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Strengthening policy development in the Irish civil service

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Abstract

This paper centres on recent efforts – led by the Department of the Taoiseach under the aegis of the Civil Service Management Board – to improve the policy development capacity of the Irish civil service. It focuses on the rationale for a novel framework for policy development which consists of three interdependent parts, namely (i) evidence, (ii) feasibility and (iii) legitimacy. Developing such a framework is only the first step in reform as the fundamental challenge lies in embedding it in the policy work of government departments. International experience shows that this embedding exercise has to be driven on multiple fronts rather than viewing it as an outcome of enhanced training. The paper outlines how this is currently being done and some of the major issues to be addressed.

Keywords: evidence, feasibility, legitimacy, policy development, three-pillar framework.

Introduction

One of the fundamental roles of the civil service is to offer the best advice possible on how government should deliver on its ambitions and commitments through public policy, and associated actions and instruments. In this sense, policy development extends beyond analysis to encompass issues around delivery and public acceptance.

Recognising the importance of this function, the Civil Service Management Board (CSMB) has laid out a threefold framework – comprising evidence, feasibility and legitimacy – that should underpin any model of the policy process. The fact that the CSMB endorsed such a framework for government departments underlines the vital role that it has in the formulation of policy advice which is distinct from the work of the public service that is often focused on the provision of services.

Traditionally, the civil service was seen to enjoy a relative monopoly on policy advice, but this day has passed. Nowadays, evidence emanates from a variety of sources, be they academic, industrial, international, civil society or elsewhere. But developing policy is more than just comprehending this cornucopia of ideas – it is also about ensuring that they are translated into actions that can be implemented and accepted. In short, policy must not only be evidence-informed but also has to be animated by concerns about feasibility – can it be accomplished – and legitimacy – can it be accepted.

The changed context of public policy in Ireland

Recalling earlier eras can help us understand how the landscape of policy development has changed in Ireland. The circumstances of life in 1950s Ireland were such that they appear to contemporary eyes as, in L. P. Hartley's words, 'a foreign country' (Hartley, 1953). The situation in Ireland then was so dire that 'unemployment remained high and national growth was minimal in comparison with other Western European countries' (Ferriter, 2004, p. 463).

These circumstances impelled public servants to look for a way out of this morass but there were different approaches. The Department of Finance favoured trade liberalisation to stimulate restructured export industries, but the Department of Industry feared that previously protected businesses would not survive in such a scenario. The latter body favoured tax reliefs on export profits as a way of inducing new businesses to establish themselves in Ireland. The Revenue Commissioners were opposed in principle to differential taxation and the Department of Finance was resistant on the grounds that this measure foreshadowed 'further expansion of the already inflated administrative machinery of the state and new large outlays from public funds and losses of revenue through widespread tax concessions' (quoted in Barry, 2024, p. 73).

What is striking about this episode from a contemporary perspective is that the clash of ideas was almost exclusively developed

within the public bureaucracies of the time. Indeed, the success of the Department of Industry in obtaining a political mandate for its proposal appears to have stimulated the Department of Finance to nurture its analytical capabilities. T. K. Whitaker is recorded as urging his assistant secretaries to 'do some independent thinking and not simply wait for Industry and Commerce or the IDA [Industrial Development Authority] to produce ideas' (quoted in Barry, 2024, p. 74).

The distinctiveness of this time is that policy development was initiated and developed from within the civil service with little, if any, external input. Barry (2012–3, p. 86) notes the 'importance of the bureaucracy's role in vetting proposals, in analysing their costs and benefits, and in offering policy options to government' which were largely untainted by rent-seeking proposals of lobby groups or vested interests. This is an example of what the academic community would designate as a 'closed' policy advisory system, whereby the civil service enjoys what might be termed a relative monopoly or dominant source of policy advice to ministers (Craft & Halligan, 2020).

