Ireland Stat – Government performance measurement[1]

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Introduction

Over the last year or so, the government has developed and introduced a suite of reforms to the public expenditure framework.[2] These reforms present challenges to those involved in public administration insofar as they restructure long-standing approaches to public financial reporting, but they also present opportunities for the development of evidence-based policymaking. The recent launch of the *Ireland Stat* pilot portal (www.irelandstat.gov.ie) is one important component of the broader reform agenda, and it is opportune to set out the background and the rationale for this initiative, and to solicit the views of policymakers and the public about its future development. *Ireland Stat* is a web-based, whole-of-government performance-measurement portal that has been developed by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. *Ireland Stat* builds upon the 'performance budgeting' approach that has been implemented over the past two years, whereby the annual *Book of Estimates* has been recast to show information on inputs (financial and staffing) alongside outputs and impacts. Performance budgeting is perhaps the single most radical restructuring of the traditional *Estimates* documentation that has been introduced over recent decades, but it is essentially an 'inward-looking' reform, aimed at streamlining administrative processes and facilitating parliamentary scrutiny. *Ireland Stat* aims to

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[1] Any views and opinions expressed in this paper are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of either the Minister or the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform.

[2] Further details are available in the *Comprehensive Expenditure Report 2012–2014* (Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, 2011).

repurpose this information – along with other useful data – in a public-facing, user-friendly manner. As a pilot initiative, the project team will be reviewing whether and how it should be rolled out to other departments and offices, and examining how to develop the project to better meet the needs of those who use it.[3]

Background: Moving from financial to performance metrics

The *Ireland Stat*/performance budgeting initiatives are seeking to change how people think about policy, and both initiatives seek to support the use of performance data and 'evidence' in Irish policymaking. As their starting point, these initiatives rely upon a single coherent way of presenting the complex array of information that relates to each specific policy programme.

Both initiatives provide policymakers and other stakeholders with data on the costs, activities and achievements of government policy. The intention is to shift the emphasis of resource-allocation policy from the traditional focus on financial resources or 'inputs' toward the public services that are delivered with these resources (the 'outputs') and the contribution these services make to Irish society (the 'impacts' or 'outcomes').

The need to make room for data/evidence in policymaking has been a recurring theme in Irish administration over many years. In 2007 the National Economic and Social Forum held a conference entitled 'Evidence-Based Policy Making: Getting the Evidence, Using the Evidence and Evaluating the Outcomes'. In their paper on the current relationship between research and evidence-based policymaking in Ireland, Hearne & Watt (2011, p. 152) point to the need for a stronger evidential basis for policy, observing that 'basing policy decisions on the most complete evidence should lead to better outcomes'. Boyle & MacCarthaigh (2011, p. 20) argue that there is 'a need to further develop the system for evaluation of public expenditure in Ireland', noting that the impact of past initiatives (such as the Value for Money and Policy Review Programme) has been 'limited' and 'does not address in a comprehensive manner the fundamental questions relating to the continued relevance of expenditure programmes'. Recently, Ruane (2012, p. 121–2) noted that there was a 'growing gap between the rhetoric and reality in the late 1990s/early 2000s in

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relation to "evidence-based policy" and evidence-based approaches to evaluation' and that 'money was spent on many "nice to have" rather than "need to have" projects and programmes, with little apparent regard to evidence-based prioritisation in the decision-making process'.

If *Ireland Stat* and performance budgeting are to succeed in contributing to a stronger performance focus and evaluation culture in Ireland, they will need to capture the imagination and attention of the public and policymakers alike, beyond the level of success that has been evident from initiatives in place up to now.

Design principles for *Ireland Stat*

Even in a small country such as Ireland, government (in the general sense, which encompasses the totality of public administration) is a large and complex entity with countless services and programmes being delivered by a range of departments, offices and agencies. Presenting all of this information in a uniform way that is comprehensible and usable by the public and the political system is a challenge to be addressed in the first instance by public servants ourselves.

Both *Ireland Stat* and performance budgeting are built upon a single organising principle for presenting public service information. Departments' statements of strategy, which set out a number of 'high-level goals', are the anchor documents. For the purposes of performance budgeting, these goals are now re-presented in the *Estimates of Expenditure* as the strategic 'programmes', around which the key information about financial inputs, staffing resources, outputs and outcomes is shown.

