

Improving the use of research evidence to inform economic policy-making in Ireland: Reflections on some key changes since 2012

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Abstract

Since the global financial crisis, Ireland has increasingly adopted a more evidence-informed approach to policy development. Over the past fifteen years, this shift has been reflected in greater investment in the National Statistical Service, greater funding of policy-relevant research projects and postgraduate programmes, the establishment of the Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Service (IGEES) in 2012, and, most recently, by the naming of ‘Data and Evidence’ as the first pillar of the Government of Ireland *Policy Handbook* published in 2025. The purpose of IGEES is to strengthen the analytical capability within the civil service to deliver economic research evidence to policy officials who are advising senior politicians. This paper revisits several issues raised in Ruane’s article ‘Research evidence and policymaking in Ireland’ previously published in volume 60 of *Administration* in 2012, which remain pertinent today. It then examines the evolution of

¹ The views expressed in this paper are my own and do not necessarily reflect the helpful feedback received from many civil servants, including current and former members of IGEES, and from the Central Statistics Office. I am grateful to the referee and editors for their inciteful comments and suggestions. All remaining errors are my own.

IGEES as the first cross-departmental group of professionals in the Irish civil service, focusing on what is required for its continued development and future sustainability. The paper goes on to consider IGEES as the first step in developing a more skills-based civil service, moving Ireland away from the inherited pre-independence, ‘generalist’ United Kingdom civil-service model.

Keywords: civil service, democracy, economists, evidence-informed, generalist, Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Service, IGEES, policy-making, research evidence, skills-based workforce.

Introduction

In the aftermath of the global financial crisis (GFC), Ruane (2012) raised four questions in relation to the use of research evidence in informing economic policy-making in Ireland: What can research offer to the policy-making process? Why is greater use not made of research in policy-making? Why is more policy-focused research not available? And what is needed for more productive engagement between researchers and policymakers? These questions bear some revisiting in the context of the evolving research–policy ecosystem, the growing literature, both national and international, on the use of research evidence in shaping public policy and governance (see Lunn & Ruane, 2013; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2020a; Hogan & Murphy, 2021; Christensen, 2025), and also specifically in relation to evaluation, as summarised in Nielsen et al. (2024). Today, announcements of new economic or social policies in Ireland almost invariably refer to their being ‘evidence informed’, and are often accompanied by comprehensive analytical reports.² While the focus of this paper is primarily on economic policy development, the issues raised are relevant to a whole range of public policy areas, especially where economic factors come into play either directly or indirectly.

Crucial to providing evidence to inform economic policy is the availability of highly trusted data and information. Since 2012, the Central Statistics Office has grown its capacity³ to produce more timely data releases and analyses, to create new integrated datasets based on survey and administrative data, and to invest in longitudinal datasets. These improvements have increased trust in, and use of, Irish official statistics⁴ and facilitated greater analysis of more complex

² It is widely agreed that evidence has played a central role following the GFC; see Hearne and Watt (2011) and Hogan and Murphy (2021).

³ See, for example, Ruane (2019).

⁴ See Dalton (2014) and O’Hara (2014).

policy issues than was possible in 2012.⁵ Advances in technology and changes in legislation now allow increased numbers of analysts to have greater access to disaggregated and linked micro-datasets. At the same time, increased access to international sources, such as the OECD and EUROSTAT, facilitate setting Irish policy research in cross-country contexts. Although further progress is possible, the potential for high-quality research to inform policy-making in Ireland is now much greater than it was only a decade ago, so that there is now a much stronger evidence base to inform policy-making in Ireland.

But good data are just the starting point – to provide economic evidence requires inputs from research economists with the relevant concepts and analytical skills who choose to undertake research to inform current policy issues. Along with research economists, government economists with the skills to interpret research findings in a specific policy context are also needed – they play a sophisticated brokerage role in mediating the link between independent researchers and policymakers.

While this paper is primarily focused on the system of supplying evidence to inform policy, rather than on the drivers of the demand for evidence to inform policy, the system only works when senior civil servants consistently endorse the use of evidence to developing policy and recognise the role that government economists play in this process.

The backdrop to this paper is the evolving Irish economic-policy ecosystem, where economists' roles are growing (Fitzgerald & O'Rourke, 2023; Hogan & Murphy, 2021), where the OECD and European Commission strongly influence policy and policy processes (OECD, 2020a, 2023), where increasing numbers of government departments are publishing research strategies and where the Irish civil service has introduced a new *Policy Handbook* (Government of Ireland, 2025a) intended to promote evidence-centred, organic policy development.

The next section of the paper reviews the structures and incentives needed for successful engagement between independent research economists and government economists – as such it revisits some of the issues in Ruane (2012). The third section (Development of the Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Service) examines the role of government economists since the establishment of the Irish

⁵ For example, the connection between children's health and educational performance, and older people's physical and mental health.

