

Evidence-informed policy-making: The evolving role of national research funders

Emer Cahill & Peter Clifford
Research Ireland

Abstract

This article examines the evolving role of national research funders in strengthening evidence-informed policy-making, with particular attention on Research Ireland and its predecessor organisations, Science Foundation Ireland and the Irish Research Council. It situates the research–policy interface within Ireland’s changing research and innovation system and considers how funders can act not only as grant makers, but also as conveners, brokers and strategic system leaders. Drawing on the development of programmes, including COALESCE, New Foundations, the National Challenge Fund and the Public Sector Fellowship Programme, alongside experience from sectoral agencies, the article identifies the institutional conditions that support effective policy engagement. The analysis also highlights persistent challenges arising from differing research and policy timelines, fragmented networks, and the need to balance policy relevance with academic independence and foundational research. It argues that Research Ireland’s cross-disciplinary remit creates an opportunity to develop a more coherent national approach to research for policy.

Keywords: evidence-informed, national research funders, policy-making, research for policy, Research Ireland.

Introduction

Across Europe and internationally, governments are increasingly focused on how research can better support policy-making, strengthen

public services, and contribute to addressing complex societal challenges (European Commission, 2022a). Climate transition, demographic change, technological disruption, housing, health system reform, biodiversity loss, digital governance, and social cohesion all require policy responses informed by robust evidence, interdisciplinary expertise, and meaningful collaboration between researchers and decision makers. In this context, the relationship between research and policy has become vital to contemporary public governance.

For national funders such as Research Ireland, the implication is that future progress will depend as much on programme design and partnership models as on the content of individual calls. The establishment of Research Ireland represents an important moment in this trajectory. As Ireland's new competitive research and innovation funding agency, Research Ireland inherits and integrates traditions from both Science Foundation Ireland (SFI) and the Irish Research Council (IRC), bringing together funding for science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) and the arts, humanities and social sciences (AHSS) within a single institutional structure. This creates opportunities to further strengthen interdisciplinary collaboration, support policy-relevant research across domains, and develop more coherent national approaches to research engagement and impact.

This article explores the historical, current and emerging role of research for policy within the Irish context, viewed predominantly through the perspective of Research Ireland and its precursor organisations. It examines how ideas of engagement and co-creation have evolved within Irish research funding policy; how programmes and funding mechanisms have sought to support policy engagement; what has been learned about the research-policy interface through meta research and system reflection; and the areas of opportunity for Research Ireland to work with partners to shape this agenda into the future.

The article does not attempt to provide a comprehensive account of all forms of evidence-informed policy-making occurring within Ireland. Rather, its focus is on the role of non-sectoral national funders, specifically Research Ireland, as an enabler, convener and system actor within a broader research and policy ecosystem. In doing so, it seeks to contribute to ongoing discussions about how Ireland can continue to strengthen evidence-informed policy-making and maximise the societal value of publicly funded research.

Why research-informed policy matters now

The 2019 engaged research framework describes collaboration with relevant stakeholders as a means of enhancing the relevance and potential benefits of research (Campus Engage, 2019). Research-informed policy-making exemplifies the potential advantages of this approach by fostering sustained engagement between researchers and policymakers throughout the research process.

The recent emphasis on greater engagement between research and public policy has coincided with significant evolution within the Irish national research and innovation landscape. Over the past two decades, Ireland has invested substantially in building research capacity. At the same time, expectations regarding the societal relevance and impact of publicly funded research have grown considerably. In the 2020 Science in Ireland Barometer, which monitored the Irish public's attitudes to science, 85 per cent agreed that scientists have a responsibility to communicate their research to the public and 65 per cent agreed that people affected by research should have a say in how it is developed (Science Foundation Ireland, 2021).

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.

National research funders have played a significant role in shaping this evolution. The Health Research Board (HRB) in particular has long supported forms of policy-engaged research (HRB, n.d.). As a state agency with a dual mandate to both fund research and supply evidence, the HRB has developed a suite of targeted initiatives designed to embed collaboration between researchers, policymakers, clinicians and service users across the research life cycle. This is significant from a public administration perspective because it reflects a model in which a funder is not only financing research but also helping to organise the conditions under which evidence can be produced, interpreted and used.