Contrast this with the contemporary situation of a more open and porous system of policy advice in which the pre-eminence of the civil service can no longer be assumed. Instead, this system is characterised by a diversification of sources of advice ranging from sectoral lobby groups, think-tanks, community advocacy groups, university research centres, international organisations and media outlets. The issue is not simply a proliferation of policy advice beyond the civil service, which then has to navigate this more crowded landscape, while staying faithful to its core mandate and values. Matters are made more complicated by the increasing contestability of such advice, amplified by an ever-present news cycle and the ability of citizens and pressure groups to provide direct commentary via social media and demand an immediate response from the political system.

The ubiquity of contestation has meant that the belief that evidence alone can guide policymakers toward clear, uncontested choices has waned. While evidence remains essential, it is only one of several forces shaping policy development. Policy processes are embedded in political contexts marked by competing values, institutional restraints, electoral incentives, and public expectations (Cairney, 2016, pp. 15–9). These pressures often interact in ways that limit the feasibility of strictly rational decision making, revealing the inherently political or so called "messy" nature of most policy choices.

Contestability itself is not an issue. Mature policy development in 1950s Ireland was the result of a clash of ideas between two major

government departments. But where an increase in the number of sources of policy advice is accompanied by a waning of evidentiary standards, then there is a problem. The challenge is to welcome a contest of policy ideas while maintaining standards for the quality of evidence and policy reasoning (Head, 2024).

This then is the context which faces the civil service in Ireland. No longer does it have a relative monopoly on policy advice. This profusion of alternative sources of advice is also accompanied by an incessant imperative to deliver, amplified by a continuous feedback loop from societal actors, animated through social media and an ever-present news cycle. Additionally, the implementation landscape relating to many policy areas has become more complex and crowded over the years: government must not only account for many more voices but also must negotiate many more environmental, legal and social considerations and requirements.

Response of the civil service: Strengthening policy advice through the Civil Service Renewal Plan

Following the economic and fiscal crisis of 2008, the civil service instituted an ongoing process of reform that was articulated through a three-year reform programme that built upon existing strengths and remedied perceived weaknesses (Government of Ireland, 2014).

Areas commonly recognised as strengths included: the ethos of public service; the values of honesty and independence; and the quality and objectivity of policy advice. Shortcomings were said to lie in implementation so that more needed to be done to ensure that there was 'strong and clear accountability for delivery and results for all levels and roles' (ibid., p. 9). Another issue requiring attention was the need for the civil service to be an 'an active and full participant in Irish society and [needs to] engage accordingly'. This would require improving how the civil service listens, learns and collaborates (op. cit., p. 10).

The *Civil Service Renewal Plan* (Government of Ireland, 2014) detailed over twenty actions to animate these and other ambitions. Most relevant from the perspective of this paper is action number twenty-two, which set out a goal to strengthen policy-making skills and develop more open approaches to policy-making.

As part of its efforts to bolster policy capabilities, the CSMB developed a non-binding framework for policy-making that highlights its essential features and adopt it as guidance for the civil service as a

whole. Recognising the expertise of departments in their respective policy areas, the framework was designed to be non-prescriptive, providing a foundation for policy development which departments can rest and build their own internal policy structures and processes upon.

It put forward a 'whole-system' framework consisting of three key components to strengthen policy-making in the Irish civil service:

1. *Evidence:* Awareness, development and utilisation of a sound evidence base.
2. *Feasibility/Implementation:* Planning from the outset how the policy will be delivered – feasibility testing with the service delivery system – capturing the unique insight involved in implementation and assessing potential unintended consequences or vulnerabilities.
3. *Legitimacy:* Understanding and managing the political and public context, i.e. ensuring that public views, understanding and engagement is sufficiently factored into the design and implementation processes.

Accepting this threefold framework has several important implications. First, it means that policy development extends beyond sound analysis so that relying rigorously on marshalled evidence is only one part of the policy process. From the outset, good policy development must address questions of feasibility – can it be accomplished – and legitimacy – can it be accepted. This broader notion of policy means that the process of development must be extended beyond asking what does the evidence tell us to questions about resourcing, implementation, political understanding and public reaction. It means that competencies relating to human resources, project management, public communications and others are just as relevant as evidence appraisal.

