

THE STATE OF POLICY EVALUATION IN IRELAND



RATING		
5	Outstanding	Consistently exceeds expectations in position and the individual's contribution and accountability
4	Above Expectations	Consistently meets or exceeds expectations normally be expected and contributions are often significant
3	Meets Expectations	Consistently meets expectations considering the individual's position and individual capabilities
2	Below Expectations	Consistently does not meet expectations improved through education and training
1	Unsatisfactory	Consistently does not meet expectations consider improvement

STATE OF THE PUBLIC SERVICE SERIES | SEPTEMBER 2014

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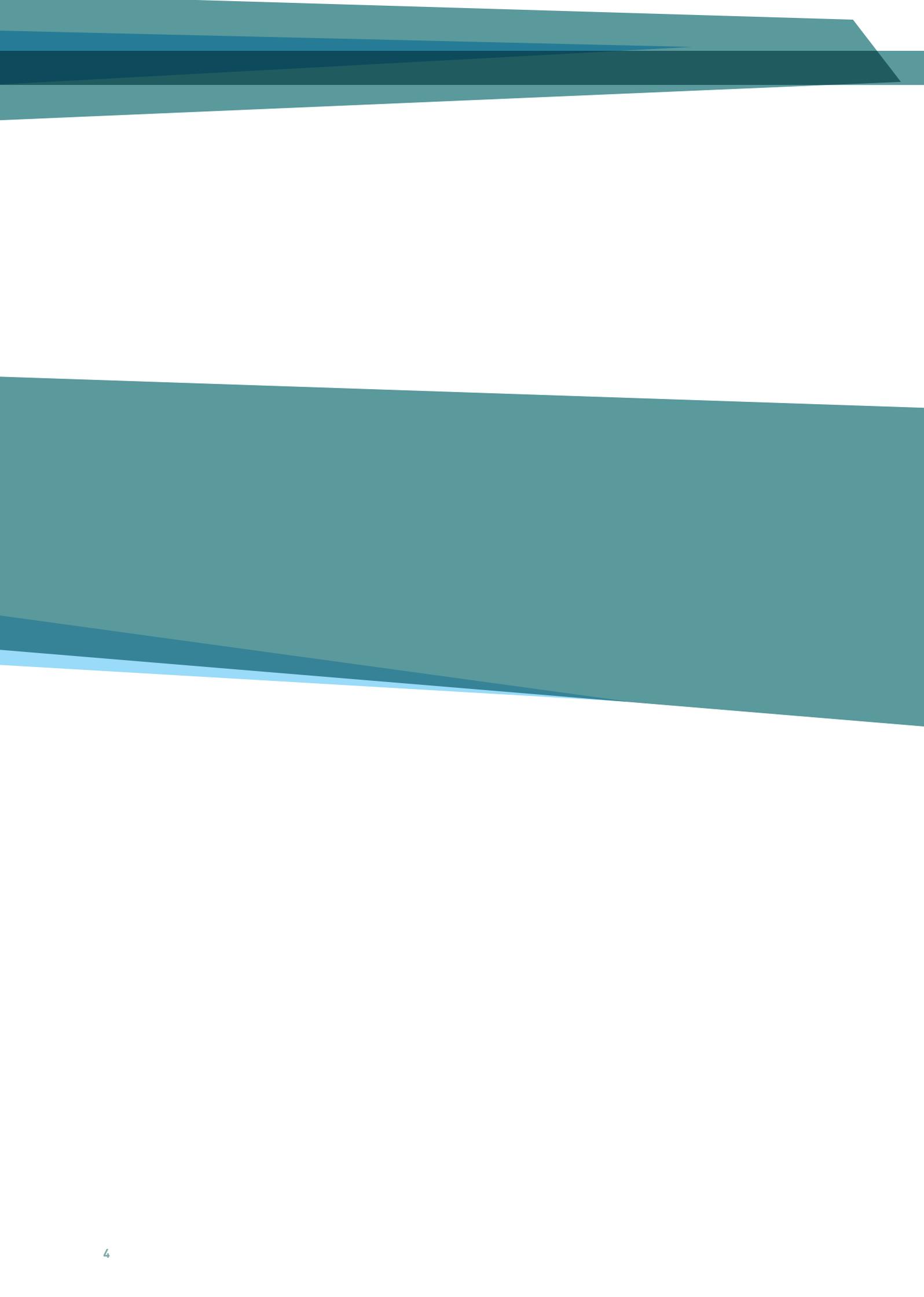
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**THE STATE OF
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IN IRELAND**

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FOREWORD

This report is timed to coincide with the holding of the conference of the European Evaluation Society in Dublin in October 2014. This bringing together of those involved in evaluation across Europe and wider afield provides an opportunity to reflect on the state of evaluation practice in Ireland at this time.

In the *State of the Public Service* research series, we seek to provide evidence-informed research and commentary on key aspects of contemporary Irish public administration. The authors of these reports bring their considerable expertise and practical knowledge to the topics selected so as to provide evidence, insights and recommendations to support future development. Our aim is that these reports will not only inform, but also challenge current thinking about how the Irish public service performs. It is intended that these short research reports will be of relevance and use not only to public servants, but also to policy makers and the wider public.

We welcome any comments or feedback you might have on the report.

Brian Cawley
Director General
Institute of Public Administration

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Previous reviews of policy and programme evaluation practice in Ireland show a mixed picture with regard to the use of evaluation as a tool of good governance. In this current review, the aim is to focus in particular on reforms introduced in the context of the fiscal crisis which place a renewed emphasis on the need to ensure value for money in public spending decisions.

Creating the conditions to carry out high quality evaluations

The general approach being taken to anchoring the evaluation regime in Irish government is sound. Evaluation is being anchored in a number of locations, notably at corporate central government level, within departments and agencies, and in the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General.

Data availability can be a problem hampering good evaluations. Evaluability assessment of programmes and policies should be undertaken as a first step for those areas identified for potential evaluation, to determine if sufficient data is available to conduct an evaluation. Where this is not the case, a data collection strategy should be developed and implemented within an agreed timescale to facilitate future evaluation.

The Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Service (IGEES) is an important initiative started in 2012 which needs to be further developed and monitored. In particular:

- The expansion of IGEES units to cover all departments should be pursued as a matter of priority
- Thought should be given to how best to maintain expertise within IGEES and for the expertise not to be dissipated as with previous initiatives of a similar nature. This will have to allow for turnover and promotion out of the service, and require careful manpower planning, persistent mobility arrangements and the development of a career path.
- The IGEES management and oversight boards should periodically review outputs and outcomes from the activity of IGEES to determine the value added of the service.

The Public Spending Code should be modified to allow greater use of providers external to the civil service in the conduct of evaluations. In this context a key requirement is that civil servants have the capacity to manage evaluations effectively and be 'educated consumers' of evaluation.