Similarly, in the environmental field, research for policies is already well-established within sectoral agencies. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has used its research programmes to support evidence relevant to climate adaptation, air and water quality, the circular economy and environmental governance, linking its funded research more directly to regulatory and policy needs (EPA, 2021). The EPA's Climate Research Coordination Group established as a novel cross-government mechanism, has helped coordinate national climate research priorities and connect evidence needs across departments and public bodies (EPA, 2018). The EPA also pioneered practices subsequently adopted and developed by other sectoral funders, including structured consultation to shape research calls, sustained dialogue between researchers and policymakers, and research-policy seminar activity. Its support for an innovative secondment arrangement, enabling a civil servant to work within a university for two days each week, further illustrates the range of institutional mechanisms through which the EPA has sought to strengthen relationships, mutual understanding and knowledge exchange between research and policy.

At the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI), bridging research and policy is a core element of how the SEAI National Energy Research Development and Demonstration Funding Programme is designed and delivered (SEAI, 2026). It is a two-way system: not only supporting the generation of high-quality research but also ensuring that policy needs actively shape the funded research, and that research outputs are effectively translated back into the policy system and evidence informed decision-making.

On the 'policy-to-research' side, the funding priorities of SEAI are strongly aligned with national energy and climate objectives and with evolving policy needs. Each year, overarching research priority areas are defined in funding calls based on government strategies, international trends and emerging evidence needs. These are further refined through an annual structured, cross-government consultation process to identify specific research gaps through the cross-Government-Agency Energy Research Funders Forum that SEAI leads. This ensures that the research is both relevant and timely, while still maintaining space for bottom-up, investigator-led innovation through open calls.

On the 'research-to-policy' side, significant emphasis is placed on facilitating the uptake and use of research outputs. SEAI supports this through an annual suite of targeted activities, including policy briefs,

thematic dissemination events, and dedicated forums such as the ‘Connecting Research and Policy’ seminar series and the National Energy Research and Policy Conference. The agency also maintains the accessible National Energy Research Database to ensure that findings are visible and usable for policymakers and other stakeholders.

A key strength of SEAI in this space is as a relatively small, domain-specific funder embedded within the energy sector. This allows for the maintenance of close, direct relationships with both policymakers and the research community. As a result, SEAI can act not only as a funder, but also as a connector and translator between these communities, supporting more continuous and meaningful engagement than might be possible in larger, more diffuse systems.

At the same time, challenges remain – particularly around aligning the inherent timelines of research married to shorter policy horizons, and different appreciation of policy-informed contracted research and other wider relevant research where determining challenges is also valued in line with identifying successes. To address this, SEAI is increasingly exploring more flexible and responsive approaches to dissemination and engagement, to ensure that insights can inform policy when they are most needed.

Overall, the approach of SEAI is centred on maximising research impact by embedding policy relevance throughout the life cycle of funded research, and by actively supporting the connections needed for evidence to inform decision-making.

In agriculture and food, Teagasc (<https://teagasc.ie/about/>) has long operated through an applied model that combines research, education, advisory services and knowledge transfer, giving it a particularly strong institutional basis for connecting evidence to practice and policy, as well as using stakeholder engagement to inform research priorities. These examples demonstrate that research for policy is not only a question of project design, it is also shaped by organisational mandate, and the routine interaction between researchers, practitioners, regulators and departments.

Background to the formation of Research Ireland

The establishment of Research Ireland marked a significant structural development within Ireland’s research and innovation ecosystem. Arising from the amalgamation of Science Foundation Ireland and the Irish Research Council, the new agency reflects both an institutional

consolidation and a broader strategic ambition regarding the future direction of Irish research policy.