It was acknowledged at the time that producing this guidance was an important step but that the real challenge would be in developing and embedding a unified approach to strengthening policy-making in a coherent and connected way across the civil service.

To address this challenge, the Department of the Taoiseach made an application to the European Commission's Technical Support Instrument for assistance in building on this framework and embedding this approach across the system to mitigate against the risk that policy choices are poorly designed or implemented or have insufficient political and public support.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Public Governance Directorate was enlisted to produce a report on strengthening policy development and foresight capacity in the Irish civil service. They conducted an extensive research exercise which included multiple sources of input and research from across the Irish policy development landscape.

The OECD research culminated in their report *Strengthening Policy Development in the Public Sector in Ireland* (OECD, 2023), which had a number of notable findings.

It commended the breadth of initiatives underway to strengthen the policy process in Ireland and endorsed the validity of the three-pillar approach, confirming it as an appropriate over-arching framework for effective policy development.

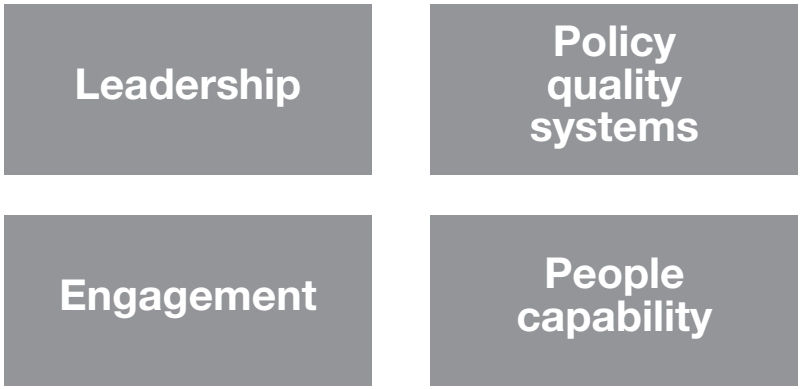
In addition, the OECD report (2023) noted several areas where improvements could be made. These include:

1. Informal contacts within individual departments are considered the main source (73 per cent of survey respondents) of policy development information within the civil service. This raised the issue of a potential lack of consistency across the civil service by embedding knowledge in informal networks, rather than in a standardised or accessible system (OECD, 2023, p. 87).
2. The generic set of competency levels for the civil service does not reflect the 'increasingly specialised skills required for policy development' (ibid., p. 77).
3. Various policy tools were identified for use, but their application is 'uneven across departments and sometimes inadequate' with variable levels of 'awareness of what guidance and tools exist and where to find them' (op. cit., p. 97).
4. Variable practice regarding public engagement and highlighted as an area 'where the sharing of good practices across the government …could be beneficial' – addressing by developing guidance (OECD, 2023, p. 63).

Importantly, the OECD noted that the improvements for these areas fit within the proposed three-pillar framework, and the fundamental link between good policy development and quality implementation. As such, the report indicated that enhancements in these domains could be effectively pursued without the need to restructure the approach. This would also provide cohesion across the various suggested improvement projects.

Finally, the report highlighted the need to produce what was termed a comprehensive policy capability infrastructure similar to that developed by the New Zealand academic and public servant Sally Washington (2023). This infrastructure should encompass all the essential elements required for good policy development, thereby strengthening the overall coherence, effectiveness, and sustainability of the policy-making process.

Figure 1: The four key components of the policy capability infrastructure (Adapted)



Note: Adapted from Washington, S. (2022). An infrastructure for building policy capability – lessons from practice. *Policy Design and Practice, 6*(3), 293–8, https://doi.org/10.1080/25741292.2022.2139952

The New Zealand policy capability infrastructure identified four key components – as outlined under Figure 1 – that are essential to building policy capability and enabling the production of high-quality policy. Those components are:

- *Leadership* – how leadership within an organisation must be exercised to ensure focus remains on its policy priorities, and ensuring the effectiveness of its policy delivery functions;
- *Policy quality systems* – where frameworks, tools, and processes are utilised to analyse and design high-quality policy analysis;
- *Engagement* – ensuring requirements and processes are in place when designing policy to account for stakeholder views (including delivery agents and organisation's respective leaders) and to meet the needs of the public;

- *People capability* – building the required skills of policy officials to meet the demands of modern public service, such as training in both modern (e.g. behavioural insights) and traditional (e.g. cost–benefit analysis) methods of policy analysis while meeting the regular advisory tasks expected of officials.

