

Governing For The Future

Institutions, Practices and the Case for Long-Term Governance in Ireland

A Policy Brief arising from two national events, April 2026



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1. Introduction

The Island of Ireland is at a pivotal moment. The appetite for long-term governance reform, expressed across government, the public service, civil society, academia and business, has never been more broadly shared. Two significant national events held in early 2026 crystallised both the opportunity and the challenge: a policy maker roundtable¹ on sustainable and inclusive wellbeing held at Queen's University Belfast in January, and a cross-sectoral workshop² on governing for the future held at University College Dublin in March. The evidence from these and from a number of preceding initiatives points in the same direction. Other countries have shown what is possible. The political conditions are aligning. What is needed now is the will to act – and a clear, shared framework within which to do so.

“The public are miles ahead of politicians in their thinking.”

Participant, MERGE Policymaker Roundtable, Belfast, January 2026

“Everyone wants change. Nobody wants to change. This applies at political, institutional, corporate and individual levels alike.”

Participant, Governing for the Future Workshop, UCD, March 2026

2. Vision to Action: Proposals for the Shared Island

The following recommendations are directed at decision-makers and advisers across the policy community; civil servants, Assembly and Oireachtas members, NGOs, academics and civic leaders. They are designed to be mutually reinforcing rather than competing priorities.

Roadmap for Long-Term Governance

1. **Establish Oireachtas and NI Assembly Committees for the Wellbeing Economy of Current and Future Generations on a statutory basis**, modelled on Finland's Parliamentary Committee for the Future – with a formal mandate, dedicated resourcing, regular joint meetings, and the power to hold departments including economic and finance to account.
2. **Advance the Commission for Future Generations Bill (2023)** through the Oireachtas as a legislative priority. The Bill is at Stage 3. Cross-party support exists.
3. **Commission participatory vision processes in both jurisdictions, drawing on the Welsh experience of broad public engagement as the foundation for long-term policy** – not as a consultation exercise, but as a genuine act of co-creation. Specific institutional recommendations would arise from this process.
4. **Embed futures thinking capacity in the civil services and in second and third-level education in both jurisdictions.** Skills in foresight, systems thinking and participatory design need to be built into professional development, not left to individual initiative³.
5. **Engage with the post-SDG (post-2030) process as a proactive agenda**, and use the Irish EU Presidency to put intergenerational fairness at the centre of the international debate.
6. **Establish the Wellbeing Economy of Current and Future Generations as a new strand in the North-South Ministerial Council** and make it a standing agenda item in meetings of the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference.

3. The Issue and Why It Matters

Our political and administrative systems govern primarily for the present. They do not yet govern well for the future. The structural conditions that produce short-termism – highly centralised systems of local government, departmental silos reinforced by annual budget cycles are well understood^{4,5}.

The interconnected challenges now faced – climate disruption, biodiversity collapse, demographic change, housing, food security, digital sovereignty, geopolitical instability, neutrality – cannot be resolved within a five-year electoral cycle. They require institutions capable of holding a longer view, practices that can reveal what is not yet visible, and a citizenry that has been genuinely invited to shape the future.

This temporal mismatch is increasingly experienced as an intergenerational fracture. Younger people, in particular, express a growing sense that the systems governing them are not designed with their futures in mind. This manifests itself not only in material concerns – access to housing and education, secure livelihoods, climate stability – but also in a more diffuse erosion of trust, agency, and belonging. The emerging European policy agenda, including the [EU Strategy on Intergenerational Fairness](#), reflects a recognition that long-term governance must explicitly account for the distribution of costs, risks, and opportunities across generations.

The cost of inaction is tangible. Project Ireland 2040 was published as a planning document but lacked anything approaching a vision and a supportive whole-of-society democratic process. The National Development Plan has been revised repeatedly but struggles to translate large-scale investment promises into actual delivery and transformation. A Wellbeing Framework exists but lacks a popular mandate, agreed overarching goals, and the teeth to drive budgetary decisions. Ireland has ostensibly built the scaffolding of long-term governance without constructing the building or breathing imagination into the narrative. Even these weak building blocks for the future are largely absent in N.Ireland.