The origins of this development can be understood within the context of evolving national priorities around research, innovation and societal impact. Over the past two decades, Ireland has progressively developed a more mature and internationally connected research system. Significant public investment contributed to the development of research structures and processes, institutional capability, talent pipelines, and international competitiveness. Much of this growth occurred through the complementary but distinct mandates of SFI and the IRC.

Science Foundation Ireland played a central role in strengthening Ireland's research approach through sustained investment in bottom-up competitive STEM research awards, alongside targeted support for strategically oriented research capacity within STEM disciplines. SFI funding of oriented basic and applied research drove a step change in the scale and quality of research in Ireland. In line with Ireland's national research priorities, SFI investment focused on areas aligned with economic development, innovation and industry collaboration. Through its funding of large-scale research centres, strategic partnerships, challenge-based initiatives, and its commitment to supporting education and public engagement, SFI made a substantial contribution to enhancing Ireland's visibility and integration within global research and innovation networks.

The Irish Research Council, meanwhile, supported excellent fundamental research across all disciplines, including AHSS, while also placing growing emphasis on collaboration, interdisciplinarity and societal engagement. The IRC played an important role sustaining the early career pipeline of STEM and AHSS postgraduates and postdoctoral fellows, in sustaining disciplinary diversity within the Irish research system and in supporting forms of scholarship particularly relevant to culture, society, public policy and civic life.

Over time, however, there was increasing recognition that many contemporary societal challenges could not be addressed through disciplinary or sectoral silos alone. Issues such as climate adaptation, health inequalities, digital transformation, and energy transition require integrated perspectives drawing on scientific, technological, societal, ethical, cultural and behavioural expertise simultaneously.

The establishment of a unified agency aligned closely with the ambitions articulated in *Impact 2030: Ireland's Research and*

Innovation Strategy (Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, 2022), which emphasised coherence, collaboration, societal impact, and the integration of research and innovation across domains. The strategy recognised that Ireland's future competitiveness and societal resilience would depend not only on research excellence, but also on the system's ability to mobilise knowledge effectively in response to national and global challenges.

The formation of Research Ireland also signalled a strong commitment to maintaining and strengthening support for AHSS within the national research ecosystem. During periods of institutional transition, concerns often emerge regarding the potential marginalisation of some disciplines or areas perceived as less directly linked to economic outputs. However, the agency's new strategy, explicitly commits to 'building national capability across the breadth of disciplines; appropriately balancing our investment in research across large thematic initiatives and investigator led funding; recognising the importance of discovery research and enabling the space for new knowledge creation' (Research Ireland, 2026, p. 6). This commitment is paired with an understanding of the societal and behavioural dimensions of complex challenges, and acknowledgement of the need to strengthen the policy interface to address the ethical, cultural, and societal implications of scientific and technological change.

This interdisciplinary ambition is particularly relevant in the context of research for policy. Public policy challenges rarely fit neatly within disciplinary boundaries. Effective engagement with policymakers frequently requires researchers to combine technical expertise with insights into governance, behaviour, communication, ethics, implementation, societal and institutional dynamics. Bringing STEM and AHSS perspectives into closer institutional proximity therefore creates opportunities for more holistic and policy-relevant forms of research collaboration.

At the same time, it is important to recognise that research for policy depends fundamentally on the existence of strong foundational research capability. Not all research will or should have immediate policy application. Long-term investment in basic research, disciplinary excellence, and researcher development remains essential to sustaining the knowledge base from which future policy-relevant insights emerge. Research Ireland therefore inherits not only programmes focused explicitly on engagement and impact, but also a broader responsibility for stewarding a healthy, diverse and

internationally competitive research ecosystem. Strong foundations in research excellence are essential if research–policy co-creation is to deliver meaningful benefits. When effective, such collaboration can contribute to better public services, more evidence-informed policy, and improved societal outcomes, while also strengthening innovation, productivity, competitiveness and economic resilience.

The creation of Research Ireland reflects a broader transformation in the conceptualisation and governance of research systems. Rather than viewing research solely through the lens of academic outputs or economic innovation, there is growing recognition that research systems also contribute to societal learning, institutional capacity, democratic governance and public problem-solving. Within this context, national funders increasingly operate not simply as grant-awarding bodies, but as strategic actors shaping relationships, incentives, and cultures across the broader ecosystem.

