

Administration, vol. 74, no. 3 (2026), pp. 133–159
doi: 10.2478/admin-2026-0025

From evidence infrastructure to evidence capability: Reframing evidence-informed policy-making in Ireland

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Abstract

This paper argues that the next phase of evidence-informed policy-making in Ireland requires a shift in focus from evidence infrastructure to evidence capability. Drawing together the contributions to this special edition of *Administration*, it argues that while Ireland has made significant progress in building institutional structures that support evidence use, structure alone is insufficient. The effective use of evidence depends upon the capabilities of individuals, organisations and systems to acquire, interpret, synthesise and apply evidence in complex policy environments. The paper identifies four interdependent dimensions of evidence capability – analytical and data capability, policy capability, knowledge brokerage capability and leadership capability – and concludes that the next phase should move beyond evidence-informed policy-making as a discrete reform agenda towards the deliberate and systematic development of an evidence-capable public service.

Keywords: evidence capability, evidence-informed, evidence infrastructure, policy-making, public service.

Introduction

The contributions to this special issue collectively demonstrate the significant progress made in strengthening the institutional

architecture that supports evidence-informed policy-making in Ireland. Over the past decade, successive governments have invested in structures designed to improve the generation, mobilisation and application of evidence across the policy system. These developments reflect an increasing recognition that effective policy-making requires access to robust data, high-quality research and systematic analytical capacity.

At the national level, this infrastructure has evolved considerably since the establishment of the Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Service (IGEES) in 2012. Subsequent developments, including the National Statistical Service, the creation of departmental research units, the publication of *Impact 2030*, the establishment of the Evidence for Policy Unit within the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, the appointment of a Government Chief Science Advisor and the establishment of the National Science Advice Forum, collectively represent a significant strengthening of Ireland's evidence ecosystem (Harty & O'Leary, 2026). Parallel developments within individual departments have sought to improve access to research evidence, strengthen evaluation capability and support more systematic approaches to policy development.

The contributions within this special edition provide valuable insight into these developments. Harty and O'Leary (2026) describe the emergence of a more coordinated evidence-for-policy system, characterised by growing engagement between researchers and policymakers. Smyth, Donnelly and Vaughan (2026) outline the development of a policy framework that explicitly recognises evidence as a core pillar of effective policy development. Riordan (2026) situates these domestic developments within a broader European context, examining how Ireland can maximise its engagement with scientific advice mechanisms operating at European Union (EU) level. Contributions from Ó Foghlú et al. (2026), Hughes and Rochford (2026), and Walsh et al. (2026) further illustrate the growing importance of knowledge brokerage, institutional collaboration and mechanisms designed to strengthen connections between research producers and research users. Collectively, these developments can be understood as constituting Ireland's evidence infrastructure: the formal institutional architecture through which evidence is generated, mobilised and applied across the public policy system.

The emergence of this infrastructure has been documented in a series of contributions to this journal, which have tracked the

progressive strengthening of structures and processes, designed to support evidence use across the Irish public service (Doyle, 2021, 2023). The conceptual foundations for this work were established in a research project undertaken by the Royal Irish Academy in partnership with the Irish Research Council, which identified three pathways for developing evidence-informed policy-making in Ireland: building bridges and creating trust: joining up and scaling up existing activity: and strengthening knowledge management and knowledge brokerage (Doyle et al., 2021). The papers in this special edition demonstrate just how far Ireland has progressed in developing this institutional architecture.

For the purposes of this paper, evidence infrastructure refers to the formal structures, systems, processes, networks and institutional arrangements designed to facilitate the production, exchange and use of evidence within the policy system. Such infrastructure is indispensable. Without access to reliable data, analytical expertise, research capability and effective mechanisms for engagement, policymakers are less well-equipped to understand policy problems, assess options and evaluate outcomes.

However, while necessary, evidence infrastructure is not sufficient. International experience suggests that investments in evidence structure do not automatically translate into more effective evidence use. Oliver et al. (2022) note the considerable investment made in structures and mechanisms designed to strengthen evidence use, while also highlighting the limited understanding of whether these interventions result in meaningful changes in policy practice. Similarly, Cairney (2016) argues that evidence rarely speaks for itself. Rather, evidence enters a complex policy environment characterised by competing interests, political priorities, resource constraints and implementation realities. Parkhurst (2016) extends this argument by distinguishing between the technical governance of evidence, concerned with which evidence is selected, by whom and for what purposes. These perspectives suggest that while infrastructure creates the conditions for evidence use, it is capability that determines whether those conditions translate into better policy-making.

The Irish experience reflects this wider international challenge. While policymakers may have greater access to research evidence than at any previous point, access alone does not guarantee effective use. Evidence must be interpreted, synthesised, contextualised and applied. Public servants must be capable of distinguishing between stronger and weaker forms of evidence, integrating multiple sources of

information, navigating uncertainty and translating technical findings into practical policy options. Equally, organisational systems must create opportunities for evidence to inform decision-making, while leaders must signal that the use of evidence is expected, valued and rewarded. The next phase of evidence-informed policy-making therefore requires attention not only to evidence infrastructure but also to evidence capability.

