advisor Forum

The Prime Minister's Chief Science Advisor brings together chief science advisors (CSAs) and departmental science advisors (DSAs) from across government agencies and institutions to create the Chief Science Advisor Forum. CSAs and DSAs, which have been appointed in major ministries and report to both their chief executive and to the PMCSA, provide strategic inputs on the development of evidence-based knowledge for public policy and assure the quality of internal research. In addition, they are engaged in the scientific review of specific budget bills through the Science Committee of Central Agencies. These scientific advisors are typically contracted by a government entity, or they may be seconded from a research institution into the role to provide senior independent advice. Regular meetings usually also include the government chief statistician, the chief economist (Treasury) as well as the president of the Royal Society of New Zealand and a deputy head of the State Services Commission representing the authority of the civil service.

The Chief Science Advisor Forum is a community of practice for science advisors that promotes the use of science to inform policy formulation, implementation and evaluation, and it provides a bridge between research and government policies. Sub-committees of the Forum typically co-ordinate research projects and advice, and research reports are published under the Forum's label or that of the PMCSA. The Forum advises the government on selected opportunities and risks highlighted by the research community and ensures both that advice from DSAs and the PMCSA is embedded in decision making processes and that the advice is founded on the latest research projects and insights from science and technology. The Forum also works to address the priorities of minority groups by supporting diversity in the scientific system and by including Māori approaches as part of the evidence base.

Source: (Government of New Zealand, 2022[20])

Box 2.5. The United Kingdom government connecting policy practitioners with researchers

The What Works Network, launched by the UK government in 2013, ensures that decision makers working on public administration have access to the best evidence on successful practices. It brings together 13 independent centres that assess the existing evidence base in specific policy areas and offer advice on effective practice. The Network is co-ordinated by a team in the Cabinet Office, which is active across government to embed a culture of evidence in the design of policy and service delivery. In 2015, a Cross-Government Trial Advice Panel was set up in partnership with the Economic and Social Research Council. The Panel offers the opportunity of sharing expertise, to allow departments with limited knowledge in performance measurement and evaluation to collaborate with departments that regularly work on it, as well as with top academic experts. In so doing, the Panel aims to reduce the barriers that departments face in commissioning and conducting evaluations and to use the resulting evidence to improve public policies.

In addition, the Open Innovation Team established in 2016 in the UK Cabinet Office, is a cross-government unit that works with academics to generate analysis and ideas for policy. It pairs academics with civil service teams to help officials have better-quality discussions about their policy areas. The Open Innovation Team works on a project basis. Departments engaging with it have contact with a more diverse range of external experts that bring fresh thinking, creative approaches and innovative ideas. The departments get a better understanding of the evidence base for their policy areas and receive support in framing their problems and defining solutions using the latest available evidence.

Source: (Government of the United Kingdom, 2022[21])

Aligning academic research with policy priorities

Interviews highlighted several additional solutions that can be put in place to further bridge the gap between the civil service and academia. One way to do this could be to commission academics in relevant research areas to regularly provide translations of research findings for policy purposes. These could take the form of research briefs, dedicated podcasts or a series of informal workshops.

Regarding international practices, Flanders (Belgium) and the Netherlands were cited by interviewees as interesting models. The Flemish model of "sectoral centres for policy research" is run by the Department of Economy, Science and Innovation. These centres, often consortia of universities, research centres and think tanks, are created by multi-year framework agreements awarded through a competitive bidding process. The centres conduct policy research on a set of agreed sector-specific topics (short-term and longer-term) and also respond to new research needs of the public administration. A critical success factor is the alignment of incentives for the civil service and for academia: outputs are defined both in terms of peer-reviewed academic articles, PhDs, policy notes, knowledge-sharing events and platforms.

Ireland's Institute of Public Administration, beyond offering training and degrees, provides a range of public management consultancy services designed to assist public organisations in their goals. These include governance services such as governance briefings for senior managers and boards, risk assessments and management, coaching and mentoring for board members, as well as advisory services in human resources management and organisational development. In addition, the Institute's consultancy branch brings together a network of professionals by organising forums, conferences and customised in-house training on various topics ranging from housing to pensions to risk management. The Institute also has the only dedicated public management research resource in the country, which offers several products, such

as Insight Briefs, annual reports on the state of the public service, a Local Government Research Series and the biannual Local Authority Times. In addition, the Institute has been publishing its own peer-reviewed research journal, "Administration", which seeks to combine original and multidisciplinary scholarship on Irish public administration with insights and experiences of practitioners. In addition to research articles, the journal publishes comments on articles, reports and letters.