What do we mean by ‘research for policy’?

Terms such as ‘evidence-informed policy’, ‘evidence-based policy’, ‘engaged research’, ‘knowledge exchange’, ‘co-creation’, ‘co-production’, and ‘policy engagement’ are increasingly common within research policy discourse, and are often used in overlapping and sometimes inconsistent ways. Clarifying these concepts is important, particularly because different understandings can imply very different expectations regarding the role of researchers, policymakers and funders. Work is ongoing to better define these methodologies, and it is not the objective of this article to do so.

However, one important characteristic is not simply communication of findings to policymakers after research has been completed. Rather, engagement is understood as relational, iterative and collaborative. Policymakers and other stakeholders are treated not merely as audiences for research outputs, but as partners within broader processes of knowledge generation and application.

This distinction is important because dissemination alone does not necessarily result in research use or policy impact. Research may be rigorous and relevant, yet still fail to influence decision-making if institutional relationships, timing, trust or contextual understanding are absent. Results emerging from recent meta research studies – currently funded by Research Ireland – into evidence for policy research highlights the need for networks and knowledge-brokering in

order to bridge the gap between academia and policy (Ó Foghlú et al., 2026). Increasingly, both research and policy communities recognise that evidence use depends as much on relationships and networks as on the quality of evidence itself (Whelan et al., 2025).

Research for policy therefore differs significantly from more traditional linear models of knowledge transfer in which researchers produce evidence that is subsequently ‘translated’ into policy. Contemporary understandings instead emphasise mutual learning, negotiation, adaptation and co-production of knowledge across organisational and disciplinary boundaries.

Within the Irish context, this evolution has been reflected in the establishment of funding programmes that also emphasise challenge orientation, stakeholder engagement, societal impact and collaboration across sectors.

Importantly, not all policy-relevant research should be or needs to be research for policy, nor does all research (or even engaged research) need to be immediately policy-facing. Nor does it diminish the importance of independent scholarship or critical inquiry. In many cases, valuable policy-relevant insights emerge precisely because researchers retain analytical independence and the ability to challenge prevailing assumptions. Effective engagement therefore requires balancing collaboration with academic autonomy.

Research for policy can also occur at different stages and with varying degrees of intensity. Some projects may involve policymakers primarily in agenda-setting or dissemination. Others may involve deep co-production throughout the entire research life cycle. Similarly, engagement may range from bilateral collaboration between a researcher and a government department to large multi-stakeholder alliances involving communities, non-governmental organisations, public agencies, international partners and interdisciplinary research teams.

The benefits of research for policy can reside across several dimensions. For policymakers, it can provide access to more timely, relevant, and context-sensitive evidence. It can also strengthen analytical capacity within public institutions and support more informed decision-making leading to better economic and societal outcomes.

For researchers, engagement can improve understanding of real-world policy challenges, generate new research questions, increase access to data and institutional knowledge, and create pathways for

societal impact. Engagement may also strengthen the legitimacy and applicability of research findings by ensuring that research questions align more closely with societal needs.

For wider society, research for policy can contribute to more responsive public policy, improved public services, enhanced democratic participation, and greater trust between institutions and citizens. In areas involving complex societal challenges, collaborative approaches may also support innovation by bringing together diverse forms of expertise and lived experience.

However, research for policy also presents challenges. Collaboration across institutional cultures can be difficult. Academic and policy timelines often differ substantially. Incentive structures may not always reward engagement activity. Policymakers may require rapid responses, while research processes often operate over longer timescales. Questions also arise regarding power dynamics, representation, evaluation and the risk of overburdening researchers or stakeholders.

These challenges highlight the importance of institutional support structures, funding mechanisms, intermediary functions and capability development. Engagement rarely occurs effectively through goodwill alone. It requires sustained investment in relationships, skills, strategic leadership, infrastructure and organisational culture.