Creating the conditions to ensure evaluation is used

Linking evaluation and budgeting is difficult but important. With regard to the periodic comprehensive reviews of expenditure (CRE) conducted by government, and budgets generally, when examining cross-departmental and priority expenditure items the main evaluation activity to support budgetary decision making should be undertaken or coordinated at central corporate level by the Central Evaluation Expenditure Unit (CEEU) in the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (DPER). Topics selected for evaluation should typically be cross-cutting in nature, have significant budgetary implications, and be areas where there is a concern as to continued relevance and/or effectiveness and efficiency.

At departmental level, Value for Money and Policy Reviews (VFMPRs) should primarily be concerned with looking at ways to improve the operation of programmes. The focus should be on effectiveness and efficiency, the scope for alternative delivery mechanisms, and generally be based on the programme logic approach. Maintenance of a role by DPER in the reviews is important to ensure a degree of independence and quality control.

Departmental-level focused policy assessments (FPAs) should concentrate on specific, identified aspects of effectiveness and/or efficiency.

There should be periodic evaluation of the evaluation regime, by both the Comptroller and Auditor General and DPER. This should include issues such as:

- The extent to which new spending proposals include a detailed plan for evaluation and monitoring which conform to the guidance in the Public Spending Code issued by DPER
- The adherence to scheduled timeframes for completion of VFMPRs
- The quality of evaluative evidence produced by VFMPRs and FPAs
- The coverage and impact of evaluation findings and recommendations
- An assessment of the cost of undertaking evaluation, to determine the value added

The CEEU website should, as set out in the Public Spending Code, show the proposed schedule of VFMPRs, a simple tracking document on all VFMPR deliverables and maintain a central repository of all reports to facilitate open access to the data.

Efforts should continue to engage politicians with evaluation findings. Experiments should be undertaken to determine the benefits of greater use of shorter, focused summaries and oral briefings on findings.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the report

Policy and programme evaluation has long been a part of the public management scene in Ireland, though often not in any systematic or comprehensive manner. A definition of evaluation is that:

Policy evaluation uses a range of research methods to systematically investigate the effectiveness of policy interventions, implementation and processes, and to determine their merit, worth, or value in terms of improving the social and economic conditions of different stakeholders (Cabinet Office, 2003: 3)

The term evaluative information is also used in this paper. By evaluative information we mean any type of data (statistics, administrative records etc.) that is used in the assessment of the merit, worth or value of a policy or programme.

Demand for evaluation in Ireland has varied over the years, both in intensity and in where the demand comes from. Similarly the supply of evaluation has fluctuated, both in terms of quality of evaluation studies and with regard to the capacity to conduct policy evaluation, both within and outside government.

From time to time, it is useful to take stock of the state of the art of policy evaluation. Previous reviews (Boyle, 1993, 1997, 2005; CSF Evaluation Unit, 1998; Department of Finance, 2004) show a mixed picture of the adoption of evaluation as a tool of good governance. In this current review, the aim is to focus in particular on reforms introduced in the context of the fiscal crisis which place a renewed emphasis on the need to ensure value for money in public expenditure decisions.

1.2 A historical overview¹

1960s and 1970s – early optimism and sporadic action

In the late 1960s, in line with many other countries, there was an interest in rational analysis and its application to planning and budgeting. A report on the development of social research in Ireland (Friss, 1965) called for objective studies of social programmes and the development of trained social researchers. In response to such demands, a number of initiatives were taken to develop evaluative skills. The Department of Finance set up an analysis section, whose role was to provide training for a number of staff each year, to be placed as analysts in departments and to provide technical advice on issues related to project or programme evaluation. The Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) was set up as an independent, non-profit-making body, to provide research and advice on social and economic issues. Many state agencies also developed evaluation skills within their organisations.

Despite these initiatives, in the 1970s and into the 1980s evaluation was limited in scope and largely peripheral to decision making. As one senior civil servant noted, while Ireland had a reasonably well developed system for the evaluation of individual projects it did not have a strong tradition of evaluation of policies and programmes (Tutty, 1994). The status of evaluation can be illustrated by the fact that many of the analysts trained by the analysis section in the Department of Finance were given work in non-evaluation related departmental activity once placed in departments. Or on promotion they moved away from analysis work.

¹ This section draws heavily on Boyle (2002).

1980s – a two-tier evaluation system

In the 1980s, domestic interest in evaluation as a tool of good governance took a back seat given the drive to control public expenditure in the context of the economic crisis at the time. Poor economic conditions meant that the emphasis was put on cutting back expenditure rather than examining its use. Official thinking is reflected in a statement by the then secretary general of the Department of Finance: 'The issue here is not management of the public finances but control ... techniques of management, while of some value, are no answer' (Doyle, 1987). A very significant exception to this scenario of limited interest in evaluation in the 1980s is with regard to European Union (EU) expenditure in Ireland. This is one area where demand for evaluation was consistent and systematic. Tied to European expenditure was a requirement to evaluate EU funded programmes. In the 1980s this had significant impact in two main policy areas: industrial training and employment creation schemes, and anti-poverty and other community development programmes. Interestingly, a distinctly different approach to evaluation was taken in each of these areas, as Murray (1992) notes: 'In the labour market area, evaluation has tended to focus on quantitative measurement of outcomes involving the use of complex statistical modelling techniques. With community development initiatives, qualitative methods concerned with process description rather than outcome measurement holds sway'.

1990s – the 'golden years'?

From 1989 evaluation of the EU structural funds became a formal requirement of those receiving assistance, and this led to further developments in evaluation practice in Ireland. The funds were applied through a number of operational programmes which ran under a joint Irish-EU agreed community support framework (CSF) plan. Each operational programme was subject to ex ante, intermediate, and ex post evaluation, as was the CSF as a whole. Various evaluation arrangements were put in place for each operational programme and centrally, combining internal, external and independent evaluation (Boyle, 2005). Evaluations carried out were seen to have some impact, as illustrated in Box 1.1.

Outside of EU expenditure, there was a renewed interest in evaluation of public expenditure. As part of a more wide-ranging programme of management reforms, there was an emphasis on programme review and evaluation. In 1993, the Comptroller and Auditor General (Amendment) Act was passed which gave a mandate to the comptroller and auditor general to carry out value-for-money audits. And linked to the strategic management initiative (SMI) introduced in 1994, in 1997 the government approved a series of expenditure reviews to be carried out as part of a new system of comprehensive programme review. The intention was to institutionalise evaluation of expenditure programmes as part of the wider agenda of public service reform.

BOX 1.1 IMPACT OF THE MID-TERM EVALUATION OF THE COMMUNITY SUPPORT FRAMEWORK (CSF) 1994-1999

A mid-term evaluation of the CSF was carried out in 1997, looking at the effect of structural fund assistance of €5,620m. Three main questions were addressed: was the original balance of interventions right; do changed circumstances warrant revisions; and are there under-performing measures?

