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The political perspective on effective approaches to evidence for policy

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Abstract

This paper examines how political considerations shape the use of research evidence in policy-making. It stresses that systematic and transparent approaches are essential for presenting complex issues and the best available evidence to ministers. By categorising policymakers and proposing that researchers have ethical responsibilities to engage beyond academia, the paper emphasises the need for the ‘three Cs’, citizens, context and clarity, as essential criteria for communicating evidence to decision makers. Using real-world examples, it shows why research, even where findings are uncertain or inconclusive, is crucial for decision-making. The paper calls for evidence to be transparent, accessible and relevant, so that ministers can make more equitable and effective policy decisions, strengthening the connection between research and policy systems, and improving public outcomes.

Keywords: evidence-informed, policy decisions, policy-making, political considerations, systematic, transparent.

Introduction

One of the most common criticisms politicians make of the research community is that researchers do not always understand the pressures

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facing those who have to make decisions on complex public problems. Politicians often have to act with limited time, competing demands and imperfect information. The purpose of this paper is to give researchers an insight into how political considerations shape the use of evidence in policy-making. It is intended to help those who want to engage with the policy system understand what is likely to be heard, understood and utilised by politicians. A stronger understanding of political dynamics can help researchers present evidence in a more policy-relevant way, and at a point in the policy process when it can have the greatest impact (Karcher et al., 2022).

This matters because the research community has much to offer. Research evidence can help politicians weigh up options, identify practical solutions and design policies that are more equitable and more likely to address the problem at hand. Although trained as a research scientist, I have spent my working life in national politics, where I have tried to apply a scientific approach to political and policy challenges. This was particularly important when Minister for Communications, Climate Action and the Environment, which incorporated energy, from 2016 to 2018. During that period, as minister, I was responding to Brexit, negotiating major European Union (EU) climate and energy files, and moving Ireland's first Clean Air Strategy from aspiration towards delivery. Drawing on that experience, this paper uses real-world examples to show how researchers can engage more effectively with decision makers, including when findings are uncertain or inconclusive. This is essential if we are to strengthen the connection between research and policy, and improve outcomes for the public.

Researchers often refer to the fact that they have presented their research to the 'policymakers' who have then failed to act on the empirical evidence. When asked to elaborate, you soon find out that they have spoken to just one politician or contributed to a single consultation process, and as a result, researchers express frustration about why policymakers have failed to act. In response, the following three points apply. Firstly, if researchers failed to secure an academic publication after a single journal submission, would they cast their work aside and move on? No. Yet, they take such an approach to engagement with 'policymakers'. Secondly, the word 'research' is interpreted very differently depending on who you are talking to and what you are talking about. For a policymaker, 'research' ranges from a media vox-pop to an academic peer-reviewed study, and 'evidence' is information presented before a parliamentary committee. To avoid

confusion, the phrase ‘research evidence’ is used in this paper and refers to academically robust, peer-reviewed research. Thirdly, as we all know, ‘scientist’ is a very broad term ranging from those practising pure sciences to the social sciences. The same is true of policymakers of which there are at least three distinct and broad categories – those who draft, those who decide, and those who deliver on policy – each with different research evidence needs.

Those who draft policy are the ‘permanent government’: the civil servants, EU Commission staff, and public officials who draft policy proposals, usually including some consultation with experts, stakeholders and the public. They then present that draft policy to the decision makers, initially to a minister, then to cabinet via the minister and to the parliament via the government for approval or in the case of the EU system, the draft policy is presented to the EU Council of Ministers of the 27 Member States and separately to the EU Parliament for co-decision. If this policy is adopted, those responsible for delivering its provisions are usually public officials, within government departments; public agencies, such as the Health Service Executive in Ireland; or regulators, such as the Commission for the Regulation of Utilities.

All three categories have very different needs, and this paper will only focus on the decision makers, the politicians who are elected by the people to make decisions on public policy on their behalf.