Government Economic and Evaluation Service (IGEES) in 2012 and its progress since the 2020 OECD review (OECD, 2020b). Henceforth in this paper, IGEES members are referred to as IGEES economists (following common parlance), recognising that IGEES recruits both economists and policy analysts from the wider social sciences. The fourth section (IGEES and the evolving Irish policy-making landscape) explores the policy landscape in which IGEES economists operate. Finally, the fifth section (Looking forward – final reflections and recommendations) reflects on IGEES's progress and draws a link between it and possible changes in the Irish civil service towards a more skills-based workforce, in terms of economic, societal, scientific, financial and technological fields. Such a development would put politicians in a better position to address the complexities of the modern world. The paper concludes with some high-level recommendations.

Research economists and government economists – basis for engagement

In this section, engagement between research economists and IGEES economists is discussed by looking at existing networking structures, the incentives for policy engagement, access to data and quality assurance. Ahead of these discussions, the author notes that greater funding for policy research and for postgraduate education, notably at PhD level, has substantially increased the supply of both research and researchers in the past fifteen years. Higher graduate enrolments reflect both improved student funding and better financial rewards for analytical skills in the labour market. Not all researchers wish to engage directly with policy, and their ongoing engagement relies on their strong links with the public service and civil society, as well as on the incentives in place for such policy engagement.

Networking structures

The interaction between independent research economists and government economists is fundamentally shaped by the networks and institutional structures that enable their collaboration (see Christensen, 2025). In Ireland, the relatively small size of the population and of professional communities encourage the formation of successful networks, especially among individuals of similar age. For these networks to thrive, institutional leaders must foster open, constructive debate, which helps prevent 'group think' in the civil

service and ensures researchers appreciate the complexity of the policy context. Constructive challenge and dialogue based on evidence are vital, especially when opinions differ. Chatham House Rule events, backed by senior civil-service leaders, offer a safe space for critical discussion and for sharing broader perspectives. Forums, such as conferences (e.g. Irish Economic Association (IEA), Dublin Economics Workshop (DEW)), online seminars, and specialist workshops all play key roles.⁶ Despite these improvements, younger research economists are increasingly more active in the IEA, while IGEES economists are the main participants at the DEW.⁷ This growing separation suggests that continued professional networking cannot be presumed and that more supports and incentives may be required to sustain engagement. The experience of the Irish Evaluation Network (IEN)⁸ is a sobering reminder that networking needs to be properly supported to survive and thrive; despite prospering for over a decade and actively participating in international peer networks, the IEN did not continue.

A further benefit of effective networking, not always recognised, is that sharing evidence and analysis contributes to improving the quality of public and media discussions, and to challenging the potential dominance of well-resourced private interests in relation to major policy issues.

Incentives for policy engagement

The extent of policy engagement by independent research economists depends critically on the value placed on policy-relevant research in recruitment and promotion systems. If research institutions prioritise peer-reviewed international publications, researchers will focus on these outputs which will often lack the granular detail needed to inform policy, and are likely couched in language less accessible to the wider policy-making community. Unless research institutions promote the value of policy research, the broader benefits of knowledge transfer could be limited, with funding being perceived as merely contributing to institutional overheads rather than to advancing policy insights. Recent developments offer some counterbalance.

⁶ Since the GFC, the number and variety of such events have increased, aided by great funding for policy-related gatherings.

⁷ Attendance at meetings of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society, established in 1847, remains low for both groups.

⁸ The network was established in late 2002, to provide a forum for the exchange of ideas, seminars and conferences for people involved in evaluation in Ireland.

Universities have seen increased public funding linked to policy engagement and demonstrable impact, while philanthropic funding has similarly become more focused on societal engagement. Collaborations between the Economic and Social Research Institute and government departments have highlighted the value of accessible research to support policy, while publication options for policy-related research have increased significantly with new international policy and interdisciplinary journals.

Long-term funding programmes for longitudinal research on children and ageing,⁹ and comparative European Union (EU) research, have demonstrated the Irish research community's ability to deliver policy-relevant research. These programmes illustrate the importance of reliable funding streams to supporting postgraduate researchers and building institutional expertise, thereby enhancing the potential value of research for policy. Structured academic–government research collaborations¹⁰ also improve quality and facilitate cooperation, further strengthening skills within IGEES.¹¹

Engagement by IGEES economists in networking will only prosper if the civil-service leadership culture recognises and values economic expertise. This needs to be reflected in the design of performance evaluations, support for continual professional development and senior leadership's treatment of IGEES analysis. Positive recognition will incentivise IGEES economists to invest in specialist analytical skills and subject-area knowledge (e.g. in energy, transport and taxation), allowing them to bring major contributions to network engagements. Like all professionals, IGEES economists require ongoing incentives and support if they are to develop and maintain their economics expertise throughout their careers.¹² And just as a hospital wants its surgeons to operate using techniques close to the knowledge frontier in their field, Ministers and Secretaries General should want their economists to keep abreast of developments in their areas.