Informed by the evaluation findings (Honohan (ed.), 1997) the CSF monitoring committee agreed a package of financial adjustments of some €163m, 7.5 per cent of planned 1998 and 1999 expenditure. Of the 18 measures or groups of measures where the CSF evaluation had questioned the need for the existing allocation, 8 received a reduction in aid. Of the 8 areas identified as needing additional funding, 5 received additional aid.

The philosophy of the evaluation also influenced some non-financial decisions. For example it was agreed that the quasi-monopoly position of government implementing agencies would be reviewed in a number of areas with a view to increasing private sector participation in the delivery of services.

Source: Hegarty, 2003

2000s – lost momentum

In the early 2000s the National Economic and Social Council (NESC) called for evaluation to become an integral part of public expenditure management and for the civil service to develop an evaluation culture (NESC, 2002). But there is little evidence of this happening on a widespread basis. Demand for evaluation reduced in the 2000s. As the economy continued to grow rapidly in the early part of the decade, the pressure to engage in detailed scrutiny of public expenditure decreased. A report on progress with programme review in 2004 found that few reviews were completed on time, some departments had opted out of the review process, and there was limited evidence of the reviews impacting on the reform of spending programmes (Department of Finance, 2004). There were some exceptions, however, and pockets of strong evaluation practice existed.

Another attempt to train analysts with relevant evaluation skills was undertaken. In 2003 the Department of Finance introduced two civil service-wide programmes in public policy analysis at masters and diploma level. The intention was that these programmes would deliver a pool of personnel across departments qualified in the conduct of public policy analysis and evaluation. This did happen, but as with the previous initiative in the 1970s the skills were dissipated as people left or were promoted or moved out of areas of work that required regular use of their analytical skills.

The Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) commented that the system of evaluation that had been put in place in the context of EU structural funds had helped shape an increasing interest in assessing the effectiveness of programme expenditure, and that it was important that the process of evaluation continue as EU funding reduced (ESRI, 2003). However, in practice as the structural funds reduced in importance, the evaluation arrangements associated with the funds were cut back. While there was significant evaluation activity associated with the 2000-2006 tranche of funding, during the 2007-2013 national development plan the level of evaluation activity decreased.

2010s – renewed interest?

In response to the fiscal crisis of the late 2000s, the control and management of public expenditure has been a topic of much concern and debate. To some extent, as in the 1980s, evaluation has taken a back seat as the emphasis has been on re-gaining control of expenditure. But there have been developments aimed at re-growing policy evaluation capability within government, in the context of a wider public service reform initiative which includes a commitment to apply evaluation techniques to deliver value for money in public expenditure (Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, 2011).

The government committed to introducing a number of evaluation-related measures in the context of a revised budgetary and expenditure framework. This approach recognises that in the past ‘... evaluations have not been sufficiently connected to decisions on the allocation of resources to particular programmes, and have not generally informed improvements to the delivery of Government services’ (Comprehensive Expenditure Report 2012-14, 2012: 81). These new measures include:

- The use of evaluations in periodic comprehensive reviews of expenditure (CRE), including both departmental-based and thematic evaluation reports
- The introduction of an Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Service (IGEES) being developed as a cross-government service to enhance the role of economics and value for money analysis in public policy making
- Changes to the programme review process, known as the Value for Money and Policy Review (VFMPR) process, including more targeted reviews, alignment with the expenditure allocation process and greater involvement for parliament in the selection and assessment of reviews

- The introduction of focused policy assessments (FPA), more narrowly focused assessments designed to answer specific issues of policy configuration and delivery and complement the VFMPR process.
- The introduction of a Public Spending Code to bring together good practice guidance on evaluation and appraisal
- The creation of a public service evaluation network (PSEN) to help build capacity

There has also been an enhanced role for philanthropies in promoting evaluation of policies and programmes they jointly fund with government. Atlantic Philanthropies and the One Foundation, for example, see building evaluation and organisational learning capacity as a central element in their grant giving.

The operation of these initiatives forms the main focus of this paper.

1.3 Structure of the paper

Building effective evaluation capacity depends on achieving both strong demand for and supply of evaluation. Based on previous work (Boyle, Lemaire and Rist, 1999: 12) a simple demand and supply framework provides the structure for this paper, as set out in Table 1.1.

TABLE 1.1 A DEMAND AND SUPPLY FRAMEWORK FOR EVALUATION CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT

		Evaluation demand	
		Strong	Weak
Evaluation supply	Strong	High evaluation capacity, High use	High evaluation capacity, limited use
	Weak	Limited evaluation capacity, High use of studies produced	Little evaluation capacity, Little use of evaluation studies

Source: adapted from Boyle, Lemaire and Rist, 1999: 12

Drawing from a number of previous studies (Boyle and Lemaire (eds.) 1999; Mackay, 2007; OECD, 1999) issues to be examined are identified under each of the supply and demand headings which when addressed create conditions supportive of evaluation capacity development (Figure 1.1).

FIGURE 1.1 KEY ISSUES TO BE ADDRESSED IN EVALUATION CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT

Supply-side issues

- Anchoring the evaluation regime
- Providing the resources for evaluation

Demand-side issues

- Linking evaluation with budgeting, auditing, strategic planning and monitoring
- Building an evaluation culture

Following this introductory section, section 2 examines the conditions needed to carry out high quality evaluations, focusing mainly on the supply side of evaluation. Section 3 explores the conditions needed to ensure evaluation is used, focusing mainly on the demand side of evaluation

2. CREATING THE CONDITIONS TO CARRY OUT HIGH QUALITY EVALUATIONS

2.1 Anchoring the evaluation regime

The evaluation regime refers to the system of rules that govern the practice of policy and programme evaluation: the way evaluation is carried out in a country. It transcends the building of capacity at the organisation-level, looking at issues such as where in the executive and/or legislative branches of government to locate evaluation and deciding who is responsible for the institutional design of evaluation and managing and planning evaluations.

Where the evaluation regime is anchored determines the type of questions likely to be asked and addressed. A significant decision is whether to locate the evaluation regime in the executive, the legislature, or both, and where in those pillars of the state. Table 2.1 illustrates the type of evaluative information that is produced by different anchors. Three different locations in the executive are outlined: at programme management level, within a corporate group at organisational level, or at a corporate government level (usually in a central department). Two locations within the legislature are outlined: in a legislative audit office and in a legislative body.