Ireland Stat takes this approach further. Previously, someone interested in a particular policy area would have to engage in a time-consuming task of bringing together the financial and human resources information from the *Estimates* with the performance information provided across several different publications, including statements of strategy, annual reports (both departmental and agency-specific), annual output statements, policy strategy documents and official sources of statistics such as Central Statistics Office and Eurostat reports. *Ireland Stat* draws together much of the key information from these sources and should provide a useful platform for both citizens and professional researchers to examine the questions they are interested in.

An important advantage that *Ireland Stat* has over the *Estimates* is that it is not limited in terms of the volume of information it can present or how it can present it. In the *Estimates*, performance information for each programme is restricted to a single page so that decision-makers have the key information available to them 'at a glance'. While this has the additional advantage of departments prioritising what they regard as the key information, the 'at a glance' presentation means that there is only a very limited amount of space available, with the obvious consequences for the depth of information that can be provided. It is also more difficult to differentiate between departments' performance information and that of the agencies under their aegis. Furthermore, in terms of making the information accessible to a wide and diverse audience, the traditional 'department/office' structure of the *Estimates*, while important for those who work in government circles, may not hold quite the same level of interest and fascination for the public.

Piloting the *Ireland Stat* model

The main parameters of *Ireland Stat* were outlined in December 2011 when the government announced in the *Comprehensive Expenditure Report 2012–2014* that a whole-of-government performance measurement portal (then referred to as 'GovStat') would be piloted in 2012 to assess if the approach was viable. The government announced that this would be a publicly available portal designed to measure the delivery of the government's goals over time by linking them to relevant outputs and outcomes.

Over the past year, implementation of the pilot project has been under way. The first aim was to test the concept by developing the database, constructing the website (with consideration given to both its presentation and ease of use) and testing the design with data from a number of programmes to determine if it could deliver as expected. A key challenge that the pilot phase had to overcome was identifying appropriate measures to include. While information on financial inputs was readily available in the *Estimates*, there is no centralised list of all public service outputs or, for that matter, of 'context and impact indicators' – as the various outcome-related measures in the *Estimates* are referred to – other than the summary, high-level material published in the *Estimates* themselves. In order to address this problem, the project team focused on the information that departments and their agencies had already published. This meant

that the departments involved with the pilot project were already familiar with the types of measures and data to be included, and would also avoid the complications associated with developing new measures and devising new data-collection methodologies. The project team then circulated the draft lists of indicators to the participating departments and offices, asking them to examine the indicators and suggest other indicators that ought to be included. Officials from the project team then met with their colleagues in the line departments to discuss any issues that had arisen and, following these meetings, departments returned the completed templates.

A parallel element of the pilot project involved a significant information technology project that would be used to house and display the data online. This project was completed using the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform's own resources, with the exception of engaging an external web design company to design the graphics and the 'look and feel' of the website. An important factor for the ICT element of the project was to construct a system that would provide for a sustainable portal – i.e. that would allow the structure to evolve and data to be updated as necessary. All the data in the *Ireland Stat* website are stored in a back-end database, and as the user clicks on areas of interest the website dynamically retrieves and displays the data from the database. A web interface was developed to give the project team full control of creating, updating and ordering the various groups of metrics and their associated data and methodologies. These changes are dynamically reflected on the website.

The programmes selected for inclusion in the pilot project were at a sufficiently advanced stage in the *Estimates* to populate data into most elements of the expected structure of the database while also presenting problems of a general nature that allowed for solutions to be developed in anticipation of the wider roll-out of the project to other programmes. Rather than present the programmes within their departmental structure, they have been reconfigured into a more limited number of 'policy themes', which are designed to be of more immediate relevance to users generally. The seven programmes included in the pilot phase are listed in Table 1.

The design of *Ireland Stat* also tries to address the needs of a variety of different audiences, including citizens, members of the Oireachtas and those who have a professional interest in policy as academics, policy analysts, journalists and public servants. In order to be able to achieve this, the portal is designed to allow people to drill down from

Table 1: Programmes of pilot phase

Programme	Department	Policy theme
Agri–Food	Agriculture, Food and the Marine	Economy
Food safety	Agriculture, Food and the Marine	Environment
Rural economy	Agriculture, Food and the Marine	Environment
Jobs and enterprise	Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation	Economy
Innovation	Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation	Economy
Land transport	Transport, Tourism and Sport	Transport
Flood-risk management	Office of Public Works	Environment

indicators that focus on the programme's goals to those that set out very specific types of information about 'actions' of particular agencies.