⁹ Since 2000, *Growing up in Ireland*, the children's longitudinal study, and *TILDA*, the longitudinal study on ageing, have been major developments for Irish economic and social statistics.

¹⁰ Examples include the various joint research programmes between the Economic and Social Research Institute and the Departments of Finance and Social Protection, and between the Geary Institute and the Department of Children, Disability and Equality.

¹¹ The likelihood of collaborations increases when departments make researchers aware of their research strategies and agendas.

¹² This parallels the role of continual professional development in the wider economy.

Access to data

A key encouragement for cooperative research between independent researchers and IGEES economists can be access to micro-datasets. Some of these are administrative datasets and others are Central Statistics Office research microdata files (RMFs). While independent researchers have long had access to RMFs, IGEES economists have only obtained access to these datasets in the past decade, and this is reflected in the large increase in the use of these RMFs for policy analysis. Being able to access the same datasets supports cooperative research projects, and the possibility of linking these to administrative data makes even more granular policy analysis possible. Numbers using these valuable data sets have grown very rapidly, reflecting greater interest from academic researchers, PhD students and IGEES economists, and the provision of easier (virtual) access facilitated by technology.¹³ Access to other government datasets, such as the Annual Business Survey of Economic Impact, also encourages engagement between research and IGEES economists and often offers richer detail for policy analysis than available in CSO datasets.

Quality assurance in policy research

Academic publication standards are promoted by researchers as the gold standard, but policy research for government also requires the use of relevant institutional details to contextualise and inform the analysis. In addition, the language for policy research must be accessible and jargon-free. While private economic consultancy can be needed for bespoke projects, it should be commissioned only when IGEES or existing research programmes cannot deliver in time. Commissioning such research – ideally led by senior IGEES economists and policymakers – should set standards that ensure impartial results, realistic deadlines and appropriate methods of publication. All policy research, whether by academics, IGEES economists or private consultants, should undergo independent peer review to a consistent, system-wide standard; at present, the standards vary across departments which is not best practice.¹⁴ There is now a sufficient volume of programme-based research to allow comparison

¹³ Between 2020–5, the number of projects accessing research micro-data files (RMFs) annually was 50 per cent higher than in 2015–9, and the number of organisations using RMFs rose from an annual average of sixteen in 2015 to thirty-six over the past decade. Source: Central Statistics Office, February 2025.

¹⁴ This becomes increasingly important in a world of fake facts and of risk of scientific fraud.

of the effectiveness of different forms of research activities, and this should be done in the context of assessing the direct contribution of IGEES. There could be some useful exploration of how artificial intelligence (AI) can be used to allow easier access to international policy research, to support research economists in delivering more tailored research reports to departments,¹⁵ and to facilitate those interested in policy in gaining insights into complex and cross-cutting issues.

Development of the Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Service

IGEES economists now play a vital role in ensuring Irish economic policy is evidence-informed. This section examines the foundation, evolution and present status of IGEES, focusing on recruitment, retention, scale and outputs.

Background

In the 1960s, the Irish civil service enhanced its economic expertise in the Department of Finance (DFIN) by hiring economics graduates and supporting young civil servants to study economics at University College Dublin. T. K. Whitaker, as Secretary of DFIN, sought to build this expertise, influenced perhaps by the limited evidence available for drafting *Economic Development* and by the example of the UK Government Economic Service (GES) established in 1964 by A. K. Cairncross.¹⁶ However, like the UK, Ireland did not consistently retain this expertise over time, failing to hire and promote young economists when more senior economists left the civil service for economics posts in the wide public service or in the private sector or moved into generalist streams within the civil service to avail of promotion opportunities.¹⁷ Furthermore, from the 1990s, the civil service adopted a policy of outsourcing economic analysis by issuing tenders to external consultancies and research centres, leading to reduced

¹⁵ It is beyond the scope of this paper to look at what AI might mean, but it should facilitate wider disciplinary and collaborative engagement. Clearly it will be crucial to put rules and governance in place to ensure that AI is not misused. See Rinaldi and Nielson (2024) specifically in relation to evaluation.

¹⁶ A paper by A. K. Cairncross was the only economics paper referenced in *Economic Development*.

¹⁷ The UK GES went into decline during the budgetary cutbacks in the 1980s.

internal knowledge, as tenders were not designed to foster knowledge or skills transfers.

Following the GFC, the outsourcing model changed and the Department of Public Enterprise and Reform (DPER) established IGEES in 2012. IGEES started with thirty economists, a combination of existing civil servants, specialising mainly in evaluation, and newly recruited master's level graduates. Unlike the 1960s model, IGEES was designed from the outset to span the entire civil service, not just the work of DFIN or DPER. Its evolving goals centred on providing economic and policy analysis for government decision-making across the broad socio-economic spectrum, on promoting best practices in policy evaluation, and on facilitating open dialogue between IGEES, academia and other stakeholders.