In brief, the message is that the nearer the evaluation function is located to programme delivery, the more effective it is at addressing operational issues (such as dealing with work processes and outputs produced) but the less likely it is to address impact and continued relevance issues. Mayne, Divorski and Lemaire (1999) conclude that evaluation needs to be anchored in several places if it is to become institutionalised, given that for the most part:

- Evaluation in the executive cannot supply critical information about the continued relevance of policies or programmes unless there is solid political demand for the information
- Evaluation anchored in independent legislative audit offices will likely address impact issues but stay away from continued relevance issues
- Evaluation in the legislative branch would address impact and relevance issues, but likely from a more political perspective

TABLE 2.1 CLASSES OF EVALUATION ISSUES

Location of evaluation	Evaluation demand		
	Operational issues	Impact issues	Continued relevance issues
Executive			
Programme manager	Addressed well	May get partly addressed, if useful for justifying policy/ programme	Not addressed (too threatening to continued existence of policy/ programme)
Corporate group in the organisation	Organisational-wide issues of interest and will be addressed	Should be of interest and addressed, but may be avoided if too threatening	Major organisational rationale issues not addressed
Corporate government group	Of less interest, though government-wide issues will be addressed	Issues of direct interest will get addressed	Issues will be addressed if it is in the interest of government to do so
Legislature			
Legislative audit office	Will be addressed for large programmes and for organisational and government-wide issues	Issues of direct interest as a value for money concern will get addressed	May not get addressed if they are seen as political in nature
Legislative bodies	Of little interest	Issues will be addressed	Likely to be addressed

Source: adapted from Mayne, Divorski and Lemaire, 1999: 32

In Ireland, evaluation is anchored in both the executive and the legislative areas.

2.1.1 Evaluation in the executive branch in Ireland

Evaluation functions can be found at the corporate government level and within departments, where arrangements vary.

Corporate government group level – the Central Expenditure Evaluation Unit

The Central Expenditure Evaluation Unit (CEEU) in the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (DPER) was established in 2006 to promote the application of value for money (VFM) practice in public expenditure programmes and projects. Its role has since evolved beyond that to include the provision of analytical and research support to DPER and also to others. The unit promotes best practice in the evaluation and implementation of programme and project expenditure, including the provision of guidance which is set out in a Public Spending Code².

The unit is responsible for the conduct of a number of evaluations linked to the comprehensive review of expenditure (CRE), including focused policy assessments on particular topics and cross-cutting evaluations which cover issues common to a number of departments (see section 3.1.1).

Organisational-level evaluation arrangements

Within government departments and offices, arrangements for the conduct of evaluation vary. Traditionally, location at the programme management level has been the most common arrangement, with evaluations being conducted or commissioned primarily at the programme level, but often with some corporate-level support, both

² <http://publicspendingcode.per.gov.ie/>

from within the organisation and centrally. Six departments and offices formally have evaluation as a named function in the title of a corporate unit, most often combined with finance and audit³. For example the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (DTTAS) has an economic and financial evaluation unit and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade have an evaluation and audit unit. This is somewhat similar to organisational level arrangements in Canada (Box 2.1).

The further development of units within departments with specialist economic and evaluation expertise is being progressed as part of the process stimulated by the creation of the Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Service (IGEES) in 2012 (see Box 2.2 for details).

BOX 2.1 DEPARTMENTAL-LEVEL EVALUATION IN CANADA

In 2009 the Canadian government adopted a revised policy for evaluation. The policy requires deputy heads (equivalent to secretaries general) to establish a neutral evaluation function in their department, appoint a head of evaluation (supported by an evaluation unit) and evaluation committee of senior officials. Each department must produce a rolling five-year risk-based evaluation plan, and ensure that coverage includes all direct programme spending every five years⁴.

A 2012 review of the health of the evaluation function found that most heads of evaluation fulfil more than one role in the organisation, with almost two-thirds also being the chief audit executive. Also nearly all (91 per cent) of departmental evaluation functions are co-located with one or more other functions, most commonly internal audit and/or performance measurement. Evaluation coverage of public expenditure has been found to have increased significantly. (Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, 2012).

2.1.2 Evaluation in the legislative branch in Ireland

The Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General has assigned evaluation functions and acts as an intermediary between the legislature and the executive. The Oireachtas (parliament) itself may choose to evaluate policies and programmes and the library and research service provides evaluative information to support the work of the Oireachtas and its committees.

Evaluation in the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General

In 1993, the Comptroller and Auditor General (Amendment) Act was passed. This act gave a mandate to the Comptroller and Auditor General to carry out value-for-money (VFM) audits. Value for money reports record the results of examinations into (a) the economy and efficiency with which state bodies acquire, use and dispose of resources and (b) the systems, procedures and practices employed by state bodies for evaluation the effectiveness of their operations.

The number of VFM audit reports produced by the Office has fluctuated over the years, with a maximum of nine reports in 1997 and none in 2011. The average number of reports produced between 1994 and 2013 was four per year⁵. The highest level of activity with regard to value for money auditing was in the late 1990s. By contrast, the supreme audit institutions in Belgium and the Netherlands, with notably higher levels of resourcing, produce around fifteen performance audits (equivalent to VFM audits) per year (Lonsdale, 2011: 11).

The subject area covered by VFM audit reports varies. Some examine programmes, such as the review of the EU-sponsored LEADER programme. Some examine organisations, such as reviews of Met Éireann and the Ordnance Survey. Some address system-wide processes, such as the use of administrative budgets and consultancies in

³ Information obtained from IPA Yearbook & Diary 2014 (Institute of Public Administration, 2013).

⁴ Slightly different arrangements are required of smaller departments and agencies than of large departments.

⁵ The number of specific VFM reports is not of itself a precise indicator of VFM-related activity. Some VFM-related reporting also appears in the annual report of the C&AG and some reports deal with more complex issues and are more resource consuming than others.

the civil service. In this latter category, in 2001 the Comptroller and Auditor General conducted a value for money audit of programme review practice (then known as the Expenditure Review Initiative (ERI)) to examine the extent to which the ERI achieved its objectives in the period 1997-2000 (Comptroller and Auditor General, 2002).

The quality of VFM audit reports is high. An external review of quality in 2008 found that the overall quality of seven VFM reports reviewed was good (Institute of Public Administration, 2008). Using criteria drawn from international practice, the mean score of the reports overall was 3.6, where 3 represents 'good' and 4 'very good'. No report scored under 3.

Evaluation in the Oireachtas

There is no institutionalised evaluation function in the Oireachtas (parliament). As Mayne, Divorski and Lemaire (1999: 44) note locating evaluation in the legislative branch can be challenging as they '... must respect the narrow line between objective comment on the performance of government policy and programmes, and the partisan debate that such information can stimulate'. On the other hand, evaluation located in the legislative branch is likely to address issues of interest to legislators and use by the legislative branch should be high (the issue of use is addressed further in section 3).

While there is no formal evaluation function, in recent years there has been a growth in the supply of evaluative information to parliament and its committees by the Oireachtas library and research service. They provide a service that aims to condense evaluative and other information into digestible material for busy parliamentarians. For example through their Spotlight series which provides an in-depth briefing on single topics such as tendering for public service provision and community policing.

2.2 Providing the resources for evaluation

2.2.1 Human resources

As well as location of the evaluation function influencing the supply of evaluation, so too does having a cohort of people with the necessary skills and competences needed to conduct high quality evaluations. Table 2.2 shows the range of knowledge and skills required of evaluators.