This is one reason why national research funders have become increasingly interested in the research–policy interface. Funders occupy a unique position within the ecosystem. Through programme design, funding criteria, evaluation processes, partnership models, and strategic convening, they can shape the conditions under which engagement occurs. In doing so, they increasingly influence not only what research is funded, but also how research is conducted and connected to wider societal needs.

Research Ireland as an enabler of research for policy

Research Ireland's emerging role within the national research ecosystem extends beyond that of a traditional funding agency. While competitive grant funding remains central to its mandate, the agency increasingly operates as a broader system actor with responsibilities relating to stewardship, coordination, convening, and strategic leadership across Ireland's research and innovation landscape.

This broader role is particularly important in the context of research for policy. Effective research–policy collaboration depends not only on individual projects or funding calls, but also on the wider

ecosystem within which relationships, incentives and institutional cultures develop. National funders are uniquely positioned to nurture these conditions.

Historically, research funding agencies were often viewed primarily as mechanisms for allocating resources to support research excellence. While excellence remains foundational, contemporary expectations include more proactive focus on societal impact, interdisciplinary collaboration, stakeholder engagement, economic impact and responsiveness to current national priorities. As a result, funders now play a more active role in shaping research agendas, supporting networks, and facilitating connections across sectors.

Research Ireland inherits substantial experience in this regard from both SFI and the IRC. Over time, both organisations developed programmes that encouraged collaboration between academia and external stakeholders, including industry, civic society, public bodies and international partners. These programmes helped build institutional familiarity with collaborative research models and contributed to growing capacity for engagement across the Irish research system.

Importantly, funders can influence engagement in multiple ways simultaneously. Funding criteria can incentivise stakeholder collaboration. Programme structures can support interdisciplinary approaches, such as in the case of COALESCE (Research Ireland, 2025a). Evaluation frameworks can recognise broader forms of impact, as seen in the National Challenge Funding (Science Foundation Ireland, 2025). Fellowship schemes, such as the Public Sector Fellowship, can enable researcher mobility between sectors. Strategic Partnership programmes can create long-term institutional relationships (Research Ireland, n.d.a); convening activity, brought about by small collaborative grants like New Foundations (Research Ireland, 2025b) can bring diverse actors together around shared societal challenges. The proactive focus on education and public engagement across awards and through structured activities like Science Week and the Discover Programme also supported the evolution of broader engaged research, both with community partners and with policymakers. Funders can also shape researcher incentives. By applying the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA) principles (<https://sfdora.org/>) and using narrative curricula vitae, they can recognise policy engagement, knowledge mobilisation and other contributions that conventional publication metrics may

overlook. In this sense, Research Ireland's role is not merely transactional but incorporates leadership. The agency contributes to building relationships across the national research system.

This system-level role also provides opportunities for strategic insight and thought leadership. Because funders operate across disciplines, sectors, institutions and programmes, they can identify emerging trends, gaps, opportunities and systemic barriers that may not be visible from within individual organisations. They can observe where engagement succeeds, where it struggles, and where additional supports may be needed.

Increasingly, this positioning allows research funders to contribute to broader discussions about how evidence moves within public systems. Questions regarding research uptake, policy learning, institutional brokerage and knowledge mobilisation are now recognised as central components of research rather than peripheral concerns.

Research Ireland may therefore be particularly well placed to support a more mature and coordinated national approach to research for policy. This could involve not only funding individual projects but also strengthening long-term relationships between research and policy communities.

Such an approach aligns with wider national and international developments in mission-oriented innovation policy and challenge-led research funding. Increasingly, public funders are expected to support not only excellent research outputs, but also to provide collective capacity to address complex societal problems.

At the same time, it is important that this expanded role remains balanced with support for independent inquiry and disciplinary diversity. Research for policy functions most effectively within healthy research environments that are future-proof and sustain intellectual plurality, methodological diversity and long-term capability development. Research Ireland's challenge is therefore not simply to increase policy relevance, but to support meaningful engagement while preserving the creativity, independence and breadth that underpin strong research systems.