Washington emphasizes that while these individual four components are vital for policy development, their real value can only be gauged when evaluating how these components interact and support one another – hence the need for a policy infrastructure where its constituent elements reinforce each other, rather than approaching the individual elements separately.

The rationale for such an approach was justified on the basis that, according to Washington (2023, p. 284):

> Analysis of action on the policy capability front suggests that most organizations and jurisdictions adopt a piecemeal approach, focusing on a piece of the policy problem rather than taking a system view of how the bits of the policy puzzle fit together. Most often the focus is on people capability reflecting an assumption that better trained policy staff will lead to better policy advice and outcomes … But the problem is much more complex than having smart well-trained people in policy roles. It requires a system shift and action on multiple fronts.

According to Washington, the focus of reform therefore is often on upgrading people's capabilities, reflecting an assumption that enhanced training and development will lead to better policy processes and outcomes. But while better learning and development might be necessary to improve policy development, it is not sufficient. The OECD report, consistent with Washington, considered that improving policy development requires a system shift and action on multiple fronts. In terms of leadership, it requires that the senior cohort of a government organisation set the scene and create the demand and environment for good policy.

Underpinning good policy design and good policy advice are various tools and processes that offer recognised templates that both guide individual civil servants and encourage consistency. In Sally Washington's words, 'increasingly organizations and jurisdictions are calling for scalable and repeatable models for how to do policy, to ensure consistency of approach (without stifling innovation) and

greater consistency in the quality of policy outputs' (2023, pp. 288-9). This issue of a repeatable model of how to best 'do policy' is discussed below.

Training and upskilling people is still an important, but is not a dominant component of reforms to the policy process. As we noted, the OECD raised this issue in its report, querying whether the model of generic competencies was fit for the increasingly specialised skills required for contemporary policy development. Practitioners, consulted by the OECD, believed that skills were lacking in areas such as 'use of data for policy, strategic and systems thinking, anticipating future challenges, external communication, monitoring and evaluation, and the ability to apply relatively new methods like behavioural insights and user-centred design to policy processes' (OECD, 2023, p. 74).

And lastly, good policy development also happens in the context of a more populated ecosystem in which the sources of data, and ultimately advice to decision-makers, are more numerous than in the past. It must also contend with the fact that the advice is much more contested so that getting political 'buy-in' does not guarantee success. Public acceptance can be even more important, putting a stress on legitimacy.[1]

The roadmap

The CSMB accepted the OECD analysis and agreed upon the following approach to embed its recommendations across the civil service.

1. Publish a revised policy handbook, based upon the three-pillar approach and OECD findings, which would serve as a 'common playbook' for policy development across the civil service, helping to elevate coherence and consistency. This would be one way of helping to ensure that 'the best practice that exists within individual Civil Service organisations should become common practice' (Government of Ireland, 2014, p. 10).

[1] It should be noted that Washington's notion of a policy infrastructure (2023, p. 286) embraces both the perspective of policymakers through four mutually supporting infrastructure components – leadership, policy quality systems, people capability and engagement – and also the political administrative interface. This is not expressly configured in the Irish adaptation of the model.

2. Assess what training courses are being provided to instil policy skills and highlight where there may be gaps in light of processes set down in the revised handbook – the aim would be to establish a graduated curriculum comprised of discrete courses which serve as the basis for continuous professional development.
3. Lay out a model of public engagement in policy development, which would be based on the good work being done in many bodies. This would again build coherence and diminish duplication of effort.
4. Map what networks are currently operative in the policy development space to establish which ones could play a more active role in guiding practitioners. Examples include the Civil Service Research Network which could be assisted to help civil servants engage with academia, commission research, interrogate evidence, etc.
5. Define what tools and skills are necessary for policy development with a view to building into training curriculum.