Following this introductory section, the paper first reviews why research evidence matters to decision makers and how it can inform the policy-making process. It then presents the three Cs (citizens, context and clarity) as a practical framework for improving how research is shared with decision makers. The paper then considers three case studies: planning guidelines for wind farms, energy poverty, and the challenges faced by people managing post-coronavirus disease 2019 condition (long Covid) symptoms. These examples show that decision makers use research evidence for different purposes, and that they access it in different ways depending on the issue, the timing and the decision they have to make. The final section sets out conclusions and recommendations on how the relationship between researchers and decision makers could be improved.

The importance of research evidence

I firmly believe that both the research and policy communities are losing out because of the combined failure to turn research evidence

into action (Naughten, 2025a). Moreover, I believe that the research community has an ethical responsibility to broaden its engagement beyond scientific circles. Article 27 of the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations General Assembly, 1948) states that 'Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits'. As a result of both public and patient involvement, and public dissemination encouraged by funding programmes like Horizon Europe, people are sharing in scientific advancement. However, to fully take advantage of the benefits of scientific advancement, rigorous scientific research must make its way into public policy, informing the decisions that are made by governments ensuring that policies are not just effective but more importantly that they are both equitable and just. This underscores the ethical responsibility, on the one hand, of the research community to engage with the policy system, and, on the other hand, of the policy community to reach out to the research community to seek its assistance.

There is also the right of the public to know the source of this research evidence and the transparency of policy-making. Experience of drafting policy and legislation as a member of the opposition front bench and of overseeing it as a government minister, leads me to believe that it is not practical to apply academic-style citations to policy publications. Instead, I suggest that an appendix be attached to the policy paper listing the sources reviewed during the drafting process. Furthermore, embedding research evidence within the policy process through such appendices helps institutionalise a research-evidence-based approach (Parnham et al., 2023).

Focusing solely on decision makers in the policy-making process leaves a range of motivations for both ministers and parliamentarians to use research evidence. It is important to remember that the politicians – the decision makers – can use research in a range of ways: (i) to assist with making a decision, 'substantive' use; (ii) to support a decision or policy approach already taken, 'strategic' use; or (iii) to alter or refine an already established policy, 'elaborative' use (Whiteman, 1985; Akerlof et al., 2024). Many researchers fully recognise the value of using research evidence in a 'substantive' way before decisions are made. From my experience as a minister and policymaker, this is the point in the process when the evidence is at its most valuable, because it can directly shape the options considered, the trade-offs assessed, and the final decision taken.

However, it should not be ignored that the ‘strategic’ and ‘elaborative’ use is also important, not just for a minister but for the Oireachtas more generally. The latter two uses are highly effective in building trust and long-term relationships between researchers and decision makers or policymakers.

Trust is critical when advising on policy outcomes, particularly when the research is uncertain. At such times, policymakers and, even more so, decision makers rely on the relationships they already have with the research community and the ability they have to be able to sit down and have an open and frank conversation with a researcher over a cup of coffee. In interviews with members of parliament across the world who had utilised research as part of policy development, this open, trusted conversation over a cup of coffee was found to be by far the most effective tool for presenting research evidence to policymakers (Naughten, 2025b).

Let us take the example of a government minister and their use of research evidence within the policy process. Firstly, they could use the research evidence for substantive purposes to either direct or formulate policy through their engagement with the policy-making officials within the department. Secondly, this research evidence could be used for strategic purposes, as the minister must convince both their party colleagues and their cabinet colleagues of the merits of the proposal before a policy is adopted by the government. Thirdly, having secured government approval, the minister must then secure the support of both parliament on the one hand (which may be through legislation, a funding allocation, or a government decision which is scrutinised) and public opinion on the other of the merits of the proposed policy, which again will require strategic use of research evidence. This may also include elaborative use, should the draft proposal be altered before final adoption, or alternatively, when a minister decides to review already established policy. Again, this research evidence is likely to be utilised during each of the three engagement phases outlined above.