TABLE 2.2 KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS REQUIREMENTS FOR EVALUATORS

1. Knowledge and skills associated with research methodology
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Understanding of alternative paradigms and perspectives b. Methodological implications for alternative assumptions c. Planning and conducting research
2. Knowledge and skills needed for evaluation but borrowed from other areas
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Administration/business, e.g. project management b. Communication/psychology, e.g. oral and written communications, negotiation skills c. Philosophy, e.g. ethics, valuing d. Political science, e.g. policy analysis, legislation e. Anthropology, e.g. cross-cultural skills f. Economics, e.g. financial analysis, cost benefit and cost effectiveness analysis
3. Knowledge and skills unique to specific disciplines e.g. education, health
4. Knowledge and skills associated with understanding governmental functions e.g. budgeting, auditing, strategic planning

Toulemonde (1995) has developed a useful categorisation of evaluators along a continuum from professionals to amateurs. Evaluation professionals are knowledgeable about a range of techniques and methodologies and devote the majority of their work time to evaluation. Specialised professionals have similar experience but do not devote the majority of their time to evaluation. Craftsmen have a good knowledge of techniques usually in one particular area or field of expertise. Amateurs call some of their activities evaluation and have a partial knowledge of evaluation theories and techniques.

In Ireland, using Toulemonde's categorisation, most policy evaluation carried out within government departments has been done by amateurs. Most evaluation work undertaken for the VFMPR has been done by line managers who may have some methodological and subject area expertise but who would not see themselves as evaluators. An advantage of this approach is that staff conducting the evaluations are familiar with the subject area and well placed to take decisions. On the other hand their level of knowledge of evaluation methodologies may be limited, they may have other work pressures that lead to overload, and they may lack distance from the policy or programme.

An alternative is to develop specialised professionals and put them in dedicated posts or units. This occurs in a number of departments, such as the evaluation and audit unit in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, which has a small number of evaluation specialists. In 2012 the government established an Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Service (IGEES) which is intended to build economic and evaluation expertise (see Box 2.2) and develop dedicated units in government departments and offices.

BOX 2.2 THE IRISH GOVERNMENT ECONOMIC AND EVALUATION SERVICE

The Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Service (IGEES) was established in 2012 as an integrated cross-Government service to enhance the role of economics and value for money analysis in public policy making. The new service is intended to demonstrate the commitment of the government to a high and consistent standard of policy evaluation and economic analysis throughout the civil service.

IGEES is in part a restructuring of existing economic and evaluation resources into an inter-departmental network, with common training and support structures. The IGEES is comprised of specialist units operating in government departments. As at July 2014 there are fourteen government departments and offices involved. The Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport provides an example of good practice in creating an IGEES unit which has produced a number of good quality studies. It is planned to establish IGEES policy units in all departments and offices.

The heads of the IGEES units form the IGEES management board which is responsible for driving the development and performance of the service. The management board reports to the IGEES oversight board. The oversight board reviews overall performance and development, whilst also advising on best practice and the future direction of the service. Membership of the oversight board comprises senior civil servants, academics and external experts, who advise on developments in relation to economics and evaluation relevant to IGEES, assist in fostering increased interaction between IGEES and the economic and evaluation community, and advise on the strategic development of the service.

To 'kick start' the service, in 2012 twenty-seven economists were specifically recruited and appointed at administrative officer level. After initial training mainly based in the central departments of Public Expenditure and Reform, Finance and Taoiseach, these recruits are gradually being moved into dedicated analytical units in government departments. The intention is that they will remain in a department for a couple of years and then move on to another department or office.

Some early public commentary on the work produced by the IGEES suggests it is having a positive impact on policy evaluation⁶. A key challenge will be to maintain this dedicated capacity. As noted in section 1.2, previous attempts to develop a cohort of analysts had limited success as many of the specially trained analysts were given work in non-evaluation related departmental activity, once placed in departments, or on promotion they moved away from analysis work.

The Public Service Evaluation Network

The Public Service Evaluation Network (PSEN) was established in 2012 and comprises civil servants who are engaged in policy-related analytical work and experts in economics and related areas from the universities and the other research organisations. The purpose of the PSEN is to provide a forum for those engaged in policy evaluation to share experiences and expertise, to peer review analytical work and to facilitate the flow of information between the public service and external experts regarding evaluation, appraisal and policy analysis. Seminars have been held to promote cooperation between public service evaluators and external bodies such as the universities, the Economic and Social Research Institute and European experts. Outside the public service, the Irish Evaluation Network (IEN) fulfils a similar role for all evaluators in Ireland (http://www.dcu.ie/education_studies/ien/index.shtml) including those working in the private, voluntary and community sectors.

Insiders versus outsiders

A significant issue in ensuring access to people with appropriate skills and expertise is the extent to which staff are appointed and developed within the public service, or whether outside expertise is used. When using outside expertise it is more likely that the people contracted will be specialised professionals or evaluation professionals, as it is particular expertise that is being brought in. Sonnichsen (1999: 58) indicates that a mix of insiders and outsiders may offer the ideal combination, allowing access to outside expertise and distance from the programme when needed, while at the same time enabling organisations to take advantage of their internal evaluator's familiarity with the culture of the programme and access to decision makers.

The Public Spending Code⁷ sets out the formal position in Ireland with regard to the use of consultants for VFMPR evaluations:

The engagement of paid consultants to carry out VFMPRs, as a rule, is not permitted. The VFMPR work should be conducted from within the evaluation / policy analysis resources that are developed and maintained within each Department / Office. Exceptions can only be justified on the basis that a particularly complex piece of analysis is required and that the necessary skills are not available internally. Even where this is the case it is not a justification to outsource the whole review.

This desire not to use consultants in part arises from a desire to build up an evaluation capacity and culture within the civil service. In part it is also driven by a negative political and public perception with regard to the use of public money to fund work carried out by consultants more generally, and an assessment that the quality of reports produced by consultants is not necessarily higher than those produced internally.

2.2.2 Data and funding

Ruane (2012: 7) points out a historic data deficit in Ireland with regard to evaluation:

Compared to the UK, Ireland has been very poor in building data sets to inform policy design and evaluation. These data come from administrative records and can be used to establish baselines in relation to resources, costs, productivity, etc. These provide the starting point for evaluating the effectiveness of existing interventions or exploring new interventions. Furthermore, best practice is to establish metrics to measure outcomes ahead of the introduction of any new intervention rather than trying to pull together data to assess it after its introduction.

⁶ <http://www.independent.ie/opinion/columnists/stephen-kinsella/thinktanks-economic-blueprint-a-step-in-the-right-direction-30413258.html>

⁷ <http://publicspendingcode.per.gov.ie/reviewing-and-assessing-expenditure-programmes/>

Ensuring there is sufficient data to carry out evaluations remains a challenge. Several VFMPR studies have suffered from a lack of data availability which has hampered the ability to draw conclusions with regard to effectiveness and impact in particular. Some steps are being taken to improve the situation. DPER has established a new Databank website that provides information on government expenditure on a multi-annual basis. This is part of a wider open data initiative aimed at making data available and accessible online.

