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Introduction: Evidence-informed policy-making in the Irish public service – an important national asset

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Introduction

Since its first publication in 1953, *Administration*, together with the Institute of Public Administration, has played a special role in contributing to the research and knowledge base of the Irish public service. As governments today face increasingly complex challenges, the need for robust, credible and interdisciplinary evidence to support effective policy-making and maintain public trust has grown substantially. As a result, there has been an increasing focus on evidence-informed policy-making (EIPM) as a basis for responding effectively to these challenges (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2020; Oliver, 2022; Keizer et al., 2025).

The objective of public management or governance is to meet the needs of, and improve outcomes for citizens (OECD, 2020). In

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optimal circumstances this is done through 'systematic, evidence-based, transparent, efficient and implementable policymaking' (Geva-May & Howlett, 2021, p. XV). Good evidence is therefore a critical component of better policy-making. The need for the best available evidence and knowledge to inform what government does and how it does it would appear to be obvious in democratic societies. However, beyond this presumption, there is a high degree of complexity in respect of how evidence is generated, funded, disseminated, evaluated and reflected in policy development, implementation and evaluation.

Within an Irish context, the public service reform plan, *Better Public Services* (Government of Ireland, 2023), identifies three themes which it states will help the Irish public service to deliver for the public it serves, build trust in public institutions and help to address some of the major challenges Ireland faces. Evidence-informed policy and services designed for and with our public is one of these core themes.²

Evidence, in this context, is usually broadly defined to encompass data, information, knowledge and wisdom. EIPM therefore refers to the process whereby wide-ranging and multidisciplinary sources of research evidence and knowledge are consulted before making a decision to plan, implement or alter public policies and programmes in support of the delivery of public services (OECD, 2020).

The focus for this evidence is most usually the civil and public servants who are tasked with analysing policy and presenting options, sometimes accompanied by recommendations, to politicians. It is widely accepted that it is our politicians who have the constitutional obligation and electoral mandate to decide what policies will best achieve their political objectives. However, it is also recognised that the policy-making process is enhanced by using the best available evidence and that it is the role and responsibility of public servants, in this context often termed 'policymakers', to support them in their task (Government of Ireland, 2025).

Beyond effective policy-making, where policymakers can point to sound reasoning and justification for their decisions, the use of evidence by government has been shown to enhance trust in government and public institutions. Citizens strongly support the use of scientific evidence in policy-making (Keizer et al., 2025). Research evidence also helps to counterbalance the trend in some countries

² The first theme is 'Digital and Innovation at Scale'; the second is 'Workforce and Organisation of the Future'.

towards the politicisation of public administration and the damaging impact of this on administrative capacity (Moynihan, 2025). The capacity of the public service ‘to act in a value based, value driven manner’ was highlighted almost twenty years ago by the late John Murray, always an eloquent and insightful commentator on the public service in Ireland. In a presentation at the Institute of Public Administration (Murray, 2008, p. 2; 2019)³ he concluded that the legitimacy and the security of civil society rests in the capacity of the civil and public service to preserve and assert its independence and ‘to never fail in its commitment to probity and in its skill in “speaking truth to power”’.

Evidence has always supported policy-making, but in recent years there has been more of a focus on how this is being done and, more importantly, which methods ensure the best outcomes. Governments have sought to promote more systematic approaches, with the establishment of research units in many government departments, and concerted efforts to coordinate and synthesise research needs and opportunities, and the provision of training for public servants in relation to how they access and use evidence.

However, in a review of research–policy engagement activities and impact globally, Oliver et al. (2022, p. 691) describe ‘a rudderless mass of activity’, which in the main was not evaluated and which therefore ‘failed to provide useful lessons for those wishing to improve evidence use, leading to wasted time and resources’. Cairney (2016) proposes that this is because researchers do not understand and or appreciate what he terms ‘the politics of evidence informed policy making’, in other words a failure to appreciate the complex, real-world policy-making environment, whereby ‘the use of scientific evidence represents one of many aspects of good policymaking’ (ibid., p. 130).

The focus of both issues 74(2) and 74(3) of *Administration* is to review how EIPM happens within the Irish public service. The motivation for the double special issue has been the ongoing prominence of the issue both nationally and internationally and the wide-ranging challenges facing government (Government of Ireland, 2023, 2025; OECD, 2020; Oliver, 2022; Keizer et al., 2025). In response to these developments, members of the *Administration* Editorial Advisory Committee considered it timely to connect and

³ With the permission of John’s family, the paper was posthumously published in *Administration*.

review developments in respect of EIPM in Ireland, and, consistent with the recommendation of Oliver et al. (2022), to 'provide useful lessons for those wishing to improve evidence use'.