4. Evidence and Context

The two events that inform this brief together represent a broad all-island conversation on long-term governance. They build on a number of recent initiatives from both within and outside the civil and public service. The MERGE Policymaker Roundtable in Belfast (January 2026), organised by the Wellbeing Economy Alliance (WEAll) IrelandHub in partnership with the European Policy Centre, Queen's University Belfast and FEASTA, brought together approximately forty participants from both jurisdictions using the Three Horizons Framework to structure evidence, imagination and transition together. The Governing for the Future workshop at UCD (March 2026), organised by UCD CITO, the School of International Futures, WEAll Hub Ireland, FEASTA and Coalition 2030, convened

academics, civil servants, former ministers, politicians and business leaders across four structured breakout sessions.

Across both events, three interconnected dimensions shaped the conversation:

A Wellbeing Economy is an economy designed to serve people and the planet, not the other way around – one in which societal success is evaluated not by the crude measurement of GDP growth but by whether everyone has enough to live in comfort, safety and dignity, within a restored and thriving natural environment. It is people-centred, long-term, and geared towards environmental regeneration by design.

Future Generations is a rights-based and legislative framework. It holds that people not yet born have interests that current decision-making must explicitly account for, and that institutions can and should be designed to protect those interests. It underpins the Welsh Future Generations Act, the EU Intergenerational Fairness agenda, and the Commission for Future Generations Bill currently before the Oireachtas.

Sustainable and Inclusive Wellbeing is the measurement and policy evaluation framework developed through the [EU MERGE Project](#). It provides analytical tools to assess whether policy decisions are genuinely serving current and future generations across economic, social and environmental dimensions.

These three dimensions are complementary rather than competing. The Wellbeing Economy sets the direction. Future Generations provides the accountability structure. Sustainable and Inclusive Wellbeing provides the means to measure whether we are getting there.

A number of significant findings emerged across both events:

- Both jurisdictions lack an agreed, participatory, cross-party vision for the medium-to-long term. This was identified as the root cause of most other failures.
- The Wellbeing Frameworks in both jurisdictions are intended to present a nuanced and wide-ranging overview of wellbeing in Ireland and Northern Ireland, and they have the potential to become vehicles for change. However, they need extensive revision in order to align more closely with agreed societal goals and with each other, and to enable them to more accurately communicate risk.
- The Welsh Future Generations Act was cited in both events as the most directly transferable international model: its Commissioner role, its broad participatory genesis, functioning as a structure that obliges government departments to think across generations. Its adaptation to different contexts is being supported by SOIF.
- Finland's Parliamentary Committee for the Future and pre-election foresight reports were raised as practical mechanisms for allowing politicians to take a longer-term view.

- Citizens' assemblies are valuable but not seen as sufficient as ongoing participation mechanisms, particularly following the 2024 referendum losses. More sustained engagement models are needed.
- The North–South Ministerial Council is consistently under-used as a vehicle for all-island futures thinking and could significantly promote and support more of this work.

“The focus on frameworks is a bit of a bluff, as they can enable us to dodge any confrontations with the political reality.”

Participant, MERGE Policymaker Roundtable, Belfast, January 2026

“If you want to build roads, you need to train civil engineers. We haven't built the capacity for futures thinking, and it is no surprise it hasn't been embedded.”

Chair, Breakout 3, Governing for the Future Workshop, UCD, March 2026

5. Shared Options and Recommendations

The following recommendations are drawn directly from the evidence gathered across both events. They are presented as a layered set of options rather than a single prescription, recognising that different actors hold different levers.

Vision and Participation

- Commission a genuine participatory vision process, cross-party and open to the public, within and between jurisdictions, that produces an agreed direction of travel to 2050. The Welsh model – which began with NGOs and widened to include citizens, ultimately incorporating the Welsh language and public health – is instructive.
- Resource 3–5 local governance pilots (in the Dublin Workshop the Cloughjordan public lighting initiative and the Beacons Education project were given as community co-design models in operation) as scalable models for citizen-led long-term governance at local and regional level.
- Pursue radical reform of local government: restore budgetary powers, restore accountability, and reverse the post-2008 (particularly in 2014) centralisation that has left Ireland as an outlier in Europe for the weakness of its local democratic structures.