Evidence capability may be defined as the ability of individuals, teams and organisations to acquire, interpret, synthesise, challenge and apply evidence effectively in the development, implementation and evaluation of public policy. This definition builds on a substantial body of work examining how research evidence is used in public services, which consistently emphasises that evidence use is neither automatic nor linear (Nutley et al., 2007). Rather, it is shaped by the knowledge, skills, relationships and organisational conditions that determine whether evidence is sought, understood and acted upon. Evidence capability is therefore concerned not simply with whether evidence exists, but whether public organisations possess the capacity to utilise it effectively. While infrastructure provides the institutional architecture that supports evidence use, capability determines whether that architecture translates into better policy decisions. This conceptual shift also reflects broader developments in public administration scholarship.

Contemporary capability debates increasingly recognise that organisational performance depends not solely on access to resources or technical systems, but on the capacity of organisations to absorb, integrate and apply knowledge in practice (Argyris & Schön, 1996; Cohen & Levinthal, 1990). Similarly, the literature on public-sector professionalisation emphasises the importance of creating institutional environments that support the development, deployment and renewal of expertise over time rather than relying on individual capability alone. Viewed through this lens, evidence-informed policy-making becomes fundamentally a capability challenge. The central question is no longer whether government has access to evidence, but whether it possesses the capabilities to use that evidence effectively. This requires moving beyond a narrow focus on technical analytical skills towards a broader conception of capability encompassing professional judgement, policy expertise, collaboration across organisational boundaries and leadership.

Indeed, one of the most significant insights emerging from the first special issue is that evidence use is inherently relational. Knowledge-

brokerage activities seek to strengthen relationships between researchers and policymakers. Research networks seek to connect expertise across organisational boundaries. Policy development frameworks seek to create processes through which evidence, feasibility and legitimacy can be considered together. These activities all depend upon human capability. Their success is shaped not simply by the existence of structures but by the ability of individuals and organisations to work across professional, institutional and disciplinary boundaries. The implication is clear. If Ireland has largely succeeded in building the infrastructure required to support evidence-informed policy-making, future progress will depend increasingly on developing the capabilities required to utilise that infrastructure effectively. The challenge is no longer principally one of building evidence systems, but of building an evidence-capable public service.

Doyle and O’Riordan (2026a) in introducing this issue of the double-issue special edition, argue that the next phase of evidence-informed policy-making in Ireland must move beyond structures and processes towards capability, relationships, evidence culture and leadership. Responding to that agenda, this paper argues that developing an evidence-capable public service depends upon four interdependent dimensions of capability: analytical and data capability; policy capability; knowledge brokerage capability; and leadership capability. Together, these dimensions provide a framework for understanding how evidence-informed policy-making can move from aspiration to embedded administrative practice.

Reframing evidence-informed policy-making as a capability challenge

The increasing emphasis placed on evidence-informed policy-making over recent decades has often been accompanied by a tendency to view evidence use primarily as a technical challenge. From this perspective, improving policy outcomes is largely a question of strengthening data systems, improving access to research, enhancing analytical methodologies and establishing mechanisms through which evidence can be communicated to decision makers. While each of these elements is undoubtedly important, this perspective risks overlooking the human and organisational dimensions of evidence use.

Evidence does not enter the policy process in a neutral or self-executing manner (Head, 2016). Rather, evidence is interpreted, contested, synthesised and applied by individuals operating within

complex organisational and political environments. Policy-making rarely involves straightforward technical solutions to clearly defined problems. Instead, policymakers must frequently navigate ambiguity, uncertainty, competing priorities and conflicting forms of evidence while simultaneously responding to political, social and fiscal considerations, often within compressed political timescales. As Cairney (2016) observes, the policy process is characterised by complexity and bounded rationality, meaning that evidence represents only one of several influences on decision-making. The challenge therefore is not simply one of generating evidence but of developing the capability to use evidence effectively within real-world policy contexts.

This distinction is reflected in the evolving literature on public-sector capability. Increasingly, scholars have moved beyond narrow conceptions of capability as a collection of individual skills and competencies. Instead, capability is understood as a multi-level phenomenon encompassing the knowledge, skills, behaviours, systems and institutional arrangements that enable organisations to perform effectively and adapt to changing circumstances (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017; Van Dooren et al., 2015). This broader understanding of capability has particular relevance for evidence-informed policy-making. While considerable attention has been devoted to strengthening the supply of evidence, comparatively less attention has been paid to the absorptive capacity of public organisations – their ability to identify, assimilate, interpret and apply knowledge in support of decision-making (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990). Public organisations may have access to extensive data, sophisticated analysis and high-quality research, yet still struggle to translate these resources into improved policy outcomes if the capabilities required to utilise them effectively are underdeveloped.

The challenge is therefore not simply one of technical expertise. Evidence-informed policy-making requires the integration of multiple forms of knowledge and capability. Technical and analytical expertise remains essential. However, evidence must also be combined with professional judgement, contextual understanding, implementation knowledge and the ability to engage constructively with stakeholders both within and beyond government. Effective policymakers require the capacity to assess the quality and relevance of evidence, understand its limitations, communicate its implications and balance evidence with considerations of feasibility, legitimacy and practical

implementation. Importantly, these capabilities are distributed across organisations rather than residing solely within individual roles or professions. Evidence-informed policy-making depends upon collaboration between researchers, analysts, policy professionals, operational leaders and senior decision makers. It also requires interaction across organisational boundaries, connecting government departments, public bodies, academic institutions and wider stakeholder networks. Consequently, evidence capability should be viewed as a collective organisational and system-level asset rather than merely an individual competency. Viewed through this lens, evidence-informed policy-making can be understood as a capability system rather than a collection of discrete activities. It requires capabilities operating at multiple and interconnected levels.