IGEES represented a significant change for a civil service then based entirely on a 'generalist model', and arguably its success led to the National Statistical Service (NSS) being set up in 2017.¹⁸ While there have been specific recruitment drives for other professions in the past decade, NSS is the only professional group developing on a broadly similar basis to IGEES. Departments were encouraged, but not required, to allocate graduate economic entrants to IGEES-linked positions, so it took until 2018 for all departments to have an IGEES unit. This incrementalist approach secured support from civil servants and politicians,¹⁹ and also addressed the challenge of onboarding new graduates into a system where so few people had the relevant policy experience or economic skills to train them.²⁰ Further details are provided in OECD (2020b) and the IGEES *Medium Term Strategy 2020–2022* (2020).

In addition to overall scale, a difference from the outset between IGEES and the UK's GES is that the GES covers economists in all agencies and public bodies as well as the civil service, thereby providing greater training opportunities and promotion prospects for government economists. Furthermore, the UK has moved to a more specialist workforce structure over the past two decades, so that the

¹⁸ The NSS (previously named IGSS) is managed by the Central Statistics Office and now has forty statisticians spread across eleven departments.

¹⁹ See, for example, the description by former Minister for Finance, Pascal Donohoe, of IGEES staff members as being 'an integral part of each Department, adding their skill set to the varied expertise working on policy analysis and formulation as directed by Departmental business plans' (Dáil Éireann, 2019).

²⁰ This incrementalist approach received some external criticism; see Boyle (2014) and Ruane (2021).

GES is now just one of over thirty civil-service professions. The UK service has four broad categories of professions: Operational delivery, Policy, Functional professions (with twenty groups) and Specialist professions (with ten groups). Economics is now one of the twenty functional professions, and the previous generalists have been renamed as ‘Policy professionals’ (accounting for 50 per cent of civil servants). (See Collins (2025) and the final section of the paper.)

The OECD (2020b) review of the IGEES highlighted its significant progress since 2012 and made four high-level recommendations: (i) broaden governance to improve ownership and access to data; (ii) invest more in skills and engagement; (iii) enhance the quality and variety of analytical tools; and (iv) expand dissemination to include international experts and peer exchanges.

The IGEES’s *Medium Term Strategy 2020–2022* (IGEES, 2020) did not directly address the OECD’s recommendations, but its strategic direction clearly reflects the review’s findings, referencing the need to: (i) review governance arrangements to support cross departmental integration;²¹ (ii) increase investment in skills and access to data; (iii) publish more high-quality analytical outputs; and (iv) forge greater links nationally and internationally.

Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Service in 2026

IGEES numbers grew from around 30 in 2012 to 160 in 2018 and to over 350 by the end of 2025. While IGEES does not currently have a published medium-term strategy or recent annual report, its website provides updates on its strategic focus, activities and online publications. Its current objective is defined as ‘to support the delivery of better public service, through an evidence-informed approach to the design and implementation of public policy’ (Government of Ireland, 2025b).

In effect, this objective sets IGEES at the heart of economic policy-making. For example, its contributions were evident in the analysis produced throughout the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) period, and in the quality and speed of delivery of the Report of the Commission on Taxation and Welfare in 2022. IGEES currently describes its role as being delivered through the ‘publication of analytical outputs, specialist recruitment, targeted development programmes, and knowledge sharing’ and lists its main analytical

²¹ The OECD (2020a, p. 10) noted the concentration of the service in DPER at that point.

outputs as ‘economic analysis, expenditure analysis, programme evaluations, ex ante appraisals, social and distributional impact analysis, internal briefings and analytical reports’.

While IGEES has a whole-of-government focus on strategic and cross-cutting policy issues, it has not focused on the broader regulatory ecosystem. This undoubtedly reflects the primacy for DPER of public expenditure rather than regulation and the historic neglect by policymakers of the need for careful design and implementation of regulations²² and their implications for the effective working of the economy.²³

Since IGEES is now so well embedded in the Irish system, it is more challenging to measure the full extent of its influence. Such measurement lies beyond the scope of this paper, but DPER’s external and internal advisory groups (EAG and IAG) should commission a review of all its activities.

The remainder of this section addresses recruitment and retention, reach and outputs of IGEES economists.