Context and background

In Ireland, the aftermath of the global financial crisis led to an increased focus on engagement with research evidence by the public service, following criticisms that a lack of capacity in this area contributed in significant part to the Irish banking collapse (Nyberg, 2011). These experiences were instrumental in the establishment of the Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Service (IGEES) in 2012, in order to support more analytical and evidence-informed economic policy-making. This was followed in 2017 by the establishment of the National Statistical Service (NSS). IGEES and NSS are based in the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation and the Central Statistics Office, respectively, but a huge part of their value lies in having IGEES and NSS economists and statisticians on placement in departments across the civil service

Since 2020, a range of structures has been established with the specific objective of facilitating EIPM (Doyle, 2021, 2023). The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) was established in 2020, with responsibility for higher education, and also to manage Ireland's research and innovation strategies, ensuring alignment with national priorities and workforce needs. The department had responsibility for developing a new research and innovation strategy for Ireland, which was published in 2022 (Government of Ireland, 2022). This led to the establishment of an Evidence for Policy Unit within the department, the appointment of a Government Chief Science Advisor in 2024, and the establishment of a National Science Advice Forum in 2026. Lastly, and in order to facilitate greater collaboration in respect of research and policy engagement across the civil service, the department has put in place a Civil Service Research Network. This brings together a wide range of public bodies which are engaged with research, in order to improve the structures and processes by which evidence is captured, shared and used.

All government departments and agencies look to access and fund research. However, this is particularly the case in government bodies

primarily focused on policy development in major areas like finance, health, housing, energy, the environment and agriculture. This has resulted in a depth of learning in respect of EIPM in these departments. Increasingly, this is centralised within research units which are tasked with coordinating the research needs, both of the department and of its agencies. For example, the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment, in spring 2026, published a *Statement of Research and Innovation Needs* (Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment, 2026), with the aim of identifying and clearly communicating the key research and innovation questions that must be addressed to support the delivery of the department's strategic objectives. The statement will be used to support the department's engagement with its research stakeholders and partners. Other departments, including the Department of Children, Disability and Equality, the Department of Health and DFHERIS have also published very helpful guidance to support the overall research effort in their areas of interest.

Within the higher-education sector, there has also been a growing commitment to engaging more constructively with government in support of policy-making. Activities under the auspices of the Geary Institute in University College Dublin and Maynooth University Social Sciences Institute, among others, have sought to build relationships and identify opportunities for collaboration. Ireland is also one of the European Union (EU) member states participating in the second phase of a European Commission Joint Research Centre project reviewing EIPM in member states.⁴

Finally, the establishment of Taighde Éireann/Research Ireland in 2024, following an amalgamation of the Irish Research Council and Science Foundation Ireland, is also significant from an EIPM perspective. In addition to funding multidisciplinary research and innovation projects which will support economic and societal well-being in Ireland, Research Ireland recognises that it has a key role to play in strengthening connections between academia, enterprise, public policy and society, and also, to support the structural and cultural changes needed to improve policy-making in Ireland (Research Ireland, 2026).

⁴ https://knowledge4policy.ec.europa.eu/news/eipm-20-kick-event-strengthening-evidence-informed-policy-making-across-eu_en

Overview of this issue

This is the first special issue in a series of two on the theme of EIPM in the Irish public service. In a paper published in *Administration* in 2012, Professor Frances Ruane, then Director General of the Economic and Social Research Institute, concluded that 'what is required now is that the approach to research becomes more systematic, more questioning and with a greater focus on the important policy questions facing Ireland today' (Ruane, 2012).⁵ The two special issues in 2026 have taken this recommendation as a starting point in seeking to reflect on EIPM developments since 2012. Our aims are firstly, to review whether the structures and processes to support evidence-informed policy-making have improved in the interim, but beyond that, we also want to assess the current culture in respect of EIPM. In other words, whether there is a willingness to seriously consider, ask for and use evidence in policy-making and public communication (Keizer et al., 2025, p. 3).

Developments in respect of EIPM, in particular the establishment of supportive structures and practices, have been documented in a series of articles by Mary Doyle, co-editor of this issue, and published in *Administration* (Doyle, 2021, 2023). The origin of these papers was a research project undertaken by the Royal Irish Academy, in partnership with the Irish Research Council (Doyle, Riordan & Carey, 2021).⁶ The conclusions to this paper identified three pathways to consider and evaluate activities to support EIPM in the Irish public service. These are:

- Pathway 1: building bridges, creating trust, offering opportunities;
- Pathway 2: Joining up and scaling up what already exists;
- Pathway 3: Knowledge management and knowledge brokerage.

These three pathways remain valuable as a conceptual framework to reflect on developments in relation to EIPM, and also, as a lens for reflecting on the papers in these issues, each of which brings a valuable

⁵ *Administration* has been publishing articles via open access since 2015. In order to make this paper more widely available, we republished it as a 'From the archives' paper in September 2025: see Ruane, F. P. (2025). Research evidence and policymaking in Ireland. *Administration*, 73(3), 127–47.

⁶ In 2024, the Irish Research Council merged with Science Foundation Ireland to become Taighde Éireann/Research Ireland.

perspective to the multi-faceted efforts to develop EIPM in Ireland over the past five years.