Key programmes supporting research for policy

A range of programmes developed by SFI and the IRC contributed significantly to strengthening engaged research within Ireland. While

these initiatives varied considerably in scale, disciplinary focus and partnership structure, collectively they reflected a broader shift toward collaborative, challenge-oriented, and societally engaged research funding. In many cases, insights from these predecessor programmes are informing and underpinning new funding mechanisms being developed by Research Ireland, reflecting its expanded system role and its capacity to support all disciplines.

Early programmes focused on strengthening relationships between academia and enterprise, while others explicitly targeted societal challenges, or interdisciplinary collaboration. More recent iterations specifically targeted public-sector engagement with greater bilateral collaboration from the outset. Together, they contributed to expanding institutional experience with co-creation and stakeholder engagement across the Irish research system.

Early examples of programmes include the IRC Enterprise Partnership Scheme (IRC, n.d.), which has been running since 2003, supporting collaborative postgraduate and postdoctoral research involving academic institutions and external partners across private, public and community sectors. Importantly, the scheme was not limited to commercial industry collaboration. Public bodies, non-governmental organisations, charities, and cultural organisations also participated, creating opportunities for researchers to engage directly with societal and policy challenges. The application process involved the co-creation of a research project and the ongoing engagement of the enterprise partner throughout the award.

Similarly, SFI research centres (Research Ireland, n.d.b) and SFI strategic partnership (Research Ireland, n.d.a) initiatives often involve substantial collaboration between researchers and external stakeholders. Although many centres are strongly oriented toward industry engagement and technological innovation, they also increasingly address broader societal and public policy questions, particularly in areas such as health, energy, climate, data governance and digital transformation.

Over time, funding models increasingly reflected international shifts toward mission-oriented and challenge-led approaches. Rather than focusing exclusively on disciplinary advancement, programmes sought to mobilise interdisciplinary expertise around major societal issues requiring collaboration across sectors. Collaborative programmes such as COALESCE sought to fund interdisciplinary research aimed at tackling the Sustainable Development Goals (European Commission, 2022b). The initiative brought together

researchers, government actors, civil society organisations and international partners to address complex societal challenges requiring integrated and interdisciplinary responses.

The National Challenge Fund (Science Foundation Ireland, 2025), funded by the European Union's Recovery and Resilience Facility, is an excellent example of how the development and evaluation framework of funding programmes can facilitate agile, fast-paced research teams to deliver tangible solutions to global challenges (Research Ireland, 2024; Science Foundation Ireland, 2025). Funding is provided in a competitive phased manner and teams are provided with training and mentoring to support the acceleration of an idea through each phase. The programme encourages collaboration between government departments, agencies, enterprise, the academic research community and societal stakeholders who will inform the expected outputs and outcomes to ensure that they are meaningful and relevant to the end user.

The IRC New Foundations programme represented a particularly important mechanism for policy-engaged and civic-oriented research (IRC, 2023). The programme supported collaboration between researchers and civil society organisations, government departments, public agencies and community groups. Typically operating at smaller scales and shorter timelines, New Foundations projects often enabled exploratory collaboration, evidence synthesis, pilot initiatives, or targeted policy-relevant research. The significance of such programmes extended beyond individual outputs. They frequently acted as relationship-building mechanisms, enabling researchers and stakeholders to develop trusted networks, shared understanding and collaborative experience that could later evolve into larger or longer-term initiatives.

More recently, the Public Sector Fellowship Programme demonstrates another notable development in strengthening the research-policy interface. By embedding researchers directly within government departments and public bodies, the programme creates opportunities for mutual learning between academic and policy environments.

Embedded models such as this, recognise that policy engagement is not simply about transferring evidence into policy-making. It also requires researchers to understand how policy processes operate in practice, including institutional constraints, timelines, political considerations, implementation challenges and organisational cultures. By placing researchers within public bodies, these models can

support more contextually informed and practically relevant engagement.