Institutional

- Pass the Commission for Future Generations Bill (currently at Stage 3 in the Dáil). Model the Commissioner role on the Welsh and Children's Ombudsman precedents: active, working with departments, with the power to convene and to challenge, not merely to report.
- Establish an all-island, all-party parliamentary group on the Wellbeing Economy of Current and Future Generations, supported by statutory Oireachtas and NI Assembly Committees, with mandates that extend across electoral cycles and a resourcing model that insulates them from annual budget pressures.
- Introduce annual Conferences of Secretaries General and Permanent Secretaries to explore cross-departmental conflicts and alignments and to focus on long-term priorities – a low-cost, high-impact structural change that could also be extended to the North-South context.

Capacity and Practice

- Extend the practices of foresight in Irish public life, in cooperation with organisation, such as the OECD and European Commission
- Create a Futures Research and Education Centre with explicit North-South and East-West dimensions. The Island currently has no institution that produces people trained in foresight, scenario planning or participatory futures methodologies, although a Futures Institute at QUB is being established.

- Embed foresight and futures literacy in second and third-level curricula and civil service continuous professional development. Make it a standard competency, not a specialist interest.
- Comprehensively revise the Wellbeing Frameworks in both jurisdictions in order to bring them into closer alignment with planetary boundaries and core societal needs, and embed them more explicitly in the Departments of Finance (and Public Expenditure) as a set of KPIs and budget evaluation criteria.

6. Futures Governance Ecosystem

Long-term governance capacity does not emerge fully formed. It develops through a recognisable progression from isolated initiative to embedded practice to institutionalised culture. We currently sit at an early-to-middle stage of this journey. Understanding where we are is essential for setting realistic and sequenced priorities.

The School of International Futures theory of change is developed from research and practice across 50 countries. The diagram representing the paradigm shift to wellbeing of current and future generations only sticks if interventions involve citizens, organisations and leaders together.



An assessment carried out by Feasta in the latter months of 2024 found that, while Ireland and Northern Ireland already have some useful structures in place for **systematic**

foresight, there are gaps in a number of areas. There is a need for a cross-governmental line of sight and for more integrated, cross-departmental work. While this is gradually improving, with the example given of a series of workshops hosted by the OECD, at present there is very little ongoing independent foresight capability in either jurisdiction on the island of Ireland.

In terms of the **machinery of government**, Ireland has a small group of political champions of long-term governance, while Northern Ireland has some industrial and technological interest in the subject, but no concrete political initiatives at present. Climate is probably the policy and regulatory area which is the most rigorous in requiring long-term assessments. It is a bit of an outlier, as the overall long-term assessment approach is still quite piecemeal in both jurisdictions. The Public Spending Code neither requires life-cycle analysis nor adequately protects future generations. Emergency planning structures and drills exist in Ireland; however they have limited political prioritisation and funding. Informal oversight of long-term governance mainly comes from civil society organisations or academia with limited capacity.

Citizen engagement on long-term governance tends to be consultative in nature, rather than participative (i.e. it does not always have a clear influence on outcomes). An example is the Shared Island Youth Forum, which had an open, inclusionary and productive process, but which was time-bound and whose outcomes appear unclear. There are established networks that have a focus on long-term governance, such as the National Youth Council and the Environmental Pillar, but these are not always fully embedded in governance processes, and there tends to be limited feedback to consultation participants.

7. Risks, Trade Offs and Implementation

The following are the implementation risks most consistently identified across both events.

- Political economy of centralism. The people who benefit from the current concentration of power at the centre of the Irish administrative and governance system can feel threatened by reform proposals. Local government empowerment, in particular, will be contested by those whose position depends on existing structures. This is a political tension, not a policy design problem.
- A significant aspect of the vision problem is a wider, cultural imagination, deficit. Institutions need a vision to function well; a vision requires institutions to make it real. The sequence matters: new ideas and solutions – along with the participatory process – must come before the institutional architecture crystallises, or the architecture will simply perpetuate existing assumptions. Ireland has the artists, cultural producers and architects – the creative people to help bring a new vision to life, but also needs the empathetic and responsive people to champion within governance to put new ideas into practice.

