

# Evaluation, research and policy analysis

**Three Year Strategy 2024 – 2026**

Department of Rural and Community Development

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**An Roinn Forbartha  
Tuaithe agus Pobail**  
Department of Rural and  
Community Development

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## Introduction

The purpose of this document is to set out the Research and Evaluation Unit's three-year Strategy, 2024-2026. This builds on the two preceding strategies and continues any working items from the 2022-2024 strategy delayed due to changes in resources.

This 2024-2026 Strategy reflects the evolution of the Department and the Research and Evaluation function in the context of the following:

- D/RCD Organisational Capability Review
- D/RCD Departmental Statement of Strategy 2021/2023
- Programme for Government 2022

Work completed under 2019-2022 and 2022-2024 Strategies includes:

- Focused Policy Assessments
  - Rural Regeneration and Development Fund (2022)
  - Libraries Development Supports (2022)
  - Senior Alerts Scheme (2021)
  - Local Improvement Scheme (2020)
- Spending Reviews:
  - Town and Village Renewal Scheme (2021)
  - Dublin North East Inner City Initiative (2019)
- Quality Assurance Process Report (2020)
- Establishment of a research agreement with the Economic and Social Research Institute and first publication
- Data visualisation:
  - Developing a data identifier's policy for internal use
  - Progressing the rollout of data mapping expertise; and
  - Building insights to communicate policy work of the Department
- Development of a dedicated area on gov.ie for Departmental reviews, research and relevant analysis

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## Outcomes and Intention

The work of the Research and Evaluation Unit is focused on supporting four complementary outcomes:

### **BUILD, ASSESS AND APPLY THE INTERNAL EVIDENCE BASE**

The Unit will continue to build evidence and analysis to support critical assessment across the schemes and policy interventions of the Department, supporting data-driven informed decisions at all stages of policy development. This work provides insights for evidence-based decision making, and upholds requirements under the Value for Money frameworks, D/PENDR Spending Review, Public Accounts and Joint Oireachtas Committees.

### **CAPTURE AND DEMONSTRATE IMPACT**

The Unit will foster a coherent and strategic approach to understanding and measuring value and impact. This work will include building cohesive framework of indicators and identifying opportunities for capturing outcomes cross-Government collaboration and alignment, including for example, under the National Framework for Well-being (D/Taoiseach) and the IGEES network. This work will support internal understanding, sustainable impact and optimise cross-policy reflection.

### **EMPOWER AND EMBED AN INTERNAL CULTURE OF MEASUREMENT**

The Unit will continue to build and embed a coherent approach to measurement internally across Departmental policies and interventions. This work will empower colleagues to operate and apply schemes in line with wider Government policy including the Public Spending Code, and ensure evidence and insights feed into strategic policy design and decisions, supporting a focus on measurement across the Department.

### **ENGAGE AND INFORM THE WIDER POLICY SYSTEM**

The Unit will support Departmental colleagues to identify evidence and data, scope research programmes, represent on Inter-Departmental Groups including the Civil Service Research Network, and support effective external communications for research and publications. This work will further embed evidence internally and uphold D/RCD's role, and unique insights, in the external research and evaluation space.

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## Work Programme

To achieve these outcomes, the Research and Evaluation Unit will:

- Directly deliver outputs and insights to under-pin assessment, measurement and impact of policy interventions and funding allocations in support and delivery of Government policy.
- Support and empower colleagues by:
  - building a connected, coherent and considered approach to research, monitoring, assessment and review; and
  - providing user insights and needs to inform and facilitate the design and development of the structures and systems required as the foundations for evidence-based and informed policy making e.g. analytical approach to understanding impact, feeding into data and IT infrastructure.

## Work Content

The work of the Unit will focus on three areas:

1. Internal Evidence Base and Application
2. Central Coherence and Measurement
3. External Embedding and Elevation

### 1. INTERNAL EVIDENCE BASE AND APPLICATION

The Unit will

- undertake analysis, evaluation reviews and focused policy assessments in-house;
- scope and embed overarching process to support colleagues undertaking evaluative reviews and assessments at scheme or project level through providing expert advice and insights, and embedding the ethos of the Public Spending Code; and
- build a bottom-up approach to analytical assessment and critical review with colleagues.

This work will deliver outputs directly, empower and support staff across the Department and build sustainable structures to further embed the culture of impact and assessment for evidence-based policy making.