From the perspective of public institutions, these fellowships can also strengthen analytical capacity, expose policymakers to emerging research approaches, and foster longer-term relationships with academic communities.

Importantly, these programmes also signal changing assumptions regarding what constitutes valuable research activity. Relationship-building, brokerage, stakeholder coordination, synthesis work and engagement processes became increasingly recognised as legitimate and necessary components of impactful research rather than peripheral or optional activities.

This evolution remains ongoing. As Research Ireland develops its future strategic direction, these inherited programmes and experiences provide an important foundation for understanding how national funders can support more effective and sustainable forms of research for policy.

Learning about the research–policy interface: Meta research and system insight

As interest in engaged research and policy collaboration grew internationally, there was increasing recognition that research systems themselves required closer examination. Questions emerged not only about what research should be funded, but also about how knowledge moves within systems, how relationships develop, and why evidence sometimes succeeds or fails in influencing policy and practice.

The decision to support research examining the research–policy interface itself was significant. At a time when meta research and research on research were less prominent internationally than they are today, Irish funding initiatives recognised the value of understanding the mechanisms, relationships and institutional conditions underpinning knowledge exchange and evidence use.

The 2023 Science Policy Research call sought proposals identifying best practice for translating research into policy. Six projects were funded, four of which aim to explore themes including research networks, brokerage functions, invisible labour within engagement processes, and the lived experiences of researchers and policymakers navigating collaborative environments.

Importantly, these studies are helping to move discussions beyond simplified assumptions regarding linear evidence transfer. Research

increasingly highlighted that policy engagement is shaped by complex social, organisational and political dynamics. Evidence does not move automatically from academia into policy. Rather, knowledge mobilisation depends on relationships, trust, timing, institutional capacity, communication practices and broader governance contexts.

Research also highlighted the importance of intermediary and brokerage roles. Individuals, networks and organisations capable of translating across institutional cultures often play critical but under-recognised roles within engagement ecosystems. Similarly, much of the labour associated with collaboration, such as relationship management, facilitation, coordination, synthesis, negotiation and trust-building, frequently remains invisible within conventional academic reward systems despite being essential to successful engagement.

These insights have important implications for funding policy. If engagement depends on relationships and systems rather than dissemination alone, then initiatives must account for activities and capacities that extend beyond traditional research outputs.

The growth of meta research also contributed to greater awareness regarding evaluation challenges. Measuring the impact of policy-engaged research is inherently complex. Policy influence rarely occurs in linear or attributable ways. Impacts may emerge gradually, indirectly or through cumulative relationship-building over long periods. Traditional metrics such as publications or citations therefore often fail to capture significant dimensions of research-for-policy activity.

This has prompted wider international discussion regarding alternative approaches to evaluating research impact and engagement. Increasingly, there is recognition that meaningful assessment may require more qualitative, developmental and context-sensitive approaches.

Investment in understanding these issues helped create foundations for more strategic and evidence-informed programme design. Rather than assuming generic models of impact or engagement, funders are gaining greater insight into the specific conditions and supports required within the Irish context.

This learning process remains highly relevant as Research Ireland develops mechanisms, structures and processes to support the ambitions of its new strategy. The agency now operates within a context where expectations regarding societal impact, stakeholder

engagement and policy relevance continue to grow. At the same time, there is increasing recognition that achieving these ambitions requires sustained investment not only in projects, but also in systems, relationships, skills and institutional learning.

The future direction of Research Ireland

Now that Research Ireland has established and agreed its strategic direction, this area will remain an increasingly important component of Ireland's broader research and innovation landscape. Many of the major national and global challenges are characterised by complexity, uncertainty and interdependence. Addressing these challenges effectively requires not only scientific and technological advancement, but also societal understanding, institutional coordination, public trust, behavioural insight and democratic legitimacy. Research systems therefore need mechanisms capable of supporting collaboration across disciplines, sectors and societal actors.

