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Introduction: An important national resource – strengthening evidence-informed policy-making across the Irish public service

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Introduction

An important priority for *Administration* during 2026, as identified by its Editorial Advisory Committee, was to review developments in respect of evidence-informed policy-making (EIPM) in the Irish public service. In issues 74(2) and 74(3) we have sought to provide a comprehensive overview of why EIPM matters, to review recent developments in respect of EIPM in Ireland and to make recommendations for further improving how government and the research community can engage with each other in order to improve policy-making.

EIPM refers to the process whereby wide-ranging and multi-disciplinary sources of research evidence and knowledge are consulted before making a decision to plan, implement, or alter public policies

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and programmes in support of the delivery of public services (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2020). The focus for this evidence is most usually the civil and public servants who are tasked with analysing policy and presenting options, sometimes accompanied by recommendations, to politicians. It is widely accepted that it is our politicians who have the constitutional obligation and electoral mandate to decide what policies will best achieve their political objectives. However, it is also recognised that the policy-making process is enhanced by using the best available evidence and that it is the role and responsibility of public servants, in this context often termed 'policymakers', to support them in their task (Government of Ireland, 2025).

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

In the first of the two issues (*Administration*, 74(2), June 2026), we sought to review the structures and components in place in Ireland to support EIPM. Contributions, in particular from the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science; the Department of the Taoiseach; and the Department of Education and Youth; sought to highlight how relations with higher education and other research institutions is now afforded a higher level of prominence within government, and also, that there are now structures and processes in place to promote more systematic engagement. However, it was acknowledged that policy development and implementation are highly complex, or as described in the literature, 'messy', because it is inherently political (Cairney, 2016). Drawing on the civil service *Policy Handbook* (Government of Ireland, 2025), Smyth, Donnelly and Vaughan (2026) highlight the need for policy analysis to encompass considerations as to what is feasible or implementable, and also what will be politically and popularly acceptable.

The issue also includes a perspective on how evidence is used to inform policy-making within the European Union (EU), which provides a helpful counterpoint to the Irish experience (Riordan,

2026). Other important perspectives are from the higher education sector, on the role of knowledge brokerage initiatives in bridging between the public service and research institutions (Ó Foghlú et al., 2026); and also, from Ruane (2026), on the need to build capability across the public service, both in terms of policy analysis and also in respect of specific policy areas.

Overall, the issue concluded that the foundations for stronger policy-making are now substantially in place, both at central government level and also within line departments. These conclusions are further revisited and developed in this second issue of the special edition of *Administration* on the theme of EIPM. Following on from an overview of the contributions, we summarise key themes emerging and set out ways forward to support better policy-making and implementation in Ireland.

Overview of this issue

In this second issue of the double-issue special edition, we seek to broaden out the national conversation and reflect the perspectives of a wider range of sectors, organisations and individuals that contribute to the development of EIPM in Ireland. In drawing on expertise, including that from the political system, local government and state-sponsored bodies, the issue provides important insights into the complex interactions that must take place in order to develop and implement policy. What is particularly encouraging is that a common theme emerging from all of these papers is the potential for better policy-making through developing stronger interactions between the policy-making community and the research community.

The first paper in this issue is from Denis Naughten, former TD and Minister for Communications, Climate Action and the Environment from 2016 to 2018 (Naughten, 2026). Drawing on his personal experience in government, Naughten examines how political considerations shape the use of research evidence in policy-making. Informed by three case studies, he shows why research, even where findings are uncertain or inconclusive, is crucial for decision-making. The paper calls for research evidence to be transparent, accessible and relevant, so that the political system can make more equitable and effective policy decisions, while also strengthening the connection between the research community and government, and improving public outcomes.

The second paper, by Emer Cahill and Peter Clifford from Research Ireland, explores the important role which research funders play in supporting EIPM. Many public bodies commission and support research and research-related activities. However, the establishment of Research Ireland in 2024, following a merger of the two former government agencies, the Irish Research Council and Science Foundation Ireland, is intended to ensure a more coordinated approach to engagement between researchers and government. As Cahill and Clifford comment (2026, p. 33):

The question is no longer whether research should inform policy, but how public institutions can organise that relationship more effectively. As policy problems become more cross-cutting in nature, the value of evidence-informed policy-making depends not only on academic quality, but on whether institutions can connect expertise to decision-making in timely, trusted and usable ways. This has implications not just for universities and researchers, but for the design of funding programmes, fellowship schemes, departmental partnerships and evidence-support functions across the state.