- Structures without teeth are PR exercises. The Wellbeing Framework, the UN SDGs, Project Ireland 2040 – Ireland has a track record of building aspirational frameworks that do not significantly influence how resources are allocated. Any new structure must be tied to transforming decision-making and budgeting processes, cultivating both people and culture behind policymaking, connecting to society and nurturing cross-departmental accountability, or it risks the same fate.
- Capacity cannot be wished into existence. The call for futures thinking in the civil service and in education is right, but it requires a pipeline: trained people, training institutions, and the time within working lives to use these skills. None of these currently exist at scale.
- Active citizenship and deliberative democracy need strengthening, we have not got that right, yet. Following the 2024 referendum, public confidence in citizens' assemblies as a participation model has been damaged. Any new engagement process must be genuinely open-ended, not a consultation with a predetermined answer. Its purpose is to focus on engagement both as a mechanism for trust, good discourse that brings people towards stronger democratic instruments and outcomes.

8. Northern Ireland And Ireland: Cross Jurisdiction Learning And Opportunity

Both events in this brief were all-island in aspiration and, to a meaningful degree, in composition. The MERGE roundtable in Belfast brought together participants from both jurisdictions; the UCD workshop included North–South dimensions in every breakout room. This matters because the long-term governance challenges facing both parts of the island are substantively shared: climate, biodiversity, demographic change, housing, food and energy security, and the implications of partition itself for how either jurisdiction can think about its future.

The jurisdictional differences are real and need to be respected rather than papered over. Northern Ireland operates within a devolved structure with its own Executive, Assembly and Fiscal Council. The NI Wellbeing Framework has developed independently and has won recognition for its quality. Policy levers, funding structures and constitutional contexts differ. At the same time, the island shares infrastructure, ecosystems, communities and, increasingly, economic interdependencies that do not stop at the border.

Mutual Learning

- The NI Wellbeing Framework's approach to integrating objective and subjective measures is more developed in some respects than the Republic's equivalent, and can provide useful lessons for the development of the Irish Wellbeing Framework. Both Frameworks should be improved collaboratively by drawing from local and regional-level visioning, stakeholder input and international research such as the EU MERGE project and the UN's Beyond GDP process.

- Queen’s University Belfast’s developing Futures Institute, with its explicit links to policy evaluation, offers a model for the kind of North–South academic collaboration on foresight that both jurisdictions need.
- The experience of Scotland and Wales – where wellbeing and long-term thinking have been used to build common ground across political fault-lines around constitutional questions – is directly relevant to an island navigating partition and the possibility of future referendums.

Opportunities

- The North/South Ministerial Council is the obvious vehicle for commissioning shared futures work – including a possible all-island visioning exercise: where do we want to see this island in 2050? The NSMC is currently under-used for this purpose and should be explicitly resourced to do it.
- An all-island, all-party parliamentary group on the Wellbeing Economy and Future Generations, meeting alternately in Dublin and Belfast is a concrete, achievable step that builds cross-jurisdictional political relationships around shared long-term challenges.
- The WEAll Ireland Hub’s work in convening institutions, networks and knowledge across both jurisdictions is itself a model of what all-island collaboration on these issues looks like in practice. It should be recognised and resourced as such.

““There’s a need to open-source the learning, as there will be other Lough Neaghs.”

Participant, MERGE Policymaker Roundtable, Belfast, January 2026

9. Further Reading and References

The following sources are directly referenced in or relevant to this brief:

1. Report from the MERGE Policymaker Roundtable: '[Policy Pathways to Sustainable and Inclusive Wellbeing](#)' January 2026, Co-Centre for Climate, Biodiversity and Water, QUB Belfast. Organised by WEAll Ireland Hub in cooperation with WEAll Global and the European Policy Centre.
2. [Governing for the Future: Institutions and Practices – Summary Report of Workshop](#) March 2026, UCD CITO, School of International Futures, WEAll Ireland Hub, FEASTA and Coalition 2030.
3. WEALL [Wellbeing Economy Policy Design Course](#) a free open access course designed for policy makers working at a local, regional or (inter)national level. Equipping and inspiring with tools and examples to help drive holistic, inclusive and sustainable policy development.
Modules 1 to 3 are foundational modules.
Module 8: strengthening capacity and accountability for progress
[8.5 The Wales Wellbeing of Future Generations Act](#), [8.6 The Welsh Act in Action](#)
4. Boston, Jonathan. (2017). [Governing for the Future: Designing Democratic Institutions for a Better Tomorrow](#). Emerald Group Publishing. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1108/S2053-7697201725>
Description: Examines why democratic governments tend toward short-termism and explores institutional reforms that could steer them toward more farsighted, sustainable policymaking
5. Ogami, Masakazu. (2024). The Conditionality of Political Short-Termism: A Review of Empirical and Experimental Studies. *Politics and Governance*, 12(S1), NA-NA.
<https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.7764>
Description: Reviews and maps the conditions under which political short-termism is driven or mitigated in democracies, identifying key factors from electoral cycles and economic conditions to voter preferences and interest group behaviour that shape governments' willingness to make long-term policy investments.