At the individual level, public servants require the skills and knowledge necessary to access, interpret and utilise evidence. At the organisational level, departments and agencies require systems, processes and cultures that support evidence use and learning. At the leadership level, senior managers must create expectations that evidence should inform decision-making while also modelling evidence-informed behaviours. Finally, at the system level, governments require workforce strategies, professional pathways and institutional arrangements that develop and sustain capability over time. This multi-level perspective helps explain why efforts to strengthen evidence-informed policy-making often produce uneven results. Investments in infrastructure may improve the availability of evidence, but unless accompanied by corresponding investments in capability, the impact on policy practice may remain limited. Similarly, individual training interventions may improve technical skills but are unlikely to produce sustained change in the absence of supportive organisational systems and leadership commitment.

A further dimension of evidence capability concerns the relationship between evidence and time. Developing the capability to use evidence effectively is not simply about understanding different forms of evidence; it also requires recognising the temporal realities within which policy decisions are made. Political decision-making operates under pressures that are structurally misaligned with the timescales of traditional academic knowledge production. Ministers and senior officials frequently face decisions that cannot be deferred pending systematic review. A housing crisis, a fiscal emergency or a public health threat demands a response on political timescales that

bear little relationship to peer-review cycles, publication schedules or the iterative processes through which academic consensus is built. This reality does not diminish the importance of evidence; rather, it reframes what evidence capability must encompass and what we accept as 'good' evidence.

Central to this reframing is the recognition that evidence is not a homogeneous resource. Policymakers must navigate between different forms of evidence, each with distinct characteristics and limitations. Robust longitudinal research and systematic reviews offer the strongest methodological foundations but are rarely available at the moment of decision or in a format that is easily accessible to politicians or policymakers. Rapid evidence reviews, administrative data and international comparisons are more immediately accessible but carry greater uncertainty. Practitioner knowledge, stakeholder insight and implementation experience are rarely counted as evidence in the academic sense yet frequently constitute the most contextually relevant information available to decision makers under time pressure. Increasingly, policymakers must also engage with a broader ecosystem of knowledge holders, including citizens, service users, civil society organisations, advocacy groups and professional communities. Evidence capability must therefore include the ability to distinguish between these forms, to understand what each can and cannot tell us in a given context, and to make transparent and defensible judgements about which forms are most appropriate under different conditions.

This observation also places responsibilities on the research community that the evidence-informed policy-making literature does not always acknowledge. If academic evidence is to be usable in real-world policy conditions, researchers must invest in rapid and accessible forms of knowledge production alongside traditional outputs. Rapid evidence reviews, pre-registered policy-relevant research, plain-language summaries and proactive engagement with government decision timescales are not peripheral activities for academics engaged with policy. They are core to the brokerage function. The capability challenge is therefore not solely one of improving how government uses evidence. It also concerns how evidence is produced, packaged and timed by those who generate it. An evidence-capable public service requires not only capable public servants but capable and responsive research partners. While the primary focus of this paper is on capability within the public service, the same logic has implications for evidence-producing institutions. Universities and other research organisations also require

organisational and leadership capabilities that support policy-relevant engagement, enable researchers to work across disciplinary and institutional boundaries, and create incentives for evidence to be produced and communicated in ways that are responsive to policy needs. Strengthening this supply-side capability is therefore an important complement to building the capacity of the public service to engage with and use evidence.

The implication is that evidence-informed policy-making should be viewed less as a methodological or technical reform agenda but as a broader programme of capability development. If evidence is to become embedded within the routine practices of public administration, governments must focus not only on the production and dissemination of evidence but also on cultivating the capabilities that enable evidence to influence decisions, behaviours and outcomes. The remainder of this paper develops this argument through four interrelated dimensions of evidence capability: analytical and data capability, policy capability, knowledge brokerage and leadership capability. While analytically distinct, these dimensions are mutually reinforcing and together provide a practical framework for embedding evidence-informed policy-making across the public service.

Analytical and data capability – more than technical expertise

The effective use of evidence begins with the ability to access, interpret and critically evaluate information. Consequently, analytical and data capability represents a foundational dimension of evidence capability. While discussions of evidence-informed policy-making frequently emphasise the importance of data, research and evaluation, equal attention must also be given to the underlying data infrastructure and the capabilities required to translate these inputs into meaningful insights for policy development and implementation. The growing complexity of public policy challenges has significantly increased demand for data and analytical capability across government. As MacFeely and Dunne (2026) argued, analytical systems can only realise their potential when public sector data are organised, standardised and capable of being linked across organisational boundaries. Strong analytical capability therefore depends not only on skilled people but also on well-designed data infrastructures. Aligned to this, contemporary policymakers must navigate increasingly large volumes of information originating from diverse sources, including administrative data, official statistics, evaluations, academic research, international evidence, stakeholder

consultation and emerging forms of digital intelligence. The challenge is no longer simply one of information scarcity. Rather, it is one of information abundance and the capacity to identify, assess and synthesise relevant evidence under the time constraints of policy-making.