The paper is important and timely as it highlights how Research Ireland and other research funders can work together to play a significant role in shaping the contribution of research evidence to policy-making.

Another important perspective emerges from the paper by Steve MacFeely and Ashley Ward from the OECD, which examines the evolving role of official statistics in support of policy-making and identifies emerging challenges due, for example, to technological and political changes (MacFeely & Ward, 2026). Drawing on their experience in a range of organisations, including the Irish Central Statistics Office, the Office for National Statistics in the United Kingdom, and now the OECD, MacFeely and Ward distinguish between evidence-informed and data-driven decision-making, warning that the latter may imply a technocratic shift in which data appears to substitute for human judgement. Citing both Irish and international examples, the paper considers the challenges facing official statistics, including data access, public trust, communication, artificial intelligence and the post-truth information environment. It concludes that official statistics remain essential to democratic government, however, it is important that they should inform decisions, clarify

trade-offs and support accountability, while remaining subordinate to context, deliberation and judgement.

Another important perspective in this issue relates to the local government sector which has two complementary papers that place a focus on this somewhat less-discussed aspect of government in Ireland. With less than 10 per cent of public expenditure at local government level, government in Ireland is highly centralised (Callanan, 2018). Compared with other EU member states, only a limited range of functions are devolved to the sector, and local authorities largely operate within the framework of national policy. However, in areas within their remit, for example planning or the socio-economic development of the local authority area, they do have autonomy to develop policy (Ó Riordáin, 2025). The structures primarily tasked with policy development at local government level are strategic policy committees (SPCs), envisaged in *Better Local Government* (Department of the Environment, 1996) and formally established under the Local Government Act, 2021.

In the first of two papers reviewing how research evidence supports local government policy-making, David Healy (2026) examines the contribution which SPCs have made. One noteworthy feature, which he highlights, is that SPCs include non-elected representatives, drawn from sectoral interests, including from agriculture, business and the community and voluntary sector. As a result, SPCs were designed to promote local participation and relevance. However, Healy discusses ongoing challenges in SPCs realising their full policy potential, including ambiguity around their scope, capacity constraints, lack of vision and ultimately, the continued dominance of central government.

The second local government paper, by Bernie O'Donoghue Hynes (2026) from the Local Government Management Agency, maintains the focus on local authority performance, commenting that the capacity of local government to influence and shape policy has increased. Access to quality evidence along with increased engagement by local government sectoral representatives during policy development and review, has resulted in policy decisions grounded in valuable evidence generated from local-authority data. This article looks at how the Local Government Management Agency has supported the local government sector and its representative group, the County and City Management Association, to increase their capacity to generate and utilise data-driven evidence to influence policy development and implementation.

It is not yet clear how the tensions inherent in Ireland's central and local decision-making structures will eventually be resolved but it is clear that a proactive and concerted approach will be required to implement the recommendations of the Local Democracy Task Force report and implementation plan, published in July 2026 (Government of Ireland, 2026a & b). Recommendations in the report include initiatives to enhance the role of councillors, strengthen local decision-making and deepen engagement between communities and local government. Robust research evidence will be critical to supporting policy in respect of this reform agenda.

The penultimate article in the issue, by Deiric Ó Broin (2026), is from the perspective of third-level research institutes. The article describes the establishment of a new, third-level, policy engagement unit, the Dublin City University Policy Lab, and reviews the experience of those involved in the initiative on both the university and government sides. The paper further examines the adoption of a particular pedagogy, challenge-based learning, and the use of a specific research synthesis instrument, the rapid evidence assessment. Ultimately, the paper highlights the issues that arise when working to bring university-initiated research closer to public policy-making and highlights the benefits of such efforts and the lessons learned by those involved with the programme.