Not only can research evidence be used for many purposes, but how it is presented can vary to meet the needs of each audience. For example, the policy recommendation made to me as minister in 2016, based on research commissioned by the North South Ministerial Council through the *Residential Solid Fuel and Air Pollution Study* (Abbott et al., 2016), was to extend the smoky coal ban nationwide. The recommendation was not just to extend the ban nationwide but also to expand the types of fuel covered by such a ban based on their

impact on air quality, including reductions in nitrous oxide emissions and climate co-benefits from reduced energy use in the residential energy sector. However, when I brought this proposal to cabinet, I did not focus solely on the air-quality findings themselves. In addition, I framed the issue around the public health benefits of action. The research estimated that up to 2,000 deaths per year across the island of Ireland were as a result of particulate matter and nitrous oxide emissions from the burning of solid fuel, which had significant consequences for families, the health service and the wider economy.

When the public announcement was made, the focus was on the positive impact that this policy would have on the one in five children in Ireland with asthma. The same piece of research is used differently and presented differently, depending on the audience.

The 3Cs of research evidence for policy – citizens, context and clarity

With about 3.4 million academic papers published each year in the fields of science and engineering, many behind paywalls, the reality is that very little is read outside the specific academic field of expertise, even within the research community. I would argue that, in an era of artificial intelligence, if research, particularly publicly funded research, is locked behind paywalls, its value will be immediately reduced. Its usefulness to the interdisciplinary research community will be limited, its ability to impact policy weakened, and, as a result, its usefulness to the public, who paid for much of it, will be significantly diminished, thus failing to meet the ethical responsibility referenced earlier. While making this research accessible to artificial intelligence is a positive development, as we know, its availability depends only on the prompt fed into that large language model.

Over my years in political life, in government or in parliament, most research evidence that has come across my desk has fallen short because it has failed to pass three fundamental tests. Moreover, in all likelihood, if it had not come across my desk, it may never have been fed into the policy process at all. That is because politicians have many demands on their time and attention, and, along with public servants, face many competing policy priorities. In my case, I invested the time because I could see the merit in the piece of research evidence, or as the head of one public agency put it, ‘we’ve never had a minister read our reports’.

It should never be down to relying on a piece of research evidence making it to the correct desk by chance. If research evidence can pass the ‘three Cs test’, then it is far more likely to be utilised in the policy-making process, and the research evidence that can move political decisions is the research evidence that resonates with policymakers and decision makers. The three Cs are:

1. **The citizen test:** Can the research evidence impact be traced back to real people? Who does this help, and how quickly?
2. **The context test:** Does research evidence fit in with the current policy goals, be they climate, competitiveness, cost of living, etc.?
3. **The clarity test:** Is the research evidence being laid out clearly to non-experts?

The most important test is the citizen test, and yet it is the one most often missed by those presenting research evidence. When we talk about policy-making, we are talking about ‘public policy-making’ and yet that word ‘public’ is the one that is so often ignored when presenting research evidence for policy. This is not always practical or feasible, but the researcher who can at least ‘meet halfway’ by presenting their research output from the perspective of a citizen is far more likely to secure policy engagement. I have argued that one way for researchers to frame this is through the concept of human security. This concept originates from a 1994 United Nations Development Programme report (United Nations Development Programme, 1994) and is a paradigm that shifts the focus of security from the state (military/territorial) to the individual, aiming to protect people from critical and pervasive threats to their survival, livelihood and dignity, it encourages us to place individuals at the centre of our problem-solving approach; the impact on people’s lives, their safety, health or day-to-day needs.

Unfortunately, in most instances, as researchers are experts in their fields, they tend to present their research evidence as if they are doing so to other experts, and thus fail to recognise that policymakers and decision makers have different masters with their focus firmly on public policy, and the public being a key part of their considerations.

Last year, I published a paper on how politicians could rebuild their relationship with the electorate, as public trust is strained and traditional engagement methods feel increasingly out of step (Naughten, 2025c). The paper is based on applying citizen science

tools to the concept of human security, thereby allowing politicians to foster deeper, more productive relationships with constituents, built on listening, dialogue and trust. Citizen science tools can strengthen human security by giving people direct ways to identify local risks and feed that information into the policy-making process. They enable two-way engagement, empowering citizens, building trust and democratic participation by involving people in shaping solutions to the insecurities they face. the lens of human security can be used to reframe research evidence as follows:

- Instead of ‘Our model shows X’, human security can help to reframe it as ‘Here is what this means for people’s safety, well-being or resilience’.
- Connect findings to lived experience: health, climate, inequality, energy, food, mobility.
- Emphasise how research evidence can empower communities and policymakers to act.