Recruitment and retention:²⁴ Building a skilled workforce requires implementation of a consistent recruitment strategy. Since 2017, annual open calls have been held for entry-level IGEES positions (at Administrative Officer level) and biennially for positions at Assistant Principal (AP) level. Requirements emphasise analytical and policy skills, similar to the UK GES (2:1 degree in economics or related subject). The combination of rapidly increasing numbers and a time-intensive recruitment process leaves IGEES at risk of losing the top applicants. This suggests that it would be timely to review the recruitment process (application dates, entry requirements, processing times, etc.), and give consideration to the precise skills being sought. An upside of IGEES’s success and growing reputation is the success of its undergraduate internship programme, which also serves as a pipeline for entry-level roles.²⁵

²² Regulation is a key focus of the Irish Government’s *Accelerating Infrastructure Report and Action Plan* (Government of Ireland, 2025c), which identifies planning and building regulations as being particularly problematic.

²³ The overall burden of regulation across multiple domains is a key focus of Draghi (2024).

²⁴ Christensen (2025) emphasises the importance of clearly defined recruitment and career policies in a skills-based civil service system.

²⁵ Intern numbers rose from twenty-four in 2023 to forty-two in 2025.

IGEES's ability to retain good staff depends on promotion prospects and opportunities for investment in skills. At present AP is the highest IGEES-specific grade, with limited PO posts which are not exclusive to IGEES members and come with wider job requirements. If IGEES is to be sustainable, it needs to have more economist PO-level positions, with more specific job descriptions and an adjusted weighting system in the civil-service capability framework.²⁶ Furthermore, if APs with key skills and experience meet the required PO level, it should be possible to promote them *in situ* rather than transferring them elsewhere.

The promotion system is key to retention, which is critical for IGEES's sustainability, so that there is always a cadre of experienced economists to lead and train new entrants. This sustainability risk is not addressed in the IGEES strategy (2020), but was noted in OECD (2020b), and was identified much earlier by those overseeing IGEES, as reported in Boyle (2014): 'Thought should be given to how best to maintain expertise within IGEES ... This will ... require careful manpower planning, persistent mobility arrangements and the development of a career path'.

The Head of IGEES, which is currently at PO-level, should be at a higher level in order to ensure that the service achieves its goals and is truly cross-departmental.

If IGEES is to realise its potential, its economists should be supported to continue to build their skillsets, in line with national and international norms, in both private and public sectors. These supports include access to further economics training (over and above IGEES's Learning and Development Framework), specialist experience (working on projects with research economists and statisticians), and secondments to international organisations (OECD, International Monetary Fund). Current knowledge-sharing events within IGEES could be expanded further in the coming years, to nurture a climate of curiosity, experimentation and innovation.

While planned movement between departments can broaden experience for young IGEES economists, excessive mobility risks diluting their specialist knowledge, effectively turning them into quasi-generalists. This not only limits their capacity to contribute to policy,²⁷

²⁶ At PO level, people need a balance of skills as they have to manage and mentor others but the skills balance for all PO positions should not have to be the same.

²⁷ Those external to the civil service often comment upon dealing with it on how high staff turnover rates mean that they need to go back to square one when dealing with new appointees. This viewpoint requires testing to inform decisions.

but also restricts their ability to connect meaningfully with research economists, especially in rapidly evolving fields. Arguably tenures of three to five years for younger staff, in place of the current patterns of two-to-three-year rotations, would benefit productivity and sustainability, and these mobility issues should be part of governance issues covered by the EAG and IAG.

Reach of IGEES: While IGEES has now expanded marginally beyond the civil service, there has been no open debate about extending its reach further, which could strengthen the policy evidence base and the sustainability of IGEES as a professional group. However, this would need to be considered in the context of the Irish civil service establishing more skills-based professional groups as discussed in the next section.

IGEES analytical outputs: Since 2012, published IGEES staff papers²⁸ have grown steadily, with 632 papers by the end of 2025 – starting from 7 papers in 2012, and now averaging 34 per year. While this is only one metric for evaluating IGEES’s contribution to policy, it does signal professional skill levels and breadth of contribution. As suggested by Boyle (2014), it is now time for the EAG/IAG to examine IGEES outputs in the context of an overall review. Such reviews could look further at IGEES’s potential contributions to policy documents and action plans, and to engagement in joint research with research economists, as part of skill building. In addition, it could assess the extent to which IGEES analysis is replacing external consultancy and what IGEES is contributing to creating a more integrated evidence base.²⁹

IGEES and the evolving Irish policy-making landscape

This section looks at the context in which IGEES economists operate, and specifically the work of expert groups. Overall, Ireland’s approach to policy-making is relatively transparent as evidenced by the widespread use of international benchmarking, with common practice

²⁸ See www.gov.ie/en/igees-publications/

²⁹ Consultancy in the civil service covers a wide range of services. Given that IGEES represents the reversal of the earlier outsourcing model, its effectiveness merits evaluation.

being to challenge ourselves against ‘the best’ or ‘the most relevant’.³⁰ For example, how does our education system compare with Finland’s, or our innovation ecosystem compare with Denmark’s? Data from OECD- and EU-funded cross-country research programmes are often used as a starting point for such comparative policy analysis.