It is important to emphasize that the policy development framework was not designed to supplant or usurp particular policy initiatives being pursued by government departments. Rather, it was designed to complement them provide a common foundation of, and model for, consistent good practice. The policy handbook was produced to formulate what such practice would look like for civil servants.

Policy Handbook

The *Policy Handbook – A 'Real World' Guide to Policy Development* (Government of Ireland, 2025) was developed with a focus on its practical application for civil servants' usage in the course of their work. The aim for the *Policy Handbook* was to develop actions that can be taken through guided scenarios for policy development. It was therefore divided into two sections. The first detailed the overall three-pillar framework for policy development:

- *Pillar 1 – 'Data & Evidence'* which emphasises the importance of extracting high-quality evidence from data and using it as the basis for good policy proposals and solutions;
- *Pillar 2 – 'Feasibility & Implementation'* which focuses on the actions needed to successfully deliver policy goals, from resource allocation to delivery;

- *Pillar 3 – 'Legitimacy'* which highlights the importance of public and political understanding and support of the policy issue and the proposed solution.

Building on the OECD endorsement of the three-pillar approach, the second section of the Handbook outlined the process specifically for Irish policy development through five phases. These were based on a previously articulated model (Walker & Washington, 2024) and adapted for the specific needs of the Irish policy environment.

The 5D model and the Irish adaptation

The original 5D model, as designed by Washington and the Australia and New Zealand School of Government (Walker & Washington, 2024), was developed to improve the quality of policy advice being provided to decision makers by public servants.

Walker and Washington's (2024) model is made up of five elements: demand, discover, design, decide, delivery, with two additional actions, engagement and evaluation, continuously informing these five elements throughout the whole policy development process.

The model is part of a larger 'policy infrastructure', the aim of which is to improve the overall policy advisory system in a systematic manner (e.g. systems, processes, and capabilities related to policy development and governance), rather than limiting the focus of reforms to singular areas (e.g. training of staff in policy development).

As such, the model is only an element of a larger effort to build a greater policy infrastructure. Within this infrastructure, the 5Ds provide a scalable model that can aid policy participants in their work, regardless of policy area or level of experience and be replicable across different organisations. This scalability, if implemented across government departments, would enable overall consistency in policy development, while offering the policy practitioner assistance in navigating the policy development process.

The Irish model adapted these elements and developed a related five phases, with the chief distinctions being how the five-phase model is built on to the three-pillar framework, and how the engagement and evaluation actions are built into the five phases, as opposed to being separate actions.

The five phases under the Irish model are:

1. *Demand for policy:* examines the initial source for policy development and stresses the need to critically elaborate on this demand;

2. *Deepen understanding:* explores the policy issue by utilising existing data, considering the need to commission further research, and engaging with stakeholders;
3. *Design with best advice:* develops a structure for a policy proposal based on the previous phases which sets clear objectives, provides policy options, details costings involved, and makes recommendations;
4. *Decide policy proposals:* involves finalising the proposing of a policy and the seeking of ministerial, government, and budgetary approval;
5. *Deliver policy:* details the process of policy implementation and outlines project plans, communications strategy, resource and risk management, and monitoring and evaluation processes.

The material presented in the *Policy Handbook* encompasses not only the theoretical foundations and conceptual frameworks underpinning policy development, but also their practical application. It incorporates structured action checklists designed to guide implementation and decision-making processes for each phase with a particular emphasis on adherence to the three-pillar framework at each phase. These are further reinforced through illustrative examples and end-of-phase case studies, which demonstrate how the principles discussed are applied in real-world contexts and allow for critical reflection on outcomes and best practices, particularly with regard to how the three-pillar framework is best applied.

One of these cases studies examines the delivery of Ireland's Second National Cancer Strategy in 2006, which is presented as a case study of successful delivery under phase 5.