Research Ireland's expanded remit creates opportunities to support these forms of collaboration more coherently than may previously have been possible. The previous remit of SFI funded STEM research only, whereas the IRC funded research across all disciplines but at a smaller scale. Bringing STEM and AHSS funding together within a single organisation may help strengthen interdisciplinary approaches to societal challenges and encourage more holistic understandings of impact and engagement.

Future strategic ambitions are also likely to align closely with national priorities articulated through *Impact 2030* (Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, 2022) and related policy frameworks. This includes strengthening Ireland's international research standing, while also ensuring that publicly funded research contributes meaningfully to public trust in research, societal well-being, economic development, sustainability and resilience.

Achieving these ambitions will require continued attention to the practical realities of engagement. Effective collaboration between researchers and policymakers depends on capabilities, incentives and institutional supports that cannot be assumed to exist automatically.

Researchers may require greater support in areas such as policy literacy, stakeholder engagement, interdisciplinary collaboration,

communication and knowledge mobilisation. Policymakers may similarly benefit from enhanced access to research synthesis, analytical support and opportunities for structured engagement with research communities.

Institutional incentives also matter significantly. Academic career systems have historically prioritised publications, grants, industry engagement and disciplinary achievement over policy engagement and knowledge mobilisation. Applying the DORA principles and using narrative curricula vitae can help broaden assessment by recognising these wider contributions and rewarding the relational work that supports research use and societal impact.

There may therefore be increasing rationale for dedicated structures or functions focused specifically on policy engagement within national research systems. Internationally, a growing number of jurisdictions have developed intermediary units, evidence hubs, brokerage mechanisms, and rapid evidence support functions designed to strengthen relationships between research and policy-making communities (Government of the United Kingdom, 2013; European Commission, n.d.a&b).

Within the Irish context, academic and public bodies have mobilised to create environments for strategic brokerage, foresight activity, evidence synthesis, stakeholder convening, training and capability development and support for rapid evidence responses in emerging policy areas. This agenda is also shaped by the Chief Science Adviser and the evolving research and science advisory structures within the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science.

An ongoing challenge is how to embed and sustain research policy engagement mechanisms that have often emerged through informal relationships and trust. Ensuring these connections endure beyond individual champions requires appropriate institutional support, capacity and long-term investment.

A systemic approach could also help build longer-term institutional memory and relationships across the ecosystem. One of the persistent challenges within policy engagement internationally is fragmentation. Researchers, policymakers, civil society organisations, and public agencies often operate within disconnected networks despite addressing overlapping societal challenges. Funders may therefore have an important role in supporting continuity, coordination and shared learning across sectors. Recent Irish examples demonstrate the value of this approach. The Department of Climate, Energy and the

Environment's Climate and Energy Modelling Group represents a significant investment in research capacity designed to support ongoing engagement between researchers and policymakers, ensuring that evidence and modelling expertise can directly inform policy development over time

There are also opportunities for Ireland to learn from sectors where evidence-informed research ecosystems are already relatively mature. In health research, for example, long-standing investment in clinical research, implementation science, health services research and evidence support structures has contributed to more embedded relationships between research and policy communities. Similar lessons are emerging from environmental domains with the EPA and the Climate Change Advisory Council working together to advise on climate policy.

Ultimately, the future direction of research for policy in Ireland will likely depend on balancing several important considerations simultaneously: maintaining research excellence while deepening societal relevance; supporting academic independence while encouraging collaboration; responding to immediate policy needs while sustaining long-term foundational research capacity; and developing national coherence while preserving disciplinary diversity and institutional autonomy.

Research Ireland enters this landscape at a moment of considerable opportunity. The creation of a unified national funding agency provides a platform for building more connected, interdisciplinary, and societally engaged approaches to research funding and knowledge mobilisation. Equally, it creates opportunities for Ireland to position itself internationally as a research system capable not only of producing excellent research, but also of mobilising knowledge effectively in support of public policy and societal well-being.

The development of research for policy within Ireland remains an evolving journey rather than a completed project. However, the experiences, programmes and institutional learning developed over recent decades provide a strong foundation upon which future progress can continue to build.

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