This challenge has been recognised internationally. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2020, 2023) argues that effective public governance increasingly depends upon the capacity of governments to utilise evidence systematically in support of policy design, implementation and evaluation. Similarly, Keizer et al. (2025) identify analytical capacity as a critical enabler of evidence-informed policy-making, arguing that governments require both robust evidence systems and public servants capable of interpreting and applying evidence effectively. Within the Irish context, the establishment of IGEES, the National Statistical Service and departmental analytical functions reflects a growing recognition of the increasing importance of data and analytical expertise in policy-making (Harty & O'Leary, 2026).

However, analytical capability should not be understood solely as the responsibility of specialist analysts. While economists, statisticians, researchers and evaluators perform critical functions within the policy system, evidence-informed policy-making requires a broader distribution of analytical capability across the public service. Policymakers at all levels increasingly require the ability to engage with evidence, understand analytical findings and critically assess competing claims. This suggests a shift from viewing analytical capability as the preserve of specialist functions towards recognising analytical literacy as a core professional capability for all public servants. Public servants are not required to become statisticians or data scientists, but increasingly they must possess sufficient analytical literacy to understand evidence, question assumptions and engage constructively with analytical expertise.

Analytical literacy extends beyond technical competence to encompass a range of interconnected capabilities. These capabilities include understanding different forms of evidence and their relative strengths and limitations; interpreting quantitative and qualitative data; assessing methodological robustness; recognising bias and uncertainty; and synthesising findings from multiple sources. Importantly, analytical literacy also involves understanding what evidence can and cannot tell us. Evidence rarely provides definitive answers to complex policy problems. Rather, it helps reduce

uncertainty, identify potential consequences and inform professional judgement.

The growing prominence of artificial intelligence (AI) and advanced analytical technologies further reinforces the importance of these capabilities. Advances in generative AI, machine learning and data analytics have dramatically expanded the capacity of organisations to generate insights from large and complex datasets. While these technologies offer significant opportunities for public administration, they simultaneously increase the premium placed on human judgement. As access to information becomes easier, the ability to assess credibility, interpret outputs critically and understand the limitations of analytical tools becomes increasingly important. The challenge for public services is therefore not simply technological adoption but the development of the analytical capabilities necessary to utilise these technologies responsibly and effectively.

Evidence-informed policy-making also requires greater attention to evidence synthesis. Policymakers rarely draw upon a single source of information. Instead, effective decision-making typically requires the integration of multiple forms of evidence, including administrative data, research findings, stakeholder insights, implementation experience and political considerations. The ability to synthesise these diverse sources into coherent policy advice represents a sophisticated analytical capability that extends beyond technical data analysis. It requires both methodological competence, professional judgement and the ability to reconcile different forms of knowledge.

The importance of analytical capability is reflected within Ireland's own approach to policy development. The policy framework developed by the Department of the Taoiseach identifies evidence, feasibility and legitimacy as the three core pillars of effective policy development (Smyth et al., 2026). Such a framework implicitly recognises that evidence must be interpreted alongside practical implementation considerations and broader societal expectations. Analytical capability therefore cannot be viewed in isolation from wider policy capability. Rather, it provides the foundation upon which effective policy judgement is built.

The challenge for the Irish public service is consequently twofold. First, it must continue to strengthen specialist analytical capacity through roles, functions and professions dedicated to research, evaluation, economics, statistics and data science. Second, and arguably more importantly, it must broaden analytical literacy across

the wider public service so that evidence can be understood, interrogated and utilised effectively by policy professionals, managers and leaders. Building an evidence-informed public service therefore requires both deep specialist expertise and widespread analytical capability. Analytical capability, however, is a necessary rather than sufficient condition for evidence-informed policy-making. Translating evidence into action requires additional capabilities concerned with policy judgement, collaboration and leadership, to which the discussion now turns.

Policy capability – translating evidence into public value

While analytical and data capability provides the foundation for evidence-informed policy-making, evidence alone does not determine policy choices. Public policy is rarely a technical exercise in selecting the option most strongly supported by available evidence. Rather, policy development involves making judgements under conditions of uncertainty, balancing competing objectives, assessing practical constraints and navigating complex political and societal environments. Consequently, evidence-informed policy-making depends not only upon the capacity to generate and interpret evidence but also upon broader policy capability.

Policy capability may be understood as the capacity of public servants and public organisations to develop, advise upon, implement and evaluate public policy effectively. It encompasses a range of competencies, including strategic thinking, policy analysis, communication, stakeholder engagement, implementation planning, systems thinking and professional judgement. Importantly, policy capability concerns the ability to translate evidence into action. Evidence may inform decisions, but policy capability determines how evidence is interpreted, balanced and applied within specific contexts.

The importance of policy capability has been increasingly recognised within international public administration literature. The OECD (2023) argues that effective policy development requires a combination of technical expertise, implementation capability and institutional capacity. Similarly, Peters (2018) notes that contemporary governance environments demand policymakers who can work across organisational boundaries, manage complexity and reconcile competing interests while maintaining a focus on public value. Within this context, evidence represents an important input into

decision-making, but it remains only one component of a broader policy process.