### **Direct Delivery**

A core component of building the internal evidence base is undertaking programme and scheme evaluation reviews and monitoring assessment. The Unit will continue to build the evidence base of fund allocation and scheme delivery through delivering reviews and analysis, assessing and interrogating scheme delivery and functionality, and assessing and interrogating scheme and spending impacts and outcomes.

Under guidelines by D/PENDR, Departments are to prepare multi-annual schedules of planned reviews. The below is the planned schedule for 2024-2026, which includes rolled over items from the previous strategy. These reviews may be submitted as part of the requirement to contribute to the annual Spending Review process.

**Table 1: Programme areas of assessment, 2024 – 2026**

Programme area	2024 Budget Allocation
Outdoor Recreation and Infrastructure Scheme	€16 million
Volunteering Supports - National	€6.6 million
LEADER Programme	€44 million
SICAP	€50.9 million
Community Centre Investment Fund	€16 million
Islands	€15 million
RRDF	€60 million

Over the course of the 2024-2026 Strategy, the Evaluation Unit will deliver 7 assessments and reviews across a range of community development and rural development schemes and interventions, to the total value of €208.5million under 2024 Budget allocations.

This working area will also focus on building a sustainable model for evidence-based decisions support through building peer-to-peer links and rolling out a number of processes.

- The Unit will lead internal stakeholder networks and engagement through the Internal Research and Evaluation Group (IREG) and the ArcGIS Support Group with a particular focus on embedding the Public Spending Code ethos, with respect to evaluation and impact. These networks will also provide the structures for the co-ordination of decentralised research across the Department – including identifying opportunities for collaboration, and providing guidance on process and external communication.

- The Unit will design and lead workshops and seminars, roll-out toolkits, checklists and supported delivery to embed the logic-model approach of the Public Spending Code, a focus on impacts and indicators, and support on data visualisation. The Unit will collaborate with the Communications Unit to define process for external publications of research and analysis from across the Department.

### ***Supporting Colleagues***

The Unit will also support colleagues to:

- undertake evaluation and assessment of project specific questions relating to evaluation and research; and
- commission and scope research for policy analysis and evaluation e.g. OECD Rural Strategy Review.

## **2. CENTRAL COHERENCE AND MEASUREMENT**

The Unit will focus on building a defined architecture of metrics for measuring and reporting D/RCD scheme and policy impact. This approach will be robust to the evolving data insights and measurement considerations external to the Department, including for example the National Well-being Framework, the Central Statistics Office rural data developments and international best practice on rural and community indicators, and will allow for the breath of internal policy needs.<sup>1</sup>

This strand of work will follow international best practice on taking a triangulated approach to rural and community indicators – incorporating quantitative evidence, qualitative insights and stakeholder input to best develop a comprehensive and sustainable series of indicators for D/RCD.

### ***Direct Delivery***

The work will include scoping and embedding a consistent approach to scheme level metrics on impact aligned with:

- formal reporting structures such as REV KPIs, ongoing Equality and Well-being Budget tagging reports and the Public Services Performance Report;
- recommended approaches informed by the ESRI research programme and under IGEEES strands including Spending Review reporting; and
- non-statutory reporting including the National Well-being Framework, and the CSO Well-being Information Hub.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, an approach to impact and value would best serve the Department if it were complementary across rural schemes, community development, aligned with social impact and social value considerations and support wider cross-Government value assessments.

The work will involve close liaison with colleagues on appropriate metrics, their application and operationalisation and sectoral needs and considerations. The Unit will also lead external engagement including with the CSO for data expansion and channels for collection and reporting, and representation of Departmental recommendations and needs for metrics and evaluation at ongoing Interdepartmental Groups.

### ***Supporting Colleagues***

The Unit will also support colleagues:

- Given the wider Departmental work on coherence for data and measurement, the Evaluation Unit will proactively support the evolution of data systems and infrastructure providing insights on sustainable value-added metrics for policy measurement.
- The Unit will provide expert advice e.g. on approach to rural proofing, building a consistent approach to social impact and social innovation measurement.

### **3. EXTERNAL EMBEDDING AND ELEVATION**

A core element of the Unit's work is to support D/RCD through elevating the research, evaluation and analytical work of the Department. This work will include liaising with colleagues across the civil and public service and building links with the academic and research communities, representing D/RCD work on evidence based-design throughout.

#### ***Direct Delivery***

The Unit will engage with cross-Government groups to embed impact and delivery of D/RCD through representing on the Inter-Departmental Group on Well-being, IGEES Strategic Policy Discussion Series, Spending Review, and providing ad hoc analytical support and insights where necessary.