This concept can help align research evidence with the values that drive political decision-making.

Secondly, the context test, which is the most basic, should be applied. If the issue is not on the political or policy agenda, then it will be very difficult to get the research evidence considered in the first instance. However, this is not as difficult as it might seem. There are many ways in which a government sets out its political and policy programme, and it is usually broad enough for most research evidence to fit into this agenda. Identifying the policy agenda, where the process is at, and mechanisms to feed into that process are far more accessible at European Commission level with its public consultation and feedback portal (European Commission, 2026) which allows both citizens and stakeholders to directly contribute to the policy process. On this portal, any member of the public can register their interest in a particular topic and they will then be informed when this comes onto the European Commission policy agenda. At the national level, this is not as accessible, however, in this instance, the most useful resource is the Oireachtas website² where the parliamentary record can be searched and the official reply from a minister will set out the departmental policy position on that topic, at that particular point in time. This can then be used to anchor the research evidence to be

² www.oireachtas.ie

presented to the decision maker. I have yet to come across a minister, advisor, politician or public servant who will not consider a piece of research evidence that meets the context test if it also meets the other two tests. In the era of social media, where attention spans have been shortened and where there are many other distractions, connection to current policy questions needs to be immediately evident.

Timing is also critical, with the research evidence aligned to real decision points in the policy process. These decision points are dictated by the government agenda, including its legislative priorities, departmental objectives, and ministerial goals that are also dependent on the point in time in the electoral cycle. For example, the government may initiate a public consultation within twelve months of an impending general election. In such circumstances, it is unlikely that the policy will be adopted during the term of that government, so attempting to engage with the incumbent minister will be of little benefit. While meeting the context test is critical in terms of the decision maker committing the time to consider what the research evidence is stating, unless they can make the link to citizens then the decision maker is very likely to move on quickly.

Thirdly, the clarity test is also affected by diminished attention spans. While it should be evident that the research evidence needs to be clear and understandable, this is not always the case. Engaging with policymakers is different to engaging with academic colleagues, and quantity will never compensate for absolute simplicity and clarity. A clear message can be understood not just by academics but also by non-academic policymakers and decision makers. It is important to be cognisant that in today's public service, most policymakers are non-experts; they are public servants with broad general expertise who move around from division to division and department to department. But clarity is also required because no one involved in public policy development makes a policy decision in isolation, whether a minister or a public servant; so, there is a need to be equipped with language to explain the research evidence to their non-expert colleagues. In the case of a minister, they may need to present this research evidence to the principal officer responsible for the policy area, explaining why this piece of the policy jigsaw is important, and the public official needs to understand the policy implications of the research evidence to effectively incorporate it into the policy approach. Or as outlined above, the minister may be trying to convince political colleagues or the public of the merits of the policy approach, incorporating this piece of research evidence.

In both instances, if they do not have a short, concise and clear message, then the research evidence will be confusing, and the policy will fail to progress. Therefore, if the researcher, an expert in their field, cannot explain their research output simply, then neither will the politician. Typically, the politician will make their mind up in respect of the research very quickly on hearing or reading the researcher's explanation and if it is not accessible they will not engage further. As I point out to researchers who want to communicate effectively with policymakers, academics themselves will only read the abstract of an academic paper to decide whether to invest time in the full paper, so why would they expect policymakers or decision makers to be any different? In this instance, the policy outcome must be upfront and clear rather than placing the focus on the methodology.

Political engagement with research evidence

In my experience, researchers are reluctant to engage in the policy process when the research evidence is not definitive and when the uncertainties surrounding it would be used to inform policy. Politicians constantly make judgement calls, and when they do not have research evidence or policy advice to rely on, they revert to form (i.e. their political ideology). So even uncertain research findings or advice can be helpful in weighing up options, and this was very clear during the Covid-19 pandemic, when the research evidence was very uncertain (Horgan-Jones & O'Connell, 2022).