IGEES has a key role in bringing different types of economic evidence together to inform decision-making. To succeed, IGEES economists must work with policy colleagues in determining the range of evidence and analysis needed to inform a particular policy process. As the process of designing policy interventions becomes more matrix than linear, effective use of evidence requires good planning strategies to sequence the review of international evidence, gather existing data and undertake surveys where new information is required.³¹

A longstanding feature of Irish policy-making has been the use of independent ‘expert groups’ to guide the strategic direction of policy-making.³² Groups are typically formed when policies have remained unchanged for a long period without any review. These groups usually consist of key stakeholders and independent experts selected for their professional or technical expertise/experience. When independent members bring expertise, they offer valuable insights on complex issues, leading to principle-based and consistent recommendations. But independent members can only contribute effectively if the objective of the expert group goes beyond getting stakeholder consensus. It is possible that poorly constructed expert groups that do not have access to high-quality evidence and strong analytical support (e.g. from IGEES) may ultimately serve special interests instead of the public good as intended.

Stakeholder consultations increasingly form a major part in the expert group process and provide important evidence for analysis, conclusions and recommendations. To qualify as evidence, consultations should be robust and broad-based, addressing issues

³⁰ The National Competitiveness and Productivity Council, for example, uses the group of small, advanced OECD countries as key comparators in measuring Ireland’s competitiveness performance.

³¹ New information can be critical, in, for example, assessing the effectiveness of special needs assistants for different students, the design and evaluation of delivering school meals, and measuring the effectiveness of training schemes for the green and digital transitions.

³² The gov.ie website provides the following information for the public on these groups: terms of reference, reports, statistical data, working papers, departmental minutes, etc. It could be developed so that appropriate use of AI could reduce the time costs of, for example, gaining insights into complex and cross-cutting issues.

raised by academic research and relevant external examples, as well as stakeholder concerns. When making recommendations to government, reports should openly acknowledge that stakeholders usually represent very diverse groups. Advances in AI have potential to expand consultation options while lowering the time and financial costs of gathering and using evidence.

Increasingly, IGEES economists have become more systematically involved in helping expert groups (as for example, with the Commission on Taxation and Welfare) by providing analysis to inform discussions from the outset. It would make sense to involve IGEES economists and NSS statisticians at the outset in defining terms of reference, supporting research needs, and suggesting suitable external research sources, and the commissioning of surveys. Given the scale and frequent use of these expert groups, which often sit for months and years, it would be in the public interest to provide information on their full economic costs (including the opportunity cost of all participants and supporting civil servants) as part of the final report.

When IGEES cannot undertake the required research to inform policy-making more generally, there should be protocols to decide how it should be provided – by research economists involved in existing research programmes, and/or by launching a tender. All policy tenders require careful preparation and pre-tender review by people with relevant expertise and experience. As noted above, this research should always be subjected to peer review and published as part of the governance process for the expert group.³³

Once an independent expert group report has been delivered, the minister(s) involved, advised by senior officials, should respond to it and decide on the actions to be followed, along with an implementation timetable.³⁴ Best practice would be to provide a specific response to why any major recommendations are not being accepted and implemented. These actions may require the direct involvement of the civil servants and consideration should be given to how IGEES could assist in detailed policy design, and/or in monitoring the progress made in adopting and implementing the recommendations.

³³ See, for example, the OECD report (2019) on small and medium-sized enterprises undertaken ahead of a major review.

³⁴ Regrettably examples abound of long delays – a recent case being the *Administration of Civil Justice: Review Group Report* (The Kelly Report) whose implementation lagged five years until its importance was focused on in the *Action Plan on Competitiveness and Productivity* (Government of Ireland, 2025d).

IGEES economists have the skills to contribute to improving policy formulation across a wide range of areas beyond what would be seen as economic issues. To do this, they must work with other professional experts (lawyers, project managers, etc.) on the detail of design mechanisms and delivery schemes. This involves considering in detail the possible behavioural responses triggered by policy changes so that the incentives introduced ensure alignment between the policy objectives being promoted and the interest groups affected.

Looking forward – final reflections and recommendations

This section argues that the use of research evidence to inform policy must continue to be a focus for the leadership of the Irish civil service. It reiterates the importance of IGEES as a key link between the economic research community and the civil service, which requires the support of its leadership. Drawing on the role of IGEES as the first civil-service wide group of professionals, it goes on to recommend that serious attention be given to a new model what would see increasing professional expertise within the Irish civil service so that Ireland can have a more effective system of public administration. It draws a link to the important role that research can play in strengthening democracy and concludes with four specific recommendations for action.