Ireland's Second National Cancer Strategy

Ireland's Second National Cancer Strategy (National Cancer Forum, 2006) provides a useful example of how the three pillars interact with and condition each other, rather than seeing good policy as emanating from evidence, then applied in practice, and finally communicated or 'sold' to the public. The delivery of Ireland's Second National Cancer Strategy was designed to rectify a situation whereby Ireland – by international standards – was performing poorly in relation to cancer screening, treatment and survival.

Prior to the publication of the strategy, cancer services were provided in a fragmented manner, spread across thirty-six hospitals,

many of which treated too few patients and lacked full multidisciplinary teams. In addition, access and quality of treatment varied significantly by region, gender and social class. It was identified that there was no co-ordinated national plan for cancer prevention, early detection, diagnosis, treatment, survivorship and end-of life care. To align Ireland with international best practice, it was identified that a comprehensive, population-level cancer control system was needed to match global best practice.

In response to this policy demand, the Health Service Executive designated eight hospitals as specialist cancer centres, ensuring primary curative surgery and multidisciplinary care were concentrated in appropriate locations. The National Cancer Control Programme, led by Professor Tom Keane, was created to drive this programme of change and implement the reorganisation of cancer services.

It was controversial at the time since it meant closing down many localised cancer facilities and sparked multiple protests around the country. In retrospect, the strategy has been evaluated as contributing to substantial improvements in positive outcomes for cancer patients.

As Professor Keane later explained to the Committee on the Future of Healthcare, the success of the strategy rested on three key elements: communication, legitimacy through evidence, and leadership, and how this success was measurable through key performance indicators (Keane, 2016).

Implementation through communication:

Keane noted that the success of the strategy depended on an unceasing focus on implementation. Approximately half of his time was spent communicating with the various actors, such as the political system, medical practitioners, and trade unions. He was clear that this was not an opportunity to reopen the parameters of the strategy as this would mean that, in his own words, 'all hell would break loose'. He further added:

> There is an issue about dialogue in Ireland. I was aware there was a real risk when I came regarding the strategy document, which was an excellent document produced over two years by the national cancer forum. I regarded the document as sacrosanct and I refused to reopen it. The danger I saw was that the risk of endless talk would pre-empt any implementation strategy. I was much criticised for refusing to engage in a discussion on the strategy because I knew once I opened up the strategy then

> basically we would end up talking and I would spend my time in Ireland talking and not being action-oriented (Keane, 2016).

His confidence in the strategy was conditioned by the strength of the evidence brought to bear. This is not to say that the evidence brooked no argument and simply ushered the political system and the public to an inevitable outcome. Professor Keane himself recognised that policy does not operate in such an imperiously rational way: 'we cannot manage change by telling people', and 'we have had a great idea, it is fully evidence-based and we are starting on Monday' (Keane, 2016).

Legitimacy through evidence

The strength of the evidence helped to set the terms of the debate about how to best address cancer.

> Regarding the level of evidence we brought to bear, I would say that in 80% to 90% of it there was significant evidence in the international literature and from other jurisdictions that what was happening in Ireland was not best practice. We were able to point to comparators at the time. Ireland was in the bottom quartile of the OECD tables for cancer outcomes (ibid., 4).

If evidence is able to set the parameters of the debate – 'there was a very strong argument that we were doing very badly' – then it becomes easier to enlist people in a search for solutions 'rather than simply sitting on the outside and acting as advocates' (op. cit., 15).

Leadership

The idea of a policy infrastructure features leadership in one of its quadrants. Although sometimes neglected in discussions of policy formation, it can become especially crucial when issues are contested and evidence alone cannot settle debates.

Keane commented on the strong leadership practised across the system, especially among oncologists and medical societies, which underpinned the strategy's acceptance – leadership which was augmented by the support from relevant ministers and government departments. He noted of the Minister of Health and her department that they 'always reassured me to stay the course and to keep going' (Keane, 2016). Political pressure can come from various vectors; however, even when political representatives pleaded their case with

the Taoiseach of the day, the response was typically limited to a commitment to deal with the political issues.