In reality, all research evidence comes with a level of uncertainty, and when difficult decisions have to be made, which are going to result in some level of societal pushback, then for decision makers, the easy option is to argue that the research evidence is not conclusive, using it as a justification to delay any policy action. How many times have we witnessed such an approach to climate or environmental measures?

In business and in life, people hedge. Politicians do the same. So being able to identify aspects of the research evidence that can provide certainty about the outcomes that matter to decision makers or to even give decision makers sight of uncertain research evidence before a decision is made, is far better than not providing any at all. Even with its caveats, research evidence may help moderate political ideology towards a more practical and effective approach. The reality is that, in the absence of research evidence, when decision makers are forced to act, political ideology will be the primary frame for decision-making, sometimes with far-reaching consequences for society.

It is important to remember that the most difficult decision is one made on a blank page, that is, where no options are presented. In unique circumstances, such as the Covid-19 pandemic and Brexit, any research evidence, no matter how uncertain, was far better at stimulating action than trying to decide with just a blank page on the desk. My advice to officials or those who contacted me with a problem or issue was that it was better to come up with a proposed approach, no matter how flawed, than not, because, at the very least, you have a starting point that could be considered, revised and redrafted. When trying to resolve an issue, the only 'expertise' could lie with the official working in the specific policy area up to that point, or with a person impacted by a particular failed policy approach. In such circumstances, having access to research evidence, even if uncertain, helps to invigorate the problem-solving process.

While this is all theoretical, I want to set out four applied examples of uncertain or incomplete evidence which was instrumental in moving the policy agenda in a positive direction.

Planning guidelines for wind farms

One of the first policy challenges that I faced as minister was to fulfil the Programme for Government commitment to introduce revised wind farm planning guidelines within the first six months of government. This commitment was borne out of homeowners' frustration that the existing planning guidelines were outdated, particularly given the increase in the number and scale of wind turbines. These communities were demanding that wind turbines would, at a minimum, be set back 1,500 m from their homes, with greater setbacks for larger turbines.

The department officials' view was that moving to an absolute setback of 1,500 m would effectively shut down industry expansion and be contrary to government policy on renewable wind energy generation. Their recommendation was to move from an advisory setback of 500 m to an absolute setback distance. As a minority government, such a proposal would struggle to secure government approval and would certainly fail to secure majority support in Dáil Éireann. Families faced several technical issues, including shadow flicker and noise. Shadow flicker was straightforward and easily resolved through technology, but noise was more complex and unique to the topography of the lands between the turbine and the home and to how the impacted homes were constructed.

The advice provided from officials was that even accepting the public's demand for a setback of 1,500 m would not resolve the noise problem for some families. This was seen by the department as an impasse that could not be overcome, but to me it was necessary to deal with the issue if we were to credibly address the public's concerns. Through my own research, I was fortunate to come across a then just-published book, *Wind Farm Noise: Measurement, Assessment, and Control* (Hansen et al., 2017). The book and specific chapters were useful in providing me not only with a solution but with an alternative method: using noise monitoring standards for homes as the basis for establishing setback distances rather than a blanket distance, an approach that could effectively address nuisance noise. Furthermore, the work by Hansen et al. provided a solid basis for defending the approach to be taken, which resulted in the newspaper headline 'Windfarms "louder than a bird" to be shut minister' (Melia, 2017) – the draft guidelines set out a maximum noise level of 43 decibels (a bird call being about 44 decibels). In the interview, I pointed out that 'the primary test now is not setback, it's sound' with a zero-tolerance approach to nuisance sound. Unfortunately, while those draft planning guidelines agreed in 2017 were the most advanced in the world, to date, they have yet to be introduced by the Irish Government.

Climate modelling

I took office as minister in 2016 just after Ireland's energy white paper (Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources, 2015) was published, and was immediately thrown into EU negotiations on the revision of the Energy Efficiency Directive and the Renewable Energy Directive. Within weeks, Brexit arrived, and with it a mountain of energy security risks. Then, in August 2016, climate was added to my portfolio. That brought with it the implementation of the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act, 2015, negotiations on the EU Effort Sharing Regulation, a revision of the EU Emissions Trading System, and the moving of Ireland's first Clean Air Strategy from aspiration to reality.