From a civil service perspective, another good example of collaboration with academia is the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). It has a significant research budget and looks specifically to fund research that is relevant to policymakers and to ensure that this learning is drawn out by researchers in an accessible way. The EPA manages an environmental research programme that delivers essential scientific support for environmental policy development, and its outputs have increased the national understanding of the environment and of the challenges it faces. On a three-year cycle, the EPA carries out a comprehensive consultation to identify key research areas and required actions to inform the thematic direction of its research awards for the consecutive years. The Agency's work is based on the EPA's Research 2030, a ten-year high-level framework for its research programming, which has the explicit goal of generating in-depth knowledge that will underpin environmental policies. The Agency makes Annual Research Calls and supports thematic Research Areas Assessments in collaboration with key stakeholders ensuring continuous relevance. The research budget of the EPA is relevant, and the funding is provided under its four interconnected hubs: addressing climate change evidence needs, facilitating a green and circular economy, delivering a healthy environment, and protecting and restoring the natural environment. Beyond the main EPA Research calls, the Agency offers other funding opportunities for policy-relevant research, such as the EPA Green Enterprise Scheme, PhD scholarships, Strategic and Collaborative Awards, and Fast-Track to Policy Funding opportunities to respond to identified urgent policy questions.

Areas of opportunity to strengthen the use of evidence and data for policy development

This chapter highlighted a number of progress areas in leveraging evidence and data for policy development in Ireland, as exemplified by various excellent case examples of data-driven policy development at the department and agency levels. The National Data Infrastructure and IGEES continue to play a prominent role in building a data-driven culture across the Irish civil service, and the presence of IGEES economists and policy analysts within government department teams is recognised as a good practice beyond the Irish context. In terms of longer-term policy, important policy levers have been identified, such as the risk register led by the Department of the Taoiseach, the National Risk Assessments, the programmes of the National Economic and Social Council, and the futures work of academic institutions. The progressive creation of strategic policy units across departments is a promising way to improve policy development planning at the department level. A growing appetite for strategic foresight underscores the ambition level of the civil service to strengthen strategic policy discussions.

Despite significant progress in the use of data for policy design and for the evaluation of policies, interviews and surveys with public officials pointed to several areas that can benefit from further improvement in line with OECD practices.

- Capitalising on the **lessons learned from COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine** to ensure that a government-wide approach to data engineering and architecture and to data governance is found and systems, standards and protocols are put in place to allow for understanding, leveraging and sharing available data. This applies also to the growing need for real-time data, to enable prompt decision making and action.

- Applying a more holistic approach to **cross-departmental impact measurement and integrated systems modelling,** as policy development often does not factor in impact and implications in

other domains (e.g. housing and environment). Reinforcing the **multi-disciplinary character of policy development** and encouraging a more systematic approach based on "**system thinking**" (Hynes, Lees and Müller, 2020[22]) would be beneficial for better policy formulation, as public policies have a dynamic and interactive relationship with their environment. This is crucial to **understand how parts of a policy interact with each other, with the environment and over time**.

- Identifying and mapping **strategic policy units** in more detail across the civil service and shedding light on their composition, activities and added value.

- Effectively communicating data and data needs internally, sharing them between organisations and knowing how to generate new, insightful data to fully harness the potential of data and support evidence-based decision making. In order to tap into **data sources in academia, civil society and the private sector**, **a partnership approach** can be beneficial. As highlighted by the Strategic Priorities of the National Statistics Board 2021-2026, the growing demand for data and the falling survey response rates require accessing private data sources and further developing the use of administrative data. A network of policymakers involved in research and evaluation techniques could thus help to foster the exchange of knowledge and to consolidate current practices. In addition, incorporating other forms of evidence, such as **user insights**, audience insights gathered by public communicators, stakeholder views and various qualitative information, can give a different perspective on the system's performance and highlight blind spots in the process of policy formulation.

- **Strengthening data skills** across the civil service, as highlighted by interviewees. "Often the data is there. The challenge is to understand what it means for policy-making." As policy professionals need better data literacy, part of this need can be met through ad hoc training within a skills framework, which is crucial to make policy professionals "intelligent customers" of data analytics. This can also be achieved by identifying where good capability sits in the public sector system, facilitating the access of professionals to these centres of expertise and capability, and encouraging knowledge-sharing and peer learning.

Areas of opportunity to strengthen strategic foresight and long-term priorities could include:

- **Better articulating the overall strategic direction and whole-of-government policy priorities**, including translating political priorities, joined-up risk assessment processes, and future opportunities (strategic vision) into current policy processes.

- **Improving capability in strategic foresight** that complements the National Risk Assessment processes across the government and identifying techniques to deepen how foresight analyses are fed into policy considerations to improve the ability of the public service to quickly perceive, make sense of and act on emerging developments.

- **Investigating ways to articulate an effective "authorising environment" at the political-administrative interface** so that officials are enabled to provide, and so that ministers invite and expect, policy advice that is future-focused, evidence-informed and courageous. This might centre around discussions about "legitimacy" or understanding the political and public context and including them in policy processes.

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