These three core elements exemplify the interconnectedness of the three-pillar framework and their role in policy development. The evidence-based foundation of the strategy was thoroughly communicated to all stakeholders, improving the strategy's legitimacy, and had a positive effect on both informing the proposed reforms, and their later adoption. With that feedback and buy-in, the implementation of the strategy was successful, a measurable result through subsequent monitoring and the use of key performance indicators.

King and Crewe (2014) attribute various policy failures of the United Kingdom government to what they term operational and cultural disconnect. The former refers to a gap between those who formulate policy and those entrusted with implementing it so that practical constraints and requirements are not factored in; the latter speaks to a separation between those putting forward the policy and those who are affected by it, so that the policy either has no purchase on the ground or is actively rejected.

These two 'disconnects' are another way of underlining the relevance of feasibility and legitimacy as outlined in the three-pillar framework. As highlighted in the National Cancer Strategy example, Professor Keane ensured they were factored into the execution of the strategy. But it is worth emphasizing that he did not try to overcome a cultural disconnect by letting all affected groups have their say and try to incorporate these diverse perspectives into an overall strategy. Rather, the evidence informed the contours of an optimal intervention and this was relentlessly communicated to the public.

The strategy is a useful example of a policy success. Whereas most commentary prefers to focus on the 'blunders of government' (King & Crewe, 2014), leaving us with only a vague idea of how to get things right, highlighting effective government practices can be more instructive for policy officials.

The second National Cancer Strategy is also worth considering because it illustrates how good policy development depends on keeping the three pillars in play all the time. The constant act of juggling means that 'real-world' policy is not a rational, linear sequence in which evidence sets the direction and vision, which is accepted without input by practitioners whose outputs are then communicated or 'sold' to the public. Instead, good policy development is a more intricate affair in which the three pillars mutually support each other. As such, Professor Keane's observations on best

practice in developing the strategy foreshadow the model which would eventually coalesce and expand into the three-pillar framework, as well as demonstrate its strengths.

Progressing a policy development infrastructure in Ireland

The *Policy Handbook* (Department of the Taoiseach, 2025) represented a milestone in Ireland towards the development of a 'policy infrastructure', as ideated by Washington. While its publication is a significant first step towards this larger goal, it was important to identify what further outputs, and in what sequence, would provide the most benefit to policy practitioners in the Irish policy landscape, as this infrastructure was built.

Following on from the publication of the *Policy Handbook* in April 2025, the work of embedding it in the policy work of departments commenced. This approach including establishing a 'policy champions' group composed of senior policy practitioners from every government department, and the issuing of a survey to departments to provide further insights into their specific policy processes and structures.

The findings of the survey highlighted a wide diversity of policy arrangements across departments. While all operate specific structures or processes for developing policy, it was notable that a number of departments do not maintain a dedicated, central policy unit, or a dedicated policy group/process at Management Board level.

These findings do not demonstrate an absence of quality policy development mechanisms. All departments are utilising their own systems or processes to improve policy quality within their organisations. Rather, the results show that there is a wide range of internal policy approaches in place with significant differences across departments to fit their bespoke circumstances.

Given this diversity, the question arose how best to encourage policy coherence and consistency across departments for developing and reviewing policies, without doing so in a prescriptive manner that limits the expertise of department policy practitioners or hinder their role as subject matter experts. With the help of the policy champions' group, actions have been identified and organised under four broad headings:

- leadership and communications;
- capacity development;

- resource development;
- collaboration and consolidation with relevant initiatives.

Staff from the Department of the Taoiseach have presented to individual management boards to both communicate the relevance of the policy framework and offer assistance in terms of capacity building.

In addition, the Institute of Public Administration has developed an online course, based on the *Policy Handbook*, which can be taken independently by civil servants without recourse to a lecturer. Further courses based on the individual pillars are also in train.

Staff within the Department of the Taoiseach are building up a digital resource centre with materials pertinent to policy development. The Department of the Taoiseach has always been clear that it is line departments who have the real expertise in policy matters. Therefore, the contribution of the Department of the Taoiseach is that it can coordinate resources and materials from all departments, enabling them to learn from each other.