So, I needed all the help I could get, and as a minister, one of the tools that helped in choosing, defending and delivering on these policy challenges was the clear modelling provided by a research team at University College Cork (Ó Gallachóir et al., 2024). The team had developed the Irish TIMES model, a simple visual model designed to

inform energy and climate mitigation policies in Ireland, which paired numbers with consequences.

This was crucial not just in helping me, as a non-technical expert, understand the policy implications, but also in helping me convince cabinet colleagues, some of whom would be on the receiving end of political pain for the approach that would be taken, and in explaining it to both parliament and the media.

But the model did more than guide national choices. During the 2030 climate and energy negotiations at EU level, by showing the University College Cork graphic to my German ministerial colleague I was able to clearly explain Ireland's trajectory and our constraint, and with their support I was able to secure agreement at the Council of the EU Ministers on the phasing of our trajectory to 2030 which had implications for the Irish agriculture transition, as well as broader public acceptability. This modelling did not replace political judgement, but it sharpened it. I needed to weigh up many moving parts, and while graphs alone were not responsible for the decision being made, they did provide a clearer picture of the risks inherent in any policy approach.

Energy poverty

Occasionally, ministers commission their own research evidence to support the policy agenda. After initiating the Warmth and Wellbeing Scheme to address energy poverty and its impact on health through home retrofitting, the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine was commissioned to conduct an evaluation. While the results were finally published in 2025 (Hutchinson et al., 2025), the preliminary data showed that the investment was alleviating pressure on health services by decreasing the need for general practitioner visits, emergency department admissions, and hospital stays for respiratory conditions. This data was used, in part, to help make the case to the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform to secure a commitment in the ten-year capital plan, Project Ireland 2040, to deep retrofit 45,000 homes per annum (Government of Ireland, 2018).

Emerging health challenge

In June 2021, the issue of long Covid first came to my attention, and I brought the topic to Dáil Éireann in September 2021, but at that time, there was very little information available about what long Covid was, its prevalence or the potential demands which would be placed on the

health service in efforts to support people with conditions associated with long Covid. As a result of this information deficit, I commissioned a briefing paper on the topic from the Oireachtas Library & Research Service, seeking to provide insight into the medical implications of long Covid. The briefing paper, which examined the definition, incidence, and health service needs relating to the condition long Covid, as available in the academic and health literature up to that point, was subsequently published (Timoney, 2022). This was one of the first papers of its type globally published on the topic and while there was a significant level of uncertainty, it did facilitate me bringing this to the floor of parliament and securing a response on long Covid from the Minister for Health, which did at the very least provide an acknowledgement to sufferers that this was at least a condition that was recognised by the state at a time when many patients were obtaining a sceptical response from medical professionals (Dáil Éireann, 2022). In this instance, even though there was significant uncertainty, it facilitated a credible parliamentary debate on the available evidence, which was subsequently utilised to help progress health, and welfare supports for people with conditions associated with long Covid.

So, despite the lack of conclusive research evidence from the commissioned research, even preliminary indications could be used to help move the policy agenda in the right direction.

In all four instances outlined above, the research evidence was never conclusive, and it was for different reasons, impossible to be conclusive, but this research evidence, with its caveats, was critical at key times in helping to move the policy agenda in the right direction in order to benefit the lives of people, be that families living close to windfarms, farmers or people with chronic illnesses.

Next steps

While progress among policymakers and researchers has been slow, public funding is now clearly prioritising stronger connections between research output and policy impact. Both recent strategies from Research Ireland (2026) and the Health Research Board (2026) unequivocally commit to transforming research evidence into actionable evidence for policy. Furthermore, the proposed Regulation for the new EU Horizon Europe 2028–2034 research and innovation framework declares it ‘shall actively promote the use of the results of publicly funded research and of scientific evidence in policymaking

processes at all levels, fostering stronger links between research, innovation, and the development of evidence-informed public policies' (European Commission, 2025).

From the policymaker's perspective, the *Policy Handbook* from the Department of the Taoiseach (2025) outlines the 'three pillars of policy development', the third being 'legitimacy' which raises the questions: 'Are there opportunities for collaboration with research bodies? Are research or academic bodies engaged in this policy area? Can they contribute to the development of the policy?' Furthermore, the civil service, led by the Department of the Taoiseach, is actively engaged in delivering upon the three pillars of policy development and as a result promoting wider participation with the research community.