Centrally, a pilot IrelandStat project is intended to provide a whole-of-government performance measurement system with a particular focus on outcomes achieved. It aims to show what the government has achieved on a sectoral basis, what it did in order to deliver on those achievements, what it cost and how Ireland compares with other countries. There is an ability to drill down from headline data to obtain more detail on particular aspects of performance. At a sectoral level, the Irish longitudinal study on ageing (TILDA) and the Growing Up in Ireland longitudinal study are examples of data bases being established which will provide high quality, longitudinal survey data. More generally, it is important to recognise that quantitative data and qualitative information can complement each other and jointly strengthen evaluative work.

With regard to funding of evaluation, there are no readily available figures on the costs associated with undertaking evaluations. A UK National Audit Office (2013) study also found it difficult to obtain reliable, accurate information from departments on overall spending on evaluation. They did however identify £44 million of expenditure on externally commissioned evaluations in 2010-11, with staff input of around 100 full-time equivalents (FTEs) at an estimated cost of £5 million. Evaluation is itself not a cost-free activity.

2.3 Conclusions and recommendations

The general approach being taken to anchoring the evaluation regime in Irish government is sound. Evaluation is being anchored in a number of locations, notably at corporate central government level, within departments and agencies, and in the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General.

Evaluability assessment of programmes and policies should be undertaken as a first step for those areas identified for potential evaluation (such as through a VFMPR), to determine if sufficient data is available to conduct an evaluation. Where this is not the case, a data collection strategy should be developed and implemented within an agreed timescale to facilitate future evaluation.

The Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Service (IGEES) is an important initiative and needs to be further developed and monitored. In particular:

- The expansion of IGEES units to cover all departments should be pursued as a matter of priority
- Thought should be given to how best to maintain expertise within IGEES and for the expertise not to be dissipated as with previous initiatives of a similar nature. This will have to allow for turnover and promotion out, and require careful manpower planning, persistent mobility arrangements and the development of a career path within the service.
- The IGEES management and oversight boards should periodically review outputs and outcomes from the activity of IGEES to determine the value added of the service.

The Public Spending Code should be modified to allow greater use of outsiders in the conduct of evaluations. In this context a key requirement is that insiders have the capacity to manage evaluations effectively and be 'educated consumers' of evaluation.

3. CREATING THE CONDITIONS TO ENSURE EVALUATION IS USED

3.1 Linking evaluation with budgeting, auditing, strategic planning

If evaluation is to be a mainstream element of the governance system, then it needs to be linked to other government activities such as budgeting, auditing and strategic planning if it is to be used and useful when conducting these activities. If evaluation is not seen as useful when conducting the budget or audit process or when drawing up plans its role may be questioned. In particular, the link between evaluation and budgeting is one that has received increased prominence during the fiscal crisis of recent years.

3.1.1 Evaluation and budgeting

There is some evidence that evaluation, to date, has been of limited use in Ireland when it comes to budgetary decision-making. Smyth (2007) analysed thirteen VFM reviews carried out in the Department of Agriculture and Food between 1998 and 2007. Of ninety-nine conclusions and recommendations assessed, he found none recommended programme termination; fourteen supported the status quo and the remainder largely focused on minor programme alterations or changes in management processes. He makes the point that:

It is quite obvious that these reviews look at areas of efficiency and effectiveness that must be addressed within the programmes themselves rather than a more fundamental process of evaluation that points to the need for a continuation of the scheme or programme or the need to radically redistribute resources between various programmes.

This point was emphasised in 2009 when the government established a Special Group on Public Service Numbers and Expenditure Programmes to examine the current expenditure programmes in each government department and to make recommendations for reducing public service numbers aimed at ensuring a return to sustainable public finances. In examining the outputs from the VFMPR, the Special Group noted a general deficiency of information regarding the public service impacts associated with particular items of expenditure. The Group found that the VFMPRs had limited success in redirecting scarce resources away from lower-priority, lower-performing areas to areas where they can be put to more productive use (Report of the Special Group on Public Service Numbers and Expenditure Programmes, 2009: 23). The Group recommended (2009: 23-24) that:

... competency should be developed to allow expenditure programmes to be challenged and tested, on the basis of independent and publicly-available evaluation of value-for-money and effectiveness. This competency should be developed through enhanced VFM & Policy Reviews that are more tightly woven into the resource allocation process and through a stronger role for an independent body such as the Comptroller & Auditor General (C&AG).

However, an analysis conducted for this paper suggests that VFMPRs remain of limited use for resource allocation decisions. An assessment was undertaken of recommendations contained in nineteen VFMPR reports published between 2011 and June 2014, as well as in five evaluation papers produced by the central expenditure evaluation unit in DP&ER on cross-cutting issues (Table 3.1). It can be seen from the table that with regard to VFMPR recommendations, the findings produced by Smyth are supported. Of the 428 recommendations assessed, only

1 per cent recommended programme or part programme termination. The overwhelming majority (94 per cent) recommended programme adjustments.

By way of contrast, the recommendations produced by the CEEU in their cross-cutting evaluation reports are more likely to suggest substantial re-design of the programme (55 per cent of the 29 recommendations) or programme/part-programme termination (10 per cent).

TABLE 3.1 ANALYSIS OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM IRISH GOVERNMENT EVALUATION REPORTS (ALL FIGURES IN PERCENTAGES)

	Adjustment of programme (for example changed processes, targeting criteria, or new/improved information systems)	Substantial redesign of programme or organisational structure	Programme or part-programme termination
VFMPR recommendations from 19 VFMPR reports	94	5	1
Recommendations from 5 CEEU cross-cutting evaluation reports	35	55	10

These points support the contention by Mayne, Divorski and Lemaire (1999) as outlined in section 2.1 and Table 2.1 that evaluation carried out close to the programme or policy is effective at addressing operational issues but less likely to address impact and continued relevance issues. To examine continued relevance and impact requires some distance from the programme or policy, as is achieved by a corporate group in a central department such as the CEEU.

This is not to minimise the importance of recommendations aimed at improving how a programme or policy operates. Many of the recommendations in the VFMPR reports examined (provided they are implemented) would have a significant positive effect on the quality and efficiency of service provided to the public. The point is that, when evaluating for budgeting, it is unlikely that VFMPRs, on the whole, will provide evidence that will inform resource re-allocation decisions. Such activity requires dedicated evaluation resources provided at a distance from the programme or policy.

Robinson (2014) reaches a similar conclusion in an assessment of the role evaluation can play in the budgetary process at times of fiscal austerity when the pressures for evidence to support expenditure prioritisation have increased:

The choice of evaluation topics and the scope of evaluations need to focus on identifying ineffective or low-priority government programs that should be terminated or scaled back to assist either in reducing government expenditure or in creating additional 'fiscal space' for high-priority new expenditures. The differing needs and requirements of evaluation for budgetary purposes, as opposed to evaluation for management and policy improvement purposes, need to be recognized. The notion that a single government-wide evaluation system can serve both of these purposes effectively should be reconsidered (Robinson, 2014: 6).