Conclusions

And to end where we began, it is obvious that government departments are not the only voices in the policy ecosystem, unlike the Ireland of the 1950s. Therefore, it behoves us to engage with other actors and institutions who have relevant experience and research to contribute.

Action here is being taken on two fronts. Guidance on public participation in policy matters is being prepared, particularly with a view to ensuring that there is appropriate adherence to all three pillars. The example of the second National Cancer Strategy demonstrates how outreach could potentially descend into inaction, if there is endless deliberation without moving towards tangible outcomes. Equally, it is important, as the National Cancer Strategy demonstrates, that engagement has to have due regard to the evidence, as otherwise there is a risk of crafting 'placebo policies' that have no proven impact.

The second piece of work relates to engagement between the Department of the Taoiseach and the Institute of Lifecourse and Society at the University of Galway to host conferences exploring different aspects of the three pillars of effective policy-making. The first conference was devoted to data and the second to legitimacy. A

third conference examining issues around implementation is planned for 2026.[2]

The culmination of these initiatives will lead into the next phase of building a policy development infrastructure in Ireland, further embedding the *Policy Handbook* and the three-pillar framework across Government departments, while expanding the Irish civil service's overall policy development ecosystem more broadly. These two aims will be undertaken through a variety of actions which include, inter alia:

- establishing a policy network with regular events to showcase relevant advances and developments;
- further developing and organising centralised and accessible policy case studies to communicate best practice to officials;
- producing short, training courses based on the three-pillar model.

A further development, that will be considered in the future, is introducing and using a tool to assess the overall quality of policy within the civil service. New Zealand has undertaken such a step with its quality policy framework which sets out certain standards to be achieved in the development and dispensation of policy advice. The framework is intended to be used both by civil servants driving individual policies within departments as well as enabling external assessments. It is intended to be used as a tool for formative evaluation and incremental improvement and is one way of trying to encourage a degree of commonality and consistency between individual government departments.[3]

Overall, the Irish policy project aims to create a systematic shift in policy development where the three pillars – and their mutually reinforcing relationship – are internalised across Government departments and reflected through the work of policy officials. In turn, policy officials will have access to a supporting policy infrastructure that provides resources that meaningfully contribute to the official's work, with policy development regarded as a recognised profession. This will mean promoting a diverse, though clearly defined, set of skills which officials can learn and improve upon – based upon the three-pillar framework.

[2] The Institute for Lifecourse and Society is a multidisciplinary research institute based at the University of Galway which focuses on applied social sciences.
[3] See https://www.dpmc.govt.nz/publications/policy-quality-framework

The apparent failures and faults of Irish policy development have been laid out by many commentators over the years. Some believe that the problem is that policy is not sufficiently 'evidence-informed' and therefore the solution is to connect the supply of knowledge to the process of policy development in a more reliable and consistent way.

Others believe that the problem lies in the 'doing' and that Irish public policy is afflicted by what is termed an 'implementation deficit disorder' (Molloy, 2010). This is defined as 'the failure of institutions to act when presented with indisputable facts and sensible remedies'. Although raised in the context of the economic and financial crisis of 2008, the term has become a shorthand to explain the alleged failure of Irish public policy, particularly with regard to implementation.

Viewed from the perspective of the three pillar-framework, matters may be more complex than either of these two perspectives. It is certainly not the case that there are always 'indisputable facts' which unfailingly lead to 'sensible remedies'. Sometimes, there may not even be data available that sheds light on the scale and scope of an issue; it may have to be produced or commissioned.

Feasibility questions are important, as Molloy indicates, but they cannot be divorced from the evidence and legitimacy pillars. King and Crewe's (2014) notion of 'cultural disconnect' points to the idea that policymakers may be somewhat divorced from the environment in which they are intervening. What appears 'sensible' to them may appear nonsensical to their audience, hence the importance of legitimation.

This does not entail appeasing everyone by trying to offer some sort of lowest common denominator. As the National Cancer Strategy showed, policy proposals backed by clear evidence can serve to convince people and provide a firm foundation for an effective intervention. What this means is that successful policy has to keep all three pillars in play throughout the process and this is a matter that demands constant reinforcement.

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