This reality is reflected clearly within the Irish policy framework developed by the Department of the Taoiseach. The framework identifies evidence, feasibility and legitimacy as the three pillars of effective policy development (Smyth et al., 2026). While evidence is described as the bedrock of good policy-making, policymakers must also consider whether proposed interventions are implementable and whether they command sufficient political and societal support. Such considerations should not be viewed as diluting the importance of evidence. Rather, they acknowledge the realities of democratic governance. Effective policy development requires the integration of all three dimensions. Therefore, one of the central capabilities required of contemporary policymakers is professional judgement. Evidence can illuminate problems, identify patterns, estimate impacts and evaluate outcomes. However, evidence rarely provides unequivocal answers to complex policy questions. Different forms of evidence may point towards different conclusions. Research findings may be incomplete or contested. Data may reveal trends without explaining underlying causes. Furthermore, policymakers frequently confront novel challenges where the available evidence base remains limited or evolving. Under these conditions, professional judgement becomes essential.

Professional judgement involves the capacity to interpret evidence critically, understand its strengths and limitations and apply it appropriately within a specific policy context. It requires policymakers to exercise discretion, weigh competing considerations and make informed decisions despite uncertainty. As Schön (1983) argues, professional practice often involves reflection in action rather than the application of predetermined solutions. Evidence informs this process but does not replace it. This distinction is reinforced by Naughten's (2026) practitioner perspective elsewhere in this issue. Reflecting on his experience as a government minister, he argues that evidence enters a political environment characterised by competing priorities, limited time and the need to balance technical advice with democratic legitimacy. His 'three Cs' framework – citizens, context and clarity – illustrates that research evidence is most influential when it is communicated in ways that resonate with the realities of political decision-making. The framework reinforces a central argument of this paper, the influence of evidence depends not solely on its

methodological quality but also on the capability to communicate, contextualise and apply it within the realities of democratic policy-making.

A second dimension of policy capability concerns the ability to communicate evidence effectively. Research findings and analytical outputs are often complex, technical and nuanced. Policymakers must therefore be capable of translating evidence into forms that support understanding, discussion and decision-making. This includes preparing policy advice, engaging with ministers and senior officials, communicating with stakeholders and explaining policy choices to citizens. The ability to communicate evidence clearly and credibly is particularly important in an era characterised by information overload, misinformation and declining trust in institutions.

Policy capability also encompasses implementation capability. One of the recurring criticisms of evidence-informed policy-making is that attention frequently concentrates on policy design while giving insufficient consideration to implementation. Yet evidence only generates public value when policies are translated into effective outcomes. This requires policymakers to understand operational realities, delivery systems, organisational behaviour and implementation risk. The growing focus on implementation within contemporary policy literature reflects recognition that successful outcomes depend not only on what governments decide to do but also on their ability to execute those decisions effectively (Hill & Hupe, 2022; Pressman & Wildavsky, 1984). This is particularly relevant in the context of increasingly complex and interconnected policy challenges. Issues such as climate transition, housing, healthcare reform, demographic change and digital transformation cut across organisational and sectoral boundaries. Addressing such challenges requires policymakers to adopt systems perspectives, recognising interactions between policies, institutions and stakeholders. Consequently, policy capability increasingly requires systems thinking; the ability to work across organisational boundaries, integrate multiple perspectives and understand the wider systems within which policy interventions operate.

The relationship between evidence and policy capability is therefore reciprocal. Strong evidence improves policy-making, but strong policy-making capability is also necessary to ensure that evidence is used effectively. Without policy capability, evidence risks becoming disconnected from decision-making. Conversely, policy-

making that is not informed by evidence risks relying excessively on assumptions, precedent or intuition. The objective is not to privilege evidence over judgement, or judgement over evidence but to strengthen the capability to integrate both in pursuit of better public outcomes.

If analytical capability provides the means through which evidence is generated and interpreted, policy capability provides the means through which evidence is transformed into action. Yet evidence-informed policy-making also depends upon the ability to connect evidence producers and evidence users. Bridging this interface requires a further dimension of capability, namely knowledge brokerage capability.

Knowledge brokerage capability – bridging the policy–research interface

Despite significant investment in research systems and policy capability, the relationship between research and policy-making often remains characterised by differences in language, incentives, timescales and professional cultures. Consequently, strengthening evidence-informed policy-making requires attention to a third dimension of capability: knowledge brokerage. Knowledge brokerage has emerged internationally as an important mechanism for supporting the mobilisation of evidence into policy and practice. While definitions vary, knowledge brokerage is generally understood as the process of facilitating relationships, exchanges and interactions between those who generate knowledge and those who use it in decision-making (Oliver et al., 2022; Ward et al., 2009). It encompasses activities such as translating research findings, identifying relevant expertise, convening stakeholders, facilitating collaboration and supporting the co-production of knowledge.

The importance of knowledge brokerage is increasingly recognised within the Irish context. One of the most significant themes emerging from the first issue of this special edition of *Administration* is the growing attention being paid to strengthening connections between policymakers and researchers. Harty and O’Leary (2026) highlight the importance of developing stronger interfaces between government departments and the research community. Similarly, Doyle and O’Riordan (2026b) identify knowledge brokerage as one of the key pathways through which evidence-informed policy-making can be strengthened. The contribution from Ó Foghlú et al. (2026) provides

a particularly valuable illustration of how universities can play an active role in supporting knowledge mobilisation and evidence use through deliberate brokerage activities.

