



Background paper

The challenge – a wake-up call!

Evidence is not being systematically used by government policymakers, organizational leaders, professionals and citizens to equitably address societal challenges. Instead, decision-makers too often rely on inefficient (and sometimes harmful) informal feedback systems. The result is poor decisions that lead to failures to improve lives, avoidable harm to citizens, and wasted resources.

— [Global Commission on Evidence to Address Societal Challenges](#)

What is known and unknown about this problem? Who owns the problem? Who can fix it? Who will pay? How will we know if our solutions work?

Like most countries, Ireland faces many complex and multi-faceted policy challenges. Meeting these requires innovative and effective policymaking, from design to implementation to evaluation. As elsewhere, Ireland sees the potential for research-based expertise and evidence to transform policymaking and deliver better outcomes for society. Evidence-informed policymaking (EIPM) can also help to increase public trust in decision-making, strengthen the legitimacy of policy decisions, mitigate the potential harms from misinformation, and act as an antidote to dangerous ideologies.

The mandate

The current [Programme for Government](#) demonstrates clear political support for strengthening the contribution of research to public policy. It includes commitments to:

- *Establish a formal pathway for third-level researchers to inform government policy on critical issues based on internationally recognised research*
- *Continue to support the role of the Government Science Advisor*
- *Scale up exchange programmes and secondments between academia and Government, to enhance policymaking*
- *Encourage academic and research involvement in public life and in contributing to the solution of societal challenges such as healthcare, housing and infrastructure*

This political mandate is significant at a time of major national developments to build capacity and strengthen the support structures for EIPM. The ambition for reform is reflected in the publication of Ireland's Research and Innovation Strategy, [Impact 2030](#); the establishment of [new science-advice structures](#); an ongoing programme of civil service renewal initiatives, including the recent publication of a [framework for policy development for civil servants](#); and the establishment of Research Ireland with a strong statutory remit to support the research-for-policy agenda.

A systems-thinking approach

In 2023, an [OECD review of the policymaking process in Ireland](#) advocated for more systems thinking and systematic approaches to developing and implementing public-policy responses to increasingly complex policy problems. The systematic integration of academic research and policymaking is called for in the recent [EU Council conclusions](#) on strengthening the role and impact of research and innovation in the policymaking process. This focus on system performance is also a priority action under the [European Research Area Policy Agenda 2025-2027](#), and is supported by [Horizon Europe](#), the EU's research funding programme.

Using systems-thinking in the design of EIPM support structures aligns with Ireland's [OECD commitment](#) to make innovation a normal part of public-sector work. Putting robust and relevant evidence at the heart of decision-making can be a powerful catalyst for promoting policy innovation and experimentation. Evidence can also disrupt path dependency in policy, providing the licensed dissent necessary to “challenge assumptions that existing structures, processes and interventions remain the most appropriate or effective means for the public sector to achieve its purpose and deliver upon government and citizen needs and expectations”.

Our research-for-policy ecosystem

Thinking ecologically about how research evidence is created, shared and used reveals an ‘ecosystem’ of interrelated and interdependent actors and elements, myriad dynamic interconnections and feedback loops, and variable levels of resources and capacity. System leadership is needed to coordinate action across these structures, supports and processes, so that receptive policymakers have timely access to the best available research evidence.

The [European Commission](#) sees a research-for-policy ecosystem as the “complex set of organisational structures and entities, processes, and networks that interact to support the mobilisation, acquisition, synthesis, translation, presentation for use, and application of scientific knowledge in policymaking processes”.

Research-for-policy ecosystems can be identified at global, regional (EU), national, sub-national and sectoral levels. Key system actors include researchers and their funders, research users, and intermediaries. Identifying these actors and documenting their respective roles, responsibilities and relations is not purely a technical exercise. The process can also stimulate dialogue and knowledge exchange; facilitate opportunities for international peer learning; establish an agreed lexicon of research and policy terminology and interpretations; and foster a shared sense of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and challenges in our research-for-policy ecosystem.

However, published profiles or ‘maps’ of national research-for-policy ecosystems can risk presenting oversimplified and reductionist versions of the complex, multi-directional and dynamic social processes involved. Such accounts of the system are prepared and endorsed from a particular point of view, and may reflect unconscious bias, privileging or marginalising different actors, support structures and mechanisms. System maps need to be inclusive and enriched with a deep understanding of the ‘connective tissue’ of structures and processes that support all of the human interactions, relations and social networks that enable the exchange of policy-relevant knowledge and expertise across sectoral and professional boundaries.

Systems thinking helps us to identify our research-for-policy structures and sub-structures; the interconnections and feedback loops between system elements; and the capacity and capability for research-policy engagement across our system. Just as importantly, systems thinking allows us to design appropriate arrangements for the development, coordination and governance of our research-for-policy system so crucial to determining system performance.