Another important feature is that the portal is designed to address four key questions:

i.   What has the programme achieved? The impacts or outcomes that public policy is aiming to influence. The approach that has been taken is to include relevant measures, even those that are not directly or fully controlled by government because of other social and economic factors. The emphasis is on providing the public with a clear sense of the broad 'direction of travel' to show whether or not progress is being made. (These are referred to as context and impact indicators in the *Estimates*.)

ii.   What actions were taken to achieve the programme's goals? The tasks and work-steps that transform financial inputs into services – in a sense, the services that the public are 'buying'. (These are referred to as outputs and public service activities in the *Estimates*.)

iii.   How much did the programme cost? The amount of money allocated under each programme with pay and non-pay costs clearly set out. Previously, this information was only provided for the vote as a whole.

iv.   How does Ireland compare with other EU countries? While a small number of comparative indicators were included in the *Estimates*, *Ireland Stat* includes a specific section for comparisons and provides data for the years 2008–2011.

The data associated with each measure are presented using two formats – bar chart and table. It is possible to export these presentations into different formats (.pdf, .xls or .doc) and, as each

presentation has a URL with a unique reference, each presentation can be forwarded to a colleague via email using its URL.

Another feature of the pilot website is the use of coloured arrows to indicate whether the performance of the highest level of 'achievement' indicators is 'improving', 'worsening' or 'being maintained'. The direction of the arrows is based on three criteria. First, the 'performance trend' compares the most recent year with the previous year (e.g. data for 2011 are compared with data from 2010). Second, if the change in performance is between +2 and –2 per cent, a yellow horizontal arrow is used to indicate that 'performance is being maintained'. Third, the upward or downward direction of the arrow depends on whether or not change is in a direction that is associated with 'improving' (i.e. green upward arrow) or 'worsening' performance (i.e. red downward arrow). In most cases there is a straightforward relationship between the direction of the arrow and the preferred trend in the data (i.e. an upward arrow associated with an increasing year-to-year trend in the data). However, in some cases the preferred direction of the trend is a decrease – that is, a reduction in the number of events; for instance, a reduction in the number of road fatalities is the preferred trend and a green upward arrow is used to indicate that 'performance is improving'.

How should we develop *Ireland Stat*?

The project team within the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, which includes personnel from the Expenditure Policy/Evaluation, Public Service Reform and Delivery, and ICT sides, are keen to receive feedback from all users – including public servants – on the *Ireland Stat* portal and how it might be developed and improved. A structured consultation process is underway, and respondents have been asked in particular to consider some or all of the following issues: the use of policy themes, the presentation of information, the overall ease of use, and the data and measures presented on the website. This section sets out a number of other issues that those with experience or interest in good public administration might also wish to consider.

What *Ireland Stat* is seeking to do is provide people with access to meaningful and relevant whole-of-government performance information. As to how this project might be developed, it is useful to set what has been done against Boyle's (2009) six key attributes to the good design of reporting performance.

A consistent, comparable and structured approach to underpin reported indicators

Each programme is associated with a high-level goal in a department's statement of strategy and the information is structured on addressing a number of questions:

- What did the programme achieve?
- What actions were taken to achieve the goal?
- How much does the programme cost?
- How does Ireland compare with other EU countries?

To address the issue of data quality, background information is provided for each indicator. It is recognised that there remains an ongoing need to review and improve the quality of the methodological information that is provided.

Furthermore, to ensure data quality, it is important that the system is developed so that, in principle at least, the data generated are capable of being subject to audit in due course.

A good 'performance story' to accompany the indicators

At the current stage of development, *Ireland Stat* is almost wholly focused on presenting information in quantitative form. While in time it may be possible to include narratives that provide greater detail on performance, the challenge for the moment is to capture a suite of high-quality performance indicators. (One of the criticisms of annual output statements was that they were 'wordy' and the text provided was often 'broad-brush' and lacked specific relevance.)

As acknowledged earlier, there is also the issue of the extent to which the 'achievements' are a consequence of the 'actions' of a department and/or its agencies under a programme. While acknowledging this attribution problem, the *Ireland Stat*/performance budgeting initiatives have sought to address it by referring to 'context and impact' indicators (in the *Estimates*) and 'achievements' (in *Ireland Stat*), rather than to 'outcomes', and by focusing on how performance has changed over time ('direction of travel'). A simple way of thinking about the measures included is that they are the kinds of measures that someone might examine when trying to evaluate whether or not the programme is having the intended impact; if the trend is going in the wrong direction, it might indicate that something about the programme needs to be changed.