These developments reflect a growing recognition that the existence of research evidence does not automatically result in its use. Researchers and policymakers frequently operate within different institutional environments and according to different professional norms. Academic research often prioritises methodological rigour, disciplinary contribution and publication, while policymakers must respond to immediate challenges, compressed timelines and practical implementation considerations. Research evidence may be technically robust but insufficiently accessible or relevant to policy needs. Equally, policymakers may lack awareness of existing evidence or struggle to identify relevant expertise at the point of need. Knowledge brokerage seeks to address these challenges by acting at the interface between research and policy. Traditionally, brokerage has been conceptualised primarily as a specialised function or intermediary role. This paper argues that such a conceptualisation is now too narrow. If evidence-informed policy-making is to become embedded across the public service, knowledge brokerage must be understood as an organisational capability that can be developed at individual, organisational and system levels.

This direction is reflected in Ireland's participation in the EU Technical Support Instrument project on Supporting Evidence-Informed Policymaking, led by the European Commission's Joint Research Centre. The project brings together actors from across national evidence ecosystems and places particular emphasis on strengthening professional competencies among both policymakers and the academic-research community, alongside the institutional capacity required to support the demand, integration and use of evidence in policy-making. Importantly, it also recognises knowledge brokerage as a capability that connects researchers, policymakers and other actors across the evidence ecosystem. For Ireland, the project provides an important opportunity not simply to strengthen individual skills, but to consider how brokerage capability, professional learning and stronger research-policy relationships can be developed and sustained at the system level.

At the individual level, knowledge brokerage capability encompasses the skills required to navigate different knowledge communities and facilitate productive exchange between them. These include communication skills, relationship management, translation

and synthesis capabilities, stakeholder engagement and the ability to operate credibly across professional boundaries. Effective brokers must understand both the policy environment and the research landscape, enabling them to translate policy challenges into research questions, and research findings into policy-relevant insights.

At the organisational level, knowledge brokerage capability involves the creation of structures, processes and routines that support interaction between evidence producers and evidence users. This may include research networks, communities of practice, secondments, policy fellowships, collaborative projects and formal engagement mechanisms. Such arrangements help create opportunities for sustained interaction rather than episodic engagement. Importantly, they also contribute to the development of trust, which is consistently identified within the literature as a critical enabler of effective research–policy engagement (Doyle, 2021; Oliver et al., 2022).

At the system level, knowledge brokerage capability concerns the overall capacity of the public administration system to mobilise expertise in support of policy objectives. This includes the ability to identify and access relevant expertise rapidly, connect policy challenges to available research capacity and create institutional incentives for collaboration. Recent developments in Ireland, including the Civil Service Research Network, the Evidence for Policy Unit and emerging science advice structures, represent important steps in this direction (Harty & O’Leary, 2026). Their long-term effectiveness, however, will depend not simply on their existence but on the breadth and inclusiveness of the relationships they cultivate. An evidence-capable public service requires careful consideration of who is ‘inside the tent’ of evidence production and use. This includes not only academic researchers and public officials, but also practitioners, civil society organisations, professional bodies, service users and citizens whose experiential knowledge can enrich policy development.

Knowledge brokerage capability also has an important role to play in addressing increasingly complex policy challenges. Contemporary public policy problems rarely fall neatly within disciplinary or organisational boundaries. Climate adaptation, housing delivery, healthcare reform, digital transformation and demographic change all require the integration of multiple forms of knowledge and expertise. Effective responses therefore depend upon the ability to connect evidence from different disciplines, sectors and professional communities. Brokerage capability enables these connections to occur

and supports the synthesis of diverse forms of knowledge into actionable policy insight.

This perspective has important implications for capability development. Strengthening knowledge brokerage requires more than the creation of intermediary structures or dedicated brokerage roles, it requires deliberate investment in the capabilities needed to operate effectively across the research-policy interface. Recent international work reinforces this point. Drawing on the experience of the EU Technical Support Instrument, Keizer et al. (2025) identify the development of capabilities among scientists, policymakers and knowledge brokers as an important component of strengthening evidence-informed policy-making. Similarly, Breckon et al. (2025) identify a distinctive set of competencies associated with knowledge mobilisation and emphasise that these capabilities may be distributed across teams rather than located within a single designated brokerage role. This suggests a need to invest not only in collaborative skills and relationship-building capability, but also in the organisational conditions, mobility mechanisms and opportunities for interaction through which brokerage capability can be developed and sustained.

It also requires recognition that brokerage activities contribute directly to policy capability and should therefore be valued as part of broader public service professionalism. The contributions to this special edition also suggest that knowledge brokerage extends beyond the traditional interface between researchers and public officials. Naughten's (2026) political perspective demonstrates that the ultimate influence of evidence is also shaped by the realities of democratic decision-making. An effective evidence ecosystem therefore requires brokerage across multiple interfaces – between researchers and policymakers, between policymakers and political decision makers, and increasingly between government and citizens. This broader conception reinforces the argument that brokerage is not simply about transferring knowledge, it also about cultivating relationships that enable evidence to inform public decision-making.

Ultimately, evidence-informed policy-making depends not only upon generating evidence or developing analytical expertise. It also requires the capability to connect evidence, expertise and decision-making. Knowledge brokerage capability provides the means through which these connections are established and sustained. Yet even where analytical capability is strong and brokerage arrangements are well-developed, the routine use of evidence cannot be assumed. Whether evidence becomes embedded within organisational practice

ultimately depends upon leadership. The final and arguably most critical dimension of evidence capability therefore concerns leadership.