Robinson (2014: 30) recommends that for budgetary purposes the focus should be on outcome evaluations and programme logic analysis, as these are the approaches that will provide evidence of most assistance to decision-makers interested in resource allocation decisions. And that central agencies should control and manage a schedule of such evaluations specifically designed to support budget preparation. A study of evaluation and budgeting in the Netherlands, similarly, suggest that the Ministry of Finance should drive the process (see Box 3.1)

BOX 3.1 LINKING EVALUATION AND THE BUDGET IN THE NETHERLANDS

There are four key lessons identified from the experience in the Netherlands:

1. The Ministry of Finance must initiate its own evaluation instruments, in addition to government-wide evaluation frameworks, to tailor information to the budgeting process (timely and focused). To ensure impact, a high-level principal at the political level (the Cabinet) is necessary.
2. Basic rules with respect to quality and quality control enhance the integrity of evaluations for budgetary decision making. For the credibility of the evaluation reports, it is important to draw a clear distinction between the technical evaluation phase (independent from current political preferences) and political decision-making processes.
3. Increasing the amount of formal regulations and rules is not the answer to overcoming the inherent information asymmetry between the Ministry of Finance and line ministries. In the Netherlands, evaluation instruments with the highest impact are initiated by the Ministry of Finance – instead of being part of a government-wide evaluation framework that all ministries must adhere to – and are guided by well understood informal practices.
4. Each spending ministry has a disincentive to share with the Ministry of Finance more than the strictly necessary information on true budgetary needs, on the effectiveness and efficiency of spending, and on progress with policy implementation. Line ministries fear that divulging this type of information may result in budget reductions. This information asymmetry could perhaps be overcome by the involvement of independent experts in evaluations in which independent experts, line ministries and the Ministry of Finance work together.

Source: Schoch and den Broeder, 2013: 2.

In an Irish context, the comprehensive review of expenditure (CRE), a periodic spending review introduced in 2011 and repeated in 2014, represents an important part of the medium-term expenditure framework for budgetary decision-making and one that evaluation should feed into. The CEEU cross-cutting evaluation reports noted in Table 3.1 were conducted as part of the support work for CRE 2011.

More generally, from 2012 the budgetary process moved to a 'whole of year' timetable. Oireachtas committees feed their views into the process starting in the spring of each year. It is expected that by the autumn of each year committees will be informed by the VFMPRs produced by departments. Evaluative information contained in the Estimates (performance budgeting) is also meant to inform budgetary decision making.

3.1.2 Other evaluation linkages

Strategic planning and auditing are the other government functions listed at the start of this section that evaluation should link with to enhance its use.

Evaluation can feed into strategic planning in a number of ways. In particular, evaluation can provide a basis for planning through providing evidence about previous and existing programmes and policies. A scan of departmental statements of strategy for the word evaluation found that most strategy statements included a reference or two to evaluation, but normally just in the context of saying that they plan to use evaluation to better inform actions. There is little evidence of evaluation studies being explicitly referenced as being used to help formulate the strategies contained in the statements¹⁰. In the USA, government agency strategic plans must contain a description of programme evaluations used in the development of the plan, and a schedule for future evaluations.

Evaluation and auditing can be complementary, in that both are normally retrospective and are used as a means of managing accountability. However, there are differences, in that auditing tends to address normative questions and to rely heavily on authoritative documentary sources, whereas evaluation is more aimed at cause and effect questions and more likely to use qualitative data. But boundaries between evaluation and auditing are blurring, particularly with the development of performance auditing (Lonsdale, Wilkins and Ling, 2011).

The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade has a joint evaluation and audit unit that produces both evaluation and audit reports. This provides for mutual understanding and learning between evaluators and auditors.

3.2 Building an evaluation culture

In the Irish context, the experience is that there is no such thing as an evaluation culture as exemplified by evaluation practice. In reality, there are competing cultures, underpinned by differing value emphases, and it is in the interplay between these competing cultures, influenced by changing economic and social conditions, that evaluation practice and demand emerges and is shaped. During the boom times of the Celtic Tiger years in the late 1990s and early 2000s, values of partnership and consensus prevailed. These helped shape an evaluation practice based primarily around improvement of programmes. While the rhetoric of evaluation contained many of the phrases of new public management proponents such as accountability and value for money, in practice a more developmental focus is evident (McNamara et al, 2009). Evaluation in this context was welcomed as an aid to decision making, but at the same time there was widespread recognition of the limitations of evaluation as it was being practiced.

The rapid economic decline of the late 2000s has led to the shattering of the social partnership and consensus approach. Values of efficiency, performance and compliance are more to the fore. This is shaping evaluation practice in a different way. There is growing articulation of the need for critical, centrally driven evaluations that will inform resource reduction and resource reallocation decisions. More generally, there is a view expressed by some practitioners that evaluation is at best an irrelevance and at worst a management tool used by the front line to justify expenditure when what is needed is simply expenditure control. Developing an evaluation culture in the public service in this context is a challenging task. Irish attempts to develop an evaluation culture in the public service have, in practice, been to develop evaluation cultures in different settings and contexts and with changes in emphasis over time.

3.2.1 Using carrots, sticks and sermons

In building an evaluation culture that helps foster demand for evaluation and evaluative information, it can be helpful to think about using a mix of incentives and sanctions (carrots and sticks) to promote demand. Toulemonde

¹⁰ While the term evaluation may not be used in the statement of strategy, this does not necessarily mean that findings from evaluations are not being used to inform strategy development. It may be that they were used as part of the evidence base but not referred to, or that some other phrase such as review or value for money study was used instead.

(1999) notes a number of incentives and sanctions that can be used. Incentives include earmarking of funds for evaluation purposes, establishing career paths for evaluators and systematic consultation and involvement of stakeholders. Sanctions include making evaluation compulsory, the right to ask evaluation questions and systematic quality assessment. As Box 3.2 illustrates, sanctions can be effective in some circumstances. Toulemonde recommends the use of a judicious mix of sticks and carrots.

'Sermons' are an additional tool available, based on the premise that establishing an evaluation culture requires a certain amount of preaching about the benefits. Toulemonde (1999: 167) notes that for evaluation, sermons take the form of conferences, workshops, training courses, newsletters and journals and that: 'They make extensive use of demonstration projects, success stories, visits to good practitioners, prizes and awards'.

BOX 3.2 'NAMING AND SHAMING' CAN IMPROVE PERFORMANCE

'Name and shame' is the idea that indicators work not because they inform bureaucratic overseers, nor because they help consumers pick the best services, but simply because nobody wants the embarrassment of propping up the bottom of a league table. A research paper by Hibbard, Stockard and Tusler (2003) found evidence that the 'name and shame' approach can work.