The final paper, by Colette Darcy and Denis O'Brien (2026) of the Institute of Public Administration, focuses on the capability of public servants which they identify as central to improving policy-making. They argue that access to research, data and analysis is essential, but evidence only improves outcomes when public servants have the skills, judgement, leadership and organisational support to use it effectively – a point also strongly made in the MacFeeley and Ward paper. Ultimately, they conclude that building a more evidence-informed public service requires investment in analytical capability, policy capability and leadership capability. The paper sets out a very thoughtful approach to moving towards what they call 'an evidence-capable [Irish] public service', mobilising a range of existing resources.

Key themes emerging and conclusions

The objective of the double issue special edition of *Administration* is to review developments in respect of EIPM in the Irish public service and

to make recommendations for ways forward. In recent years, and especially since the financial crisis of 2008 to 2011, the need for policy to be informed by robust and independent evidence has been recognised. The coronavirus pandemic further reinforced the importance of policymakers preparing for unanticipated events and for policy to be informed by solid research evidence.

The 2021 publication by the Royal Irish Academy and the Irish Research Council, *Research for Public Policy: An Outline Roadmap* (Doyle, Riordan & Carey, 2021), reviewed EIPM in an Irish context and proposed three pathways to support progress. These are building bridges between the policy-making and research communities, joining up and scaling up good practice where it already exists, and a focus on knowledge management and knowledge brokerage.

Over the ensuing years, EIPM has come to be recognised in Ireland, as in other countries, as a distinct policy area. Formal structures have been established at central government level, and to a certain extent at regional and local authority levels, to support a more systematic approach to engagement between policymakers, research funders, research intermediaries and the research community. These developments have been mirrored, albeit to varying degrees, in the higher education sector and among public-sector research funders. So, what, at first glance, might appear to be a range of disparate activities across sectors are, in fact, part of a vibrant network working towards the objective of a more strategic approach to EIPM and, ultimately, better policy outcomes.

As evidenced across the two issues of this special edition of *Administration*, considerable progress has been made in developing and supporting a more evidence-based approach to policy-making in Ireland. The research presented in these articles suggest a maturing EIPM system, achieved in a relatively short period of time. This positive body of work provides a strong foundation on which to build as we now turn our attention to the next phase of activity.

In the introduction to *Administration*, 74(2), we concluded that (Doyle & O'Riordan, 2026, p. 9):

In Ireland, the building blocks for a stronger approach to EIPM are now largely in place, both at a central government level and within line departments. However, structures and processes while necessary are not sufficient. The next phase of activity will

need to focus on leadership and cultural considerations to ensure that research is central to policy-making because, put simply, it improves the ability of governments to solve problems.

Picking up this theme, it is clear that challenges remain given the reality that building EIPM as a national asset requires time and sustained investment and therefore needs to be considered over a medium- to longer-term time horizon. These challenges relate principally to leadership, coordination, and the mobilisation and alignment of resources across a range of sectors.

The key concluding message from this research initiative is that the focus on structures and processes, which supported progress in the first phase of building EIPM, will now need to be complemented by an emphasis on people and their capabilities. It will require a much more strategic focus on the leadership and cultural aspects of EIPM, as identified in Darcy and O'Brien's concluding paper. Building on the good relations already developed, there needs to be ongoing collaboration among the key players around this agenda.

This publication is particularly timely as a number of initiatives are now converging and have the potential to make a substantial contribution to the quality of policy-making in Ireland over the longer term. These include the work being done in relevant government departments, the complementary work being done in various parts of the higher education sector, in the Oireachtas, and in the various funding organisations, including Research Ireland. It is clear that there is potential for greater coordination of activity within and across the various sectors and that there is scope for better alignment of activity and resources.

Ireland, led by the Department of Further, Higher Education, Innovation and Science, is also currently participating in an EU multi-country research project on EIPM. This research represents a further opportunity to assess EIPM in Ireland and signpost further action, and will be published in 2027.

Finally, we hope that the information and perspectives set out in the two issues of this special edition of *Administration* will contribute to the ongoing development of EIPM as a valuable national asset in Ireland. We are immensely grateful to colleagues for sharing their wisdom and experience with us.

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