Leadership capability – creating demand for evidence

If analytical capability provides the means by which to understand evidence, policy capability enables its application and knowledge brokerage capability connects evidence producers and users, leadership capability determines whether evidence is ultimately valued and utilised within the policy process. Leadership therefore represents the culminating dimension of evidence capability because it determines whether the other three capabilities are activated in practice.

A recurring theme throughout the evidence-informed policy-making literature is that the availability of evidence does not guarantee its use. Governments may invest in sophisticated analytical systems, commission high-quality research and establish structures designed to facilitate engagement between policymakers and researchers. Yet evidence may still exert only limited influence on policy decisions if organisational leaders do not actively create demand for its use. Embedding evidence-informed policy-making is therefore as much a leadership challenge as it is a technical or organisational one.

This observation is increasingly reflected within both international and Irish debates concerning evidence-informed policy-making. Keizer et al. (2025), in their review of evidence-informed policy-making across European jurisdictions, argue that while technical structures and processes are essential, sustained progress ultimately depends upon political and organisational leadership. Similarly, Doyle and O’Riordan (2026b), reflecting on developments within the Irish context, conclude that many of the institutional building blocks necessary to support evidence-informed policy-making are now in place. The next phase of development, they suggest, must focus increasingly on leadership and culture. Ruane (2026) reaches a similar conclusion, arguing that a more evidence-informed public service requires leaders who value research, actively seek evidence and create organisational environments in which evidence is expected to inform decision-making.

Leadership matters because organisational culture is shaped significantly by what leaders prioritise, reward and model through

their own behaviour. Public servants quickly learn which activities are valued within their organisations. Where evidence is routinely sought, challenged and discussed by leaders, evidence-informed behaviours become normalised. Conversely, where decisions are driven primarily by precedent, hierarchy or short-term considerations, evidence use may become peripheral regardless of the availability of analytical resources. From this perspective, leadership capability extends beyond support for evidence-informed policy-making in principle. It involves a range of specific behaviours and practices that influence how evidence is utilised within organisations.

Leadership capability is reflected in four interrelated practices. First, leaders play a critical role in establishing expectations regarding evidence use. This includes creating an environment in which policy proposals are expected to be supported by evidence, assumptions are open to challenge, and decisions are informed by analysis rather than anecdote alone. Such expectations help create organisational norms that reinforce evidence-informed behaviours throughout the policy process.

Second, leaders influence the allocation of resources and organisational attention. Investments in research, evaluation, analytical functions and capability development are ultimately leadership decisions. Equally, leaders determine whether time and space are created for reflection, learning and evidence gathering within often pressured operational environments. Without such support, evidence-informed policy-making risks becoming an aspirational concept rather than an embedded organisational practice.

Third, leaders play an important role in fostering learning cultures. Organisational learning literature consistently highlights the importance of leadership in creating environments where inquiry, reflection and continuous improvement are encouraged (Argyris & Schön, 1996). Evidence-informed policy-making requires organisations willing not only to generate evidence but also to learn from it. This includes learning from success, failure, evaluation findings and implementation experience. Such learning can be challenging within public-sector environments characterised by political scrutiny and risk aversion. Leadership therefore becomes essential in creating psychologically safe environments where evidence can be discussed openly and constructively.

Fourth, leadership capability encompasses the ability to navigate uncertainty. One of the misconceptions associated with evidence-informed policy-making is the assumption that evidence eliminates

ambiguity. In reality, evidence often highlights uncertainty, competing interpretations and areas where knowledge remains incomplete. Effective leaders must therefore be capable of making decisions in circumstances where evidence is imperfect or contested. This requires confidence in the use of evidence while also recognising its limitations. Evidence-informed leadership is not about seeking certainty, it is about improving the quality of judgement under conditions of uncertainty.

Leadership capability also assumes particular importance within contemporary governance environments characterised by complexity and interdependence. Leaders therefore require the capability to mobilise evidence from multiple sources, integrate diverse perspectives and support collective problem-solving. In such contexts, evidence-informed leadership becomes closely linked to systems leadership and collaborative governance. Importantly, leadership capability should not be viewed solely as the responsibility of the most senior levels of government. While senior leaders undoubtedly shape organisational direction and culture, evidence-informed policy-making also depends upon leadership throughout organisations. Middle managers influence how evidence is utilised within teams. Programme leaders determine whether evaluation findings inform service improvement. Project managers shape how data and evidence are incorporated into decision-making processes. Consequently, leadership for evidence-informed policy-making should be understood as a distributed capability that operates across all levels of the public service.

A final aspect of leadership capability extends beyond the civil and public service to the political sphere. While the focus of this paper is primarily on public-service capability, the demand for evidence is influenced by political leadership. Ministers who actively seek evidence, engage with analytical advice and signal that research should inform policy decisions create enabling conditions that no organisational structure can replicate. Conversely, where political leadership is indifferent or hostile to evidence, the influence of even the most sophisticated evidence infrastructure and organisational capability will inevitably be constrained. As Doyle and O'Riordan (2026b) observe, the constitutional obligation and electoral mandate to decide policy rests with politicians: it follows that their disposition towards evidence is not peripheral to the evidence-informed policy-making agenda but central to it. Parkhurst (2016) offers a useful framework here, distinguishing between the technical and political

governance of evidence and arguing that sustainable progress requires attention to both. Boswell (2009) similarly demonstrates that political actors engage with expert knowledge in varied and sometimes primarily symbolic ways, a reality that any capability framework must acknowledge rather than assume away.