Hibbard and her colleagues used an experimental design to evaluate the impact on quality improvement of reporting hospital performance publicly rather than privately back to the hospital. In a study conducted in Wisconsin (randomly assigning some hospitals to getting a public report and others to getting a private report or no report at all) they found that making performance public appears to stimulate quality improvement activities in areas where performance is reported to be low. Hospitals cited a concern for their reputation as a motivating factor.

Source: adapted from Harford, 2014.

3.2.2 Political engagement

Political support for evaluation is an important driver in determining a culture in the public service supportive of evaluation. But the challenge of securing political engagement with policy evaluation studies is significant, and one that is widespread internationally. Given the breadth of topics that politicians must engage with, combined with the time pressures on them, and their focus on their own political priorities, it is very difficult to get engagement with what are largely retrospective and sometimes lengthy reports on policies or programmes.

There are a couple of main methods used by the Oireachtas library and research service of relevance to getting evaluative information to politicians in a way that encourages use:

- a) Providing short, condensed papers focused on providing concise information on issues of particular interest to politicians, such as how a programme is working, has it worked elsewhere and if so how will it translate, and is it cost effective.
- b) Providing opportunities for face-to-face meetings with academics and others who can provide an explanation of the evidence arising from evaluation and research studies and key issues arising. This is increasingly happening with pre-legislative scrutiny, where the library and information service prepares a stakeholder selection paper indicating people with an interest and knowledge of the area under scrutiny, and the Oireachtas committees then themselves decide who they will call to give evidence.

The library and research service are also examining the potential of an evidence based seminar series, along the lines of that developed by the Northern Ireland Assembly (see Box 3.3)

BOX 3.3 KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE SEMINAR SERIES (KESS)

The underlying aim of the Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series (KESS) is promoting evidence-led policy and law-making within Northern Ireland. KESS formally partners the legislative arm of government – the Northern Ireland Assembly – with academia. KESS provides a forum to present and disseminate research findings in a straightforward format, across the programme for government; making those findings easily accessible to decision-makers such as MLAs and Assembly committees, as well as the wider public sector.

KESS is jointly delivered by the research and information service of the Assembly (RaISe), in partnership with the three universities located in Northern Ireland – Queen’s University Belfast, the University of Ulster and the Open University.

The series presents networking opportunities, attracting a broad spectrum of attendees. These include: MLAs and their staff; Assembly staff; public and private sector employees; academics; voluntary and community groups; and, members of the public.

Source: <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/Assembly-Business/Research-and-Information-Service-RaISe/Knowledge-Exchange/>

3.2.3 External support for building evaluation culture

Those outside of government can have a role to play in helping build a culture supportive of evaluation. A good example is the role philanthropies have had in spreading a culture of using evaluation for learning in the projects and programmes they grant support. Most prominent in Ireland is The Atlantic Philanthropies. They build an evaluation line into the budget of all the projects they fund and also, working with government agencies, commission evaluation. In some areas, such as working with children and youth, ageing and human rights, this has led to the creating of a wealth of evaluative data from both evaluations and research studies.

The intervention of philanthropies has also raised the profile of an outcome focused approach to evaluation and the use of rigorous methodologies. For example, with regard to the children and youth programme funded by The Atlantic Philanthropies, over twenty evaluations using randomised control trials (RCTs) have been carried out. RCTs were virtually unheard of in Ireland outside of the medical area before this intervention. Such studies can provide good data on whether projects are working as intended (see Box 3.4). And as a by-product of this approach, there has been an increase in the capacity base of evaluators, by skilling up evaluation practitioners (particularly in research institutions) in the use of sophisticated evaluation methodologies.

BOX 3.4 USING EVALUATION TO DETERMINE WHAT WORKS: A TALE OF TWO CONTRASTING PROJECTS

The Childhood Development Initiative (CDI) in West Tallaght, Dublin, is part of a prevention and early intervention programme, a joint initiative of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and The Atlantic Philanthropies. CDI was set up with the objective of testing innovative ways of delivering services and early interventions for children and young people.

Amongst the projects supported by CDI were Mate-Tricks and Doodle Den. Mate-Tricks was an after-school programme designed to promote pro-social behaviour amongst children aged 9-10. The evaluation included a randomised controlled trial to measure the effects of the programme on child outcomes and a process evaluation that investigated its implementation. The evaluation found that even though it was positively received by participants, Mate-Tricks did not achieve the changes in behaviour which it was designed to support (O’Hare et al., 2012). It was decided not to continue with the initiative.

Doodle Den aimed at improving literacy outcomes for young children in a disadvantaged community through an after-school literacy programme. Using a randomised control trial, the evaluation found improvements in children's overall literacy ability. The evaluation also found that Doodle Den led to improved concentration and reduced problem behaviours in school, an increase in family library activity, and in the child's reading at home (Biggart et al, 2012). Since completion of the evaluation, CDI has continued the delivery of Doodle Den in the seven participating schools. It has also been extended to a number of locations outside Tallaght.

3.3 Conclusions and recommendations

Linking evaluation and budgeting is a particularly important and challenging function. With regard to the periodic comprehensive reviews of expenditure (CRE) and budgets generally, when examining cross-departmental and priority expenditure items the main evaluation activity to support budgetary decision making should be undertaken or coordinated by CEEU. Experience suggests that VFMPRs, even with a strong central involvement, will only provide evidence of limited use for budgeting. Topics selected for evaluations or centrally conducted focused policy assessments should typically be cross-cutting in nature, have significant budgetary implications, and be areas where there is a concern as to continued relevance and/or effectiveness and efficiency.

VFMPRs should primarily be concerned with looking at ways to improve departmental level programmes. The focus should be on effectiveness and efficiency, the scope for alternative delivery mechanisms, and generally be based on the programme logic approach. Maintenance of a role by DPER in the reviews is important to ensure a degree of independence and quality control.

Departmental-level focused policy assessments (FPAs) should focus on specific, identified aspects of effectiveness and/or efficiency.

There should be periodic evaluation of the evaluation regime, by both the Comptroller and Auditor General and DPER¹¹. This should include issues such as:

- The extent to which new spending proposals include a detailed plan for evaluation and monitoring which conform to the guidance in the code (Public Spending Code, section 4.4)
- The timeframe for completion of VFMPRs (the Public Spending Code suggests 6-9 months and targeted for completion in autumn each year to fit in with the budgetary process)
- The quality of evaluative evidence produced by VFMPRs and FPAs
- The coverage and impact of evaluation findings and recommendations
- An assessment of the cost of undertaking evaluation, to determine the value added

The CEEU website should, as set out in the Public Spending Code, show the proposed schedule of VFMPRs, a simple tracking document on all VFMPR deliverables and maintain a central repository of all reports to facilitate open access to the data.

Efforts should continue to engage politicians with evaluation findings. Experiments should be undertaken to determine the benefits of greater use of shorter, focused summaries and oral briefings on findings.

¹¹ The role of DPER itself, and the IGEES, should also be subject to periodic review.

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