More progress is needed

This paper has noted significant improvements since 2012 in Ireland's approach to evidence-informed policy-making, showing progress in relation to the four questions posed in Ruane (2012). For example, in a better-funded research environment, researchers have provided more policy-relevant evidence, particularly during major crisis periods (e.g. Brexit and COVID-19). Government documents and decisions also indicate increased use of research in the policy-making process. In the recent past, actual policy decisions which have ignored research findings have come in for international criticism (e.g. from the International Monetary Fund, OECD, European Commission). A pertinent example is the widespread criticism from across the EU of Ireland's stance on Mercosur in 2025; this made no sense given the rich evidence available to demonstrate its potential net economic value to Ireland.³⁵ In addition, public criticisms of infrastructure

³⁵ That this happened in the context of the uncertain geopolitical order and the need especially for Ireland, and for the EU, to broaden market reach is unfathomable.

failures (such as housing and planning) have occurred where research recommendations have not also been taken up.

Many areas exhibiting weak and delayed policy responses to research findings and recommendations reflect the need for: (i) more specialist knowledge to be available to decision makers (e.g. on new technologies and energy options), (ii) a sophisticated sequencing approach to handle complex policy implementation (e.g. electricity and water to come ahead of housing), and (iii) more strategic medium/long-term approaches to be taken to problem-solving (e.g. multi-annual plans and budgets for energy, flooding). There is a further danger that our current positive short-term fiscal position could reduce the priority given to rigorous analysis with non-strategic solutions adopted, as demonstrated in the patchwork of energy interventions to support business/household finances (e.g. energy subsidies) rather than longer-term solutions (reduced energy dependency, increased energy efficiency, etc.). Furthermore, more productive engagement between researchers, policymakers, key stakeholders and politicians could inform and improve public discussions involving difficult choices. A study on why policy responses have not reflected the available research evidence merits serious consideration, based on surveying current and former civil servants and ministers, as well as other policy-making stakeholders.

Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Service

IGEES may come to be seen in time as the first major step in modernising the Irish civil service workforce for the twenty-first century, recognising that more specific skills are available to ensure senior officials and ministers are well placed to ensure informed, balanced and effective decision-making. Given the history set out in the section on the development of IGEES, it cannot be presumed that IGEES will survive and thrive without ongoing support from the leadership of the civil service. An informed leadership should recognise that strong civil-service/academic networks have a capacity to increase significantly the return on Ireland's investment in policy-relevant research in all disciplines, and to strengthen its knowledge base. Those responsible for building out the Irish research-policy ecosystems across all disciplines and professions should promote a comprehensive approach, covering organic networks (researchers and civil service professionals), formally established networks (e.g. the Civil Service Research Network), networks built on research

programmes, networks linked to parallel international groups (e.g. EU research group developing Policy Frameworks), etc.³⁶

A comprehensive review is strongly recommended to secure the future development and sustainability of IGEES. This review, involving expertise on strategic workforce planning, should cover governance, sustainability risks, recruitment and retention challenges, the future model for building and upskilling IGEES members, the profession, additional practical supports for engagement with the research community, and the effective and safe use of AI. If the policy system adopts a more future-focused approach to research (e.g. dynamic departmental research strategies), IGEES will have a greater capacity to provide more timely evidence and support to policy colleagues, thereby enhancing the overall capacity of the system. There should be fewer ‘unintended consequences’ associated with Irish policy interventions, especially if IGEES’s remit extends to exploring the possible negative strategic responses of affected parties to proposed regulation and policy designs. Policy design is complex and strategic analysis is needed to confirm alignment between stated objectives and actual interventions. If its remit is extended to reviewing proposed regulations, IGEES could address the recent OECD criticisms of the limited use of regulatory impact analysis in Ireland since 2011, when the Better Regulation Unit was abolished.³⁷

A modern professions-based civil service

The publication of the Irish Government’s public sector reform strategy (Government of Ireland, 2023) affirms the civil service’s objective as supporting improved delivery of public services based on evidence-informed policy. This and the adoption of the UK approach in Ireland’s new *Policy Handbook* (Government of Ireland, 2025a), appears to suggest that there is some appreciation that change is needed at the heart of the Irish civil service.³⁸ This is not surprising as the past decade has demonstrated clearly that many decisions in our more complex world require increasingly specialised skill sets to be involved in the design and delivery of policies, and failure to deliver has been a notable aspect of Irish policy-making in recent years. For

³⁶ This role is currently assigned to the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation, and Science.

³⁷ See Ferris (2024) for proposals in relation to regulatory impact analysis in Ireland to address the recommendations of the OECD.

³⁸ Its adoption in the Irish context is noteworthy given that it was developed for the civil service wherein 50 per cent of the staff are in professional groups.

an advanced OECD economy, it does seem remarkable that our civil service does not have more expert professionals and remains dependent for crucial expertise on independent public agencies and private-sector consultancies.³⁹ Christensen (2025) sets out the general case for expertise and stresses the importance of how it is organised (vertically and horizontally) and rewarded.