Clearly specified outcome indicators and attention to detail

In identifying and selecting the 'achievements' indicators, the project team sought to ensure that they related to some element of the high-level goal. However, as with the other indicators included in both initiatives, there is an ongoing need to review what has been included and replace poor or badly focused indicators.

In *Ireland Stat* some indicators have crossed *genera*, especially with regard to presenting information on agencies (i.e. including data on 'costs' and 'achievements' under the 'actions' tab), but this has mainly been the result of wanting to include the measures in the portal and this has (hopefully) been acknowledged, where relevant, within the methodology information.

Information on targets, baseline data and trends over time to guide performance assessment

The structure of *Ireland Stat* allows data to be presented for the years 2008 to 2011, and each indicator has at least two points.

Over the period ahead, consideration will be given to the benchmarking of these indicators against targets, but for the moment the project team is focused on capturing the trend data and putting in place a method for extending *Ireland Stat* to all programmes should the decision be taken to do so.

Good presentation and effective use of technology

The project team has sought to develop a portal that presents performance information that will be of interest to a diverse range of users using a variety of different approaches:

- grouping programmes by policy themes rather than departments to try and capture how people think about policy;
- addressing a number of key questions to allow people to determine how they find their way around the portal and allowing users to drill down to the level of detail that most interests them;
- using coloured arrows to provide a quick snapshot of the general direction of travel of the programme in relation to its high-level goals;
- presenting information in both figures and tables and providing a method by which these can be exported to other platforms.

A pilot app for smartphones has also been developed as a 'proof-of-concept', and may prove to be a useful medium for accessing and disseminating the key data as and when the project reaches maturity.

Output and activity indicators as well as outcome indicators when discussing organisational performance

As noted above, *Ireland Stat* already presents a wide range of performance information, although work remains to be done on improving the quality of the information presented and in terms of capturing the important work by departments that is not as amenable to the quantitative approach of the website (e.g. policy advice, legislation).

If any one factor is capable of determining the long-term viability of the *Ireland Stat*/performance budgeting initiatives, it is that the information provided is used and is seen to be used. Boyle & MacCarthaigh (2011, p. 20) note that there is a need to develop 'more public data on the performance of expenditure programmes as determined by evaluative activity'. It is hoped that, as the portal develops, researchers both within and outside the public service will find information available on *Ireland Stat* that contributes to their evaluations of programmes. In addition to this, performance information can be used to enhance accountability. For instance, various parties may be in a position to use the performance information to interrogate departments about their performance and such information will play an increasing role in resource-allocation decisions, as well as putting pressure on all of us as public servants to improve the quality of information that we supply.

That said, the stage of development of both of these initiatives needs to be acknowledged. At present they are probably at what Boyle & MacCarthaigh (2011, p. 41) regard as the most basic stage of making government data available to citizens. The ultimate aim of an initiative such as *Ireland Stat* may be Boyle & MacCarthaigh's more advanced stage of 'giving citizens more control and more informed choices with regard to public services they use and/or pay for'. At present the focus is on advancing *Ireland Stat* in a structured manner, and there is a danger that too much could be expected of this initiative in its early stages of development. A failure to meet 'unfounded' expectations of what the initiative can deliver may discourage people from engaging with the volume of information that has been provided. It should be emphasised that the current format is geared toward prompting questions about what public expenditure delivers in terms of services and the impact of these services.

What has been done so far are the first steps in developing a system that is intended to be widened (to include all government

programmes) and deepened (by developing greater linkages between 'inputs', 'outputs' and 'outcomes'). A review of the pilot project is now underway and following that review a decision will be taken as to whether or not almost eighty other programmes should be brought within the ambit of *Ireland Stat*. Even though only seven programmes were encompassed by the pilot project, the portal presents data for over 480 indicators. A significant amount of work was undertaken by officials in the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and by their colleagues in the other departments to bring the *Ireland Stat* project to this first level of development. One of the questions that will need to be addressed in the review is how to extend this approach to other programmes in a manner that is deliverable and sustainable, if that is the decision taken by the government in due course.

Finally, there is the challenge of how to deepen linkages between the various types of performance information. While the three key areas of 'costs', 'actions' and 'achievements' are presented within the context of a programme, and in some cases there are associations between the funding provided for a particular agency and its actions, there is arguably a need to develop the set of links between what 'actions' are associated with what 'costs' and what are the resulting 'achievements'. The development of these linkages could contribute to building a more sophisticated system of inputting performance information into resource-allocation decisions and ultimately to better decisions.

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