This has important implications for capability development. Efforts to strengthen evidence-informed policy-making frequently focus on developing analytical skills and technical expertise. While these remain important, equal attention should be given to developing leadership capability. Future leaders require not only policy knowledge and managerial competence but also the ability to champion evidence use, foster learning cultures and create environments in which evidence informs decision-making. Leadership development therefore represents a critical component of any strategy designed to strengthen evidence-informed policy-making across the public service.

Viewed collectively, the four dimensions of evidence capability outlined in this paper, analytical and data capability, policy capability, knowledge brokerage capability and leadership capability, are mutually reinforcing. Analytical capability enables evidence to be generated and interpreted. Policy capability enables evidence to be translated into action. Knowledge brokerage capability connects evidence producers and users. Leadership capability creates demand for evidence and embeds its use within organisational culture. Together, these dimensions provide a framework for understanding what it means to build an evidence-capable public service.

The question then becomes how such capabilities can be developed systematically and sustained over time. This requires moving beyond individual competencies towards a broader discussion of professionalisation, workforce development and institutional capability.

Conclusion: towards an evidence-capable public service

The growing emphasis on evidence-informed policy-making reflects a broader recognition that governments require access to robust evidence if they are to respond effectively to increasingly complex societal challenges. Over the past decade, Ireland has made significant progress in strengthening the institutional foundations that support evidence-informed policy-making. The establishment of structures such as IGEES, the National Statistical Service, departmental

research units, the Evidence for Policy Unit, the Civil Service Research Network and emerging science advice mechanisms demonstrate a sustained commitment to strengthening the role of evidence within public decision-making. The contributions contained within the two issues of this special edition of *Administration* provide compelling evidence of this progress. Collectively, they document the emergence of a more mature evidence ecosystem characterised by stronger connections between researchers and policymakers, improved access to data and analysis, and growing recognition of the value of evidence in addressing complex policy challenges. They also demonstrate that substantial effort has been invested in building the infrastructure necessary to support evidence-informed policy-making across the Irish public service.

However, as the contributors to this special edition also acknowledge, structures and systems alone are insufficient. The existence of evidence does not guarantee its use. Research evidence must be interpreted, synthesised, challenged and applied within organisational, political and operational contexts that are frequently characterised by uncertainty, competing priorities and resource constraints. The next phase in the evolution of evidence-informed policy-making therefore requires moving beyond investments in evidence infrastructure towards the deliberate development of evidence capability. This paper has argued that evidence-informed policy-making should be understood not solely as a technical agenda but as a capability agenda. The ability of governments to utilise evidence effectively depends upon a range of interdependent capabilities operating at individual, organisational and system levels. Four dimensions of capability have been identified as particularly important.

The four dimensions proposed in this paper describe the progression from understanding evidence, to applying it, connecting it and ultimately embedding it within the routine practice of public administration. Analytical capability enables public servants to understand and critically engage with evidence. Policy capability enables evidence to be translated into action. Knowledge brokerage capability connects evidence producers and evidence users. Leadership capability creates demand for evidence and embeds its use within organisational culture. These four dimensions constitute the foundations of what might be described as an evidence-capable public service. Such a public service is characterised not simply by access to evidence, but by the institutional capacity to utilise evidence

systematically in support of policy development, implementation and evaluation.

This perspective has important implications for public service reform. Much of the international discourse surrounding evidence-informed policy-making has focused on strengthening evidence production, improving research-policy engagement and enhancing access to data and analysis. While these remain important priorities, future progress is likely to depend increasingly upon the professionalisation of evidence capability itself. Building an evidence-capable public service requires more than the provision of training or the creation of new structures. It requires deliberate attention to professional standards, capability pathways, workforce planning, mobility mechanisms, learning infrastructure and leadership development. In short, it requires the creation of an institutional architecture capable of cultivating, deploying and sustaining expertise over time.

For Ireland, the next phase presents an opportunity to move from a series of important but often discrete developments towards a more coherent and system-wide approach to evidence capability. Ireland's participation in the current EU Technical Support Instrument project on Supporting Evidence-Informed Policymaking provides a timely platform for this work, with its focus on institutional capacity, professional competencies across the policy and academic-research communities, learning and development, communities of practice and the development of a national roadmap. The opportunity is to use this momentum to consider how analytical and data capability, policy capability, knowledge brokerage and leadership capability can be developed more systematically across the public service and sustained over the course of public service careers.

The longer-term ambition should therefore extend beyond evidence-informed policy-making as a discrete reform agenda towards the deliberate development of an evidence-capable public service. This requires learning and capability development to be treated not as a series of individual interventions, but as a strategic and system-wide investment in public service capacity. Ireland has already established much of the institutional infrastructure on which such an approach can be built. The task now is to connect that infrastructure through coherent capability pathways, stronger relationships across the evidence ecosystem and leadership that creates the conditions in which evidence is routinely sought, challenged and applied in public decision-making.

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