This first issue (*Administration*, 74(2)) begins with three papers mapping out the current context for EIPM in the Irish civil service. The paper by Harty and O'Leary gives an overview of developments which have been supported by DFHERIS since its establishment to strengthen the overall structures and processes for EIPM in Ireland (Harty & O'Leary, 2026). This represents a very substantial body of work within the civil service and across other public bodies and the research sector. The structures and relationships that have now been established will prove key to supporting the development of the overall EIPM agenda in Ireland in the future.

This work has also been led and supported by the Department of the Taoiseach which, as part of its role in supporting public service reform, in conjunction with the Civil Service Management Board, has reviewed how public policy is developed and implemented in Ireland.⁷ The paper by Smyth, Donnelly and Vaughan reflects on this process and also the development of a policy framework to support better policy development and implementation across the civil service (Smyth et al., 2026). The framework consists of three pillars: Data and evidence, described as the bedrock of good policy solutions; Feasibility, or the extent to which the policy is implementable; and Legitimacy, which encompasses political and public support for the approach being taken. Taken together, the papers from DFHERIS and the Department of the Taoiseach give an important perspective from the centre of government on future EIPM developments.

The final paper in this section, from Sinéad Riordan, former Head of Policy and International Relations at the Royal Irish Academy, reflects on how evidence supports policy-making in an EU context, and in particular the contribution of the Science Advice Mechanism within the EU Commission in providing independent scientific evidence and policy recommendations to European institutions and also, the implications of these recommendations for Ireland (Riordan, 2026).

The next group of papers represent case studies from a range of contributors who are actively involved in developing practical approaches to supporting EIPM at institutional level both in academia and in government. The first of these by Seán Ó Foghlú, Mark Boyle

⁷ The OECD supported them in this process, producing a report: OECD. (2023). *Strengthening policy development in the public sector in Ireland*.

and John O'Connor assesses the potential contribution to better policy-making of more systematic approaches to knowledge mobilisation, including knowledge brokerage (Ó Foghlú et al., 2026). Knowledge brokerage can be done both from within or external to government, but essentially it encompasses activities to make research and evidence more accessible, available, and useful to anyone who could – and should – be using it to make decisions (Research to Action, 2026). The paper by Ó Foghlú and his colleagues details a range of activities taken by Maynooth University in this area and sets out useful learning on EIPM for research-producing institutions.

This is followed by a paper by Ian Hughes and Sarah Rochford from the Department of Education and Youth's research unit. The paper shares valuable information and learning on work within the education sector to mobilise and align available research resources (Hughes & Rochford, 2026). They describe the strategic approach being adopted by the Department of Education and Youth to deliver on the department's ambition to increase the role of research, evidence and data in shaping positive and effective educational experiences for all children and young people.

The third paper in this section, by Kieran Walsh and colleagues on the experiences of early career researchers, who are often at the forefront of knowledge production, but may experience greater difficulties in engaging with policymakers (Walsh et al., 2026). The paper assesses activities of the Young Ireland Academy, operating under the auspices of the Royal Irish Academy, to address this challenge.

The final paper in the issue is by Professor Frances Ruane (Ruane, 2026). Importantly, in this paper she revisits her 2012 paper on the use of research evidence in policy-making in Ireland (Ruane, 2012), and assesses progress made in the intervening period. The starting point for her analysis is the four key questions she posed back in 2012: 1) What can research offer to the policy-making process? 2) Why is greater use not made of research in the policy-making process? 3) Why is more policy-focused research not available? 4) What is needed for a more productive engagement between researchers and policymakers? While noting many positive developments, in particular the establishment of IGEEES and NSS, she concludes that there is a need to build capacity for EIPM in the public service. She argues for a more knowledge and skills-based civil service, where appropriately trained and experienced professionals are employed in a range of disciplines and where there is a greater use of strategic workforce planning. Critically, this needs to be underpinned by a civil service

leadership that values research evidence and its contribution to policy-making.

Conclusions

The objective of this special issue and the subsequent one scheduled for publication in September 2026 is to review developments in respect of EIPM in the Irish public service. In effect, we are looking to map current activity, identify key components, and to make recommendations for ways forward.

The contributions in this issue show that good progress has been made in relation to how research evidence is sought by policymakers and in turn made available to them. Perhaps more importantly, in many areas of the public service, senior managers are also showing that they are committed to and supportive of the contribution which research evidence can make to reviewing, designing and implementing public policy. However, the real measure of success is whether policy-making is getting better at delivering the outcomes required by citizens, a process that can itself only be assessed through robust research.

Keizer et al. (2025) in a paper on EIPM on behalf of the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission conclude that in order to make progress in this area, two conditions need to be met. The first is a technical one, essentially addressing structural barriers, and the second is the importance of political considerations, which encompasses leadership and cultural considerations. In Ireland, the building blocks for a stronger approach to EIPM are now largely in place, both at a central government level and within line departments. However, structures and processes while necessary are not sufficient. The next phase of activity will need to focus on leadership and cultural considerations to ensure that research is central to policy-making because, put simply, it improves the ability of governments to solve problems. We will return to these themes in the second of the special issues of *Administration* which is due to be published in the autumn of 2026.

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