Conference aims

The Research-for-Policy Conference 2025 will explore how these ideas can be turned into practical action. It will convene key decision-makers across Ireland's research-policy ecosystem to further the national conversation about how we build systemic, coordinated connections between research and policy, so that high-quality evidence can more readily inform all stages of the policymaking process.

Individuals, organisations and system leaders will be invited to think critically about their role in the ecosystem and to share their understanding of the patterns of interrelationships and interactions. Only this kind of approach will help us to take coordinated action aimed at ensuring that the research-for-policy community has the capacity, opportunity and motivation to embed research evidence in policymaking.

In particular, to help us to advance the research-for-policy agenda in Ireland this conference will:

1. Promote cross-sectoral and intra-organisational collaboration to increase impact
2. Provide all-island and international perspectives on the challenges and opportunities
3. Contribute to the co-creation of a 'shared vision' for a more systematic, inclusive and productive research-policy interface in Ireland

Appendix: Conference organisers' research-for-policy initiatives

Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS)

In line with strategic actions under *Impact 2030: Ireland's Research and Innovation Strategy*, DFHERIS is working on system reform to drive greater use of research to underpin policy development and decision-making. DFHERIS has established structures to strengthen connections between HE researchers and policy practitioners and to maximise the impact of the national R&I system on Ireland's social, economic and environmental challenges. DFHERIS activities include:

- Publishing 'Impact 2030: Ireland's Research and Innovation Strategy' in May 2022.
- The enactment of the Research and Innovation Act 2024 and the establishment of Taighde Éireann – Research Ireland.
- Appointing a new independent Government Science Adviser, Professor Aoife McLysaght, in 2024 to lead a revised science advice mechanism for Ireland.
- Establishing a Civil Service Research Network (CSRN) comprised of research leads across government departments to address blockages to research-policy engagement.
- Working with aegis agencies on strategic funding initiatives to better understand and build capacity for policy engagement within the HE research sector, including Research Ireland's Science Policy Research Programme and research impact funding through the Higher Education Authority, which is supporting research-for-policy work in University College Dublin and University of Limerick
- Leading Ireland's participation in an EU TSI project: 'Supporting evidence-informed policymaking for the twin transition'. This 30-month project, seeks to increase professional capacity and collaboration among policymakers and the research community for evidence-informed policymaking, while raising awareness about the value of innovative practices in the policy process

Maynooth University

In the Maynooth University Social Sciences Institute, Professor Mark Boyle, Dr John O'Connor and Seán Ó Foghlú are seeking to enhance the impact of research in Maynooth University on public policy and looking at how to support such activities across the Irish higher education system. Their activities include:

- Publishing a paper in March 2024 about what Maynooth University might do to help researchers unlock the full value of their work for public policy, following detailed dialogue in Maynooth University.
- Publishing a paper in February 2024 on how universities can organise themselves to unlock research for policy.

- Working with Dublin's North East Inner City Initiative to organise a Roundtable in May 2024 in the Department of an Taoiseach. The Roundtable report and the NEIC Strategic Plan that it fed into were published in September 2024.
- Publishing a paper in January 2025 (with Mary Doyle, Royal Irish Academy) on the 'Contribution of Knowledge Brokerage to Building an Effective Evidence for Policy Infrastructure in Ireland – Lessons Learned from the Initial Series of Pathfinding Knowledge Brokerage Events in Ireland, 2022 to 2024'.
- Hosting a series of [seminars and conferences on research for policy](#).
- Professor Mark Boyle is the Principal Investigator on the 'Unlocking the value of research for public policy making and innovation: Mapping Ireland's key brokering structures and supports' project, funded as part of Science Foundation Ireland (SFI) (now Taighde Éireann) Science Policy Research programme, which commenced in Winter 2024.

University College Dublin

The [UCD Policy Interface](#), funded by the HEA, works to develop and strengthen links between researchers and policy professionals. It complements the extensive engagement already underway across UCD's Schools, Colleges, Institutes, and Centres, helping researchers drive real impact on policy and wider society. Activities include:

- Organising a [Policy Engagement Thought Leadership Seminar Series](#), to gather and share the perspectives of those involved in developing the national and international architecture that aims to bring research and policymaking communities closer together.
- Running introductory policy-engagement training sessions for UCD academics, covering topics such as: how policies are made; the role of evidence in policymaking at different levels; and how and when to connect with policy stakeholders.
- Developing tools, resources and guides to help researchers engage with policymakers.
- Brokering meetings and interactions between policymakers and UCD researchers in various contexts.
- Preparing and publishing policy briefs that summarise academic research and its implications for a policy audience.