The UK civil service model began moving to a professional-skills model some twenty-five years ago and the process is still ongoing – with 50 per cent of staff being envisaged as belonging to specialist groups and the remainder as ‘policy professionals’ (formerly generalists). If Ireland were to follow this direction, it would face a myriad of strategic workforce planning questions: How many professions and which professions to start with? Over what period to make the change? What would be the role of heads of profession and what changes in governance would be required? How would members of different professional teams work together effectively? And could some of IGEE’s experience, such as its networking and career development models, contribute to developing a model for these other professions?

Moving gradually to a model with professions across the whole civil service would require strong leadership, specialist expertise and a carefully planned incremental process, as well as stakeholder buy-in.⁴⁰ Now is the perfect time to consider such a major change, as the government faces huge pressures in terms of policy design and service delivery, significant numbers of retirements are expected, and the potential impact of AI is now on the leadership agenda. Such a change would amount to the largest restructuring of the civil service since the foundation of the state. And as Collins (2025) notes, such a move has implications for every aspect of the service, including for how generalists (i.e. ‘policy professionals’) are trained and how they interact effectively with specialist groups.

This is also the right time because in today’s technologically driven world, the government urgently requires internal science, technology,

³⁹ It is useful to reflect on how the COVID-19 pandemic showed the value of having specialised knowledge and research and practical expertise directly available to civil servants and politicians. Ironically, the nature of COVID-19 meant that individuals were more readily available to give advice.

⁴⁰ Some might suggest that the Irish civil service has already begun this process as it has held recruitment drives for some professions, such as lawyers, human resources specialists, information technologists and accountants since 2010. However, these numbers have been small in scale and could not be regarded as the creation of a service-wide professions-based civil service.

engineering and mathematics expertise and better networks to access external researchers and experts.⁴¹ That process is now underway, led by the Chief Scientific Advisor who is based at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. Civil servants with specific skills will be needed to engage with Irish science, technology, engineering and mathematics researchers to ensure that government can access the findings and recommendations of the research it is funding, and also network with their other counterparts across the EU.

Finally, despite the obvious attractions of looking at a UK-type model, perhaps on the scale used in Scotland, Ireland should also explore how other small EU/OECD countries are modernising their civil services to bring in expertise to match today's needs for specialist knowledge in government decision-making, using the framework proposed by Christensen (2025). It is vital that the workforce model chosen enables these specialist professionals to connect with academics and external experts, ensuring that senior officials and ministers have continual access to new knowledge.

Research evidence and democracy

There is a positive connection between research evidence and democracy in that clearly communicated high-quality research helps the public understanding of difficult decisions and how lessons from the past can inform new solutions. As evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, the general public responded well to receiving information directly from key scientists, physicians and behavioural economists. In general, good economic and social research, accessibly presented, can contribute to building community by reminding people that their individual experiences differ from others in society – the-day-to-day experiences are not the same for all Dubliners, nor are they the same for a family in Blanchardstown and a family in Ballydehob. Thus, robust research evidence can sustain democracy and should be promoted as such by academics, public servants, elected officials, journalists, and business and union leaders.

At a time of unprecedented change, with new perspectives evolving and risks of misinformation becoming more prevalent, how we make and implement policy can bind or divide society. When governments

⁴¹ Given the increasing volume of research output, there is now great value in having systematic approaches to ensure that relevant policymakers are kept aware of the latest findings. AI could help make large volumes of research more accessible.

have to make major decisions, they need robust information and analysis to support their proposals if they are to garner widespread support. The civil service must live up to its responsibility to produce options for politicians that can be clearly explained and grounded in trusted evidence, so that timely policy decisions command acceptance, and are aligned with political commitments underpinned by the electoral process. Strong unified leadership within the civil service and the public service is essential to ensuring the effective delivery to voters of policy decisions made by politicians, and to ensuring that Ireland's system of public administration becomes a stronger national asset.

Key recommendations

Throughout this paper, various specific suggestions and recommendations for change have been made. They can be mapped into the following four strategic recommendations:

1. The leadership of the Irish civil service should establish a culture that more clearly articulates its current and planned approach to the systematic use of research evidence to support policy.
2. Senior leaders in academia and the civil service should actively support networking between researchers in all policy-relevant disciplines and the relevant specialist civil servants to ensure senior civil servants and politicians can access the requisite evidence they need to inform policy development and decisions.
3. IGEES, as the first service-wide professional group in the Irish civil service, should be comprehensively reviewed to address barriers to its sustainability and to identify actions that will strengthen its capacity and capability as a trusted source of key research evidence for senior policymakers and ministers.
4. A cross-departmental task force, augmented by strategic workforce specialists, should be established to explore possible pathways for Ireland to move to a more knowledge-based civil-service model, with the necessary specialist expertise to meet the requirements for more complex policy formulation and decision-making and for improved delivery of services to the public.

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