To help fulfil this, government must specify its research evidence requirements and nurture ongoing collaboration with research providers. Public bodies should publish and regularly update statements of future research priorities (Doyle, 2021) and actively encourage engagement with the public consultation process as well as the innovative pre-legislative scrutiny process within the Oireachtas (Naughten, 2025d) to include the perspectives from the research community. This should coincide with reducing dependency on expensive consultancies and establishing enduring partnerships with higher education institutions and independent think-tanks. Secondments, joint appointments, and strategic alliances can ensure expertise circulates in both directions between academia and government, strengthening capacity within government and deepening researchers' understanding of policy-making.

Over the past two decades, higher education institutions have invested heavily in campus-based innovation hubs that foster startups and entrepreneurship between academia and industry, and to a lesser extent, in science communication to the public. Yet, little funding has been provided to support the research community in integrating policy outcomes into project design or translating findings for policymakers into formats that meet the three Cs outlined earlier.

For its part, the government is addressing this historic gap by establishing the National Science Advice Forum to support the expanded role of Ireland's Government Science Advisor, as part of a plan to develop new research evidence advisory structures across government (Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, 2026). This will build on the work of the parliamentary research service in the Houses of the Oireachtas

(2025), which has, for more than two decades, delivered impartial research briefings to support the Dáil, Seanad, committees, and individual TDs and senators.

To bridge the gap between both the generation and use of research for policy, there needs to be greater visibility from a public policy and research community perspective on how research evidence is being used or not used. As outlined in the theme above ‘right to research evidence’, a first step to drive demand from the policy perspective could be to include, as an appendix to any policy paper, a list of the sources of the material reviewed during the drafting process. There are also opportunities to utilise databases that track the use of research evidence in public policy documents, such as Overton³ and the Sage Policy Profiles⁴. However, providing such transparency within the policy process will be of little use unless higher education institutions also provide greater recognition to academics for public policy engagement, for example, in the promotion process. Ensuring both transparency and academic recognition will help align research evidence generation with policy needs, reinforcing the aims discussed throughout this paper.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there is an ethical responsibility as well as a funding requirement to ensure that research evidence feeds into the policy-making process, but to do that, it must be presented in a manner that meets the needs of the particular policymaker who is utilising the research output, at the appropriate time in the policy process. This can be achieved by addressing the specific question that the policymaker is grappling with at that point in the policy process, while ensuring that the material is presented clearly, relevant to the policy agenda, and can resonate with citizens. It is also important to provide research evidence, even with caveats about its certainty, because without such inputs, politicians may be forced to make policy decisions based on flawed ideological assumptions, with long-term consequences for society.

On a day-to-day basis, decision makers, be they ministers or members of parliament, are scrambling to find solutions to the problems their constituents and citizens face. The frustrating reality is

³ www.overton.io/

⁴ <https://policyprofiles.sagepub.com/>

that they do not realise that, buried in research papers, are solutions informed by rigorous scientific research that can ensure policies are not just effective but also equitable and just. Instead, far too often they fall back to their own political ideology when faced with a complex challenge which can unfortunately have far-reaching consequences for society.

As a result, my strong advice to the research community is to show policymakers and decision makers what is available in terms of research evidence and what are its limits; and to clearly and concisely lay out how the research evidence could potentially benefit policy. Be brave, this is just the first step; the real impact will come from informal discussions over a cup of coffee with the policymaker or decision maker. Approach such engagements by embracing the diversity of opinions and perspectives that will follow during these encounters, which may not be tapped into in academic circles.

Everyone brings something to the table in the development and implementation of policy – cultivating long-term, trusting relations is at the heart of building bridges between the academic community and the policy-making community. While there is no doubt that both the research and policy communities now recognise the need to engage, there is still some way to go, and mechanisms that help each other understand the knowledge and policy generation processes will assist in the utilisation of research evidence in the policy process, which will ultimately benefit citizens who elect our governments and fund the research.

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