To complement and embed the work of metrics and measurement, the Unit will reaffirm and embed links with public-service partners to share information, support Departmental need and build the wider statistical space (e.g. with the CSO to build the six-way urban-rural split data), and support the cross-Government approach to research through the D/FHERIS Civil Service Research Network.

The Unit will also engage directly with the academic and research environment more broadly to build links and foster relationships – including for example with the Economic and Social Research Institute and the current research work programme, the Irish Society for Women in Economics, the Irish Economic Association, UCD Geary Institute and Irish Behavioural Science Policy Network.



The Unit will also lead on co-ordinating D/RCD external approach to research through fostering internal connections and information sharing on research questions, approaches and content between colleagues through the IEG, including building a publications strategy with Communications Unit colleagues.<sup>2</sup>

### ***Supporting Colleagues***

The Unit will also support colleagues to:

- embed community or rural measurement lens into wider policy decisions;
- reflect on county level assessments and local impacts; and
- undertake timely publication and external communication of commissioned research where requested.

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<sup>2</sup> First publications will include this and the two previous Research and Evaluation Strategies.

## Timeline and outputs

priority focus

Internal Evidence Base and Application	Working Items	Projects	Timeline for Delivery
	Continue building monitoring and assessment of fund allocation and scheme delivery through delivering evaluation reviews, focused policy assessments and analysis	ORIS - Focused Policy Assessment	Q1 2024
		RRDF - Delivery and Impacts Review	Q4 2024
		National Volunteering Supports -First Policy Assessment	Q1 2025
		SICAP - systematic review; incl. <i>Evaluation of SICAP pre-employment supports</i> , published 2020	Q2 2025
		LEADER Programme - systematic review; incl. <i>Mid-Term Evaluation of the Rural Development Programme Ireland 2014-2020</i> , published 2019	Q3 2025
		Community Centre Investment Fund – First Policy Assessment	Q2 2026
		Islands Development Funding Review	Q4 2026
	Scope and embed overarching process to support colleagues undertaking reviews and assessments at scheme or project level	Reignite Internal Research and Evaluation Group (IREG)	<i>IREG kicked-off Q1 2024</i>
		ArcGIS Support Group	<i>in train</i>
		Design training sessions, toolkits, checklists and support delivery of training linking with external partnership and cross-Government groups	scope and kick-off with IEG Q2 2024
	Build internal information sharing networks, and process for linking research internally and raising external voice	internal information sharing process	<i>IREG kicked-off Q1 2024</i>
		external communications and publications process	
	Build internal reporting and oversight structures for monitoring, review and assessment	Internal processes for sustainable reviews and publications robust to changes in Evaluation Unit staffing - understand Strategic Unit and Data Infrastructure working items and timelines - kick off approach to consistency build approach including engagement for change	Q2 2024

	Working Items	Projects	Timeline for Delivery
Central Coherence and Measurement	Scope and embed a consistent approach for scheme level metrics on impact	Overview of REV metrics, PSP impacts in context of wider indicator work	<i>delivered Q4 2023</i>
	Build a comprehensive framework for metrics on impact across community development and rural work and evolving policy needs	Economic and Social Research Institute <i>“Developing a Framework to Monitor Rural Development Policy in Ireland: Opportunities and Challenges”</i>  Rural development impact and indicators	Q1 2024 publication  2024: build wider strategic programme on indicators H2 2025: finalised overarching approach
		GoI well-being framework and linked with PPN community work	Q4 2023: IGEES Research Grant Awardee for place-based well-being indicators  H2 2025: finalised overarching approach to Departmental indicators
		Liaising with CSO for data expansion	<i>in train</i>
		Test space for coherent metrics in wider work of the Department	
		Represent Departmental recommendations and needs at ongoing Interdepartmental Groups	
	Sectoral stakeholder engagement for testing, feedback, build links, and operationalising	Embed with external sectoral engagement, e.g. National Civic Forum, Our Rural Future fora, PPNs	H2 2025: finalised overarching approach
External Embedding +Elevation	Inter-Departmental Groups on metrics and indicators relevant to DRCD but not directly under our remit	Ongoing support for Interdepartmental groups	<i>in train</i>
	Building and fostering external academic and research links		<i>in train</i>
	Build co-ordinated approach to external publications		scope and kick-off with IEG Q2 2024