Anghel, Suzana Elena. (2025). [Intergenerational fairness: What future for a renewed European social contract?](#) [ESPAS Foresight Paper]. European Strategy and Policy Analysis System.

European Commission. (2026). [EU Strategy on Intergenerational Fairness](#).

Kavanagh, Donncha and Griffin, Ray (2025) [Beyond a Future Generations Commissioner: Building Ireland's Foresight Ecosystem](#). *The Geary Institute*.

Mulgan, Geoff (2026) [Governing in turbulent times: how to redesign the 'strategy stack' for the late 2020s](#). Briefing Note, March. TIAL

Mulgan, Geoff and Bennett, Robyn (2024) [How to reflect the interests of future generations in today's decisions: what institutions, laws, and methods can help us?](#) 10 July. TIAL

OECD Observatory of Public Sector Innovation (2021) [Towards a strategic foresight system in Ireland](#).

SOIF (2021), [Features of Effective Systemic Foresight in Governments Around the World](#)

Description: A comparative study of foresight ecosystems across eight governments, setting out the key features of effective systemic foresight. It conceptualises foresight not as a single unit or tool, but as an ecosystem of capabilities spanning culture, structures, people, and processes, and emphasises integration across government rather than standalone foresight functions. Provides a framework for diagnosing and strengthening national foresight capacity. Useful for designing whole-of-government foresight systems, identifying institutional gaps (e.g. fragmentation, lack of coordination, weak translation into policy), and guiding the development of embedded long-term strategic capability across public administration.

SOIF (2025), [Toolkit: Engaging Diverse Communities in Climate Adaptation Conversations](#)

Description: Provides a practical, modular set of participatory methods for engaging communities in long-term climate and infrastructure futures (e.g., futures walking tours, role play deliberation, climate resilience games, visioning, mindfulness and creative writing tools). Useful as a hands-on facilitation toolkit for designing deliberative, imaginative, and place-based public engagement processes on infrastructure and climate adaptation, particularly where the goal is to make long-term futures tangible, emotional, and participatory rather than purely technical.

[Intergenerational Fairness Framework / Future Check](#), SOIF & Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation

Description: A policy framework combining intergenerational fairness assessment, participatory foresight, and deliberative processes, supported by practical tools and guidance. Developed in Portugal and piloted across areas such as hydrogen strategy, COVID-19 labour measures, and pensions, it has also been adapted in the UK as a citizen-led "Future Check" approach for legislative scrutiny. Supports structured ex ante and ex post assessment of policy decisions through a deliberative, foresight-informed lens. Useful for linking a policy instrument to potential governance arrangements.

EU Policy Lab <https://policy-lab.ec.europa.eu>

To support fair policymaking, the European Commission will, as part of the EU Strategy on Intergenerational Fairness, support ongoing futures literacy in public administrations across EU Member States' [Future Oriented Policy-making package](#).

[Future Forty - An Economic and Fiscal Outlook to 2065](#) Department of Finance, Ireland.

Long-term foresight scenarios for Ireland.

[Well-Being Framework | The National Economic and Social Council - Ireland](#) work done to date by

NESC, National Economic and Social Council.

[ERSI - Some Missing Links in Ireland's Initial National Well-Being Framework](#) The Economic and Social Review, Vol. 53, No. 4 Winter 2022, pp. 299-330

Description: The study reviews Ireland's national well-being framework and highlights two key gaps: unclear use of sustainable development, which blurs present versus future well-being trade-offs, and weak regional integration, which may skew policy decisions. It proposes improvements through a revised framework, including clearer indicators, stronger regional data, and practical application to national planning goals.

Future Generation Cymru [Future Generations Wales](#) Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015. Welsh Government.

Environmental Pillar Discussion Paper on the Irish Wellbeing Framework and Intergenerational Fairness: This paper, due to be published in summer 2026, will include analyses and recommendations on revisions to the biodiversity, circular economy and economic indicators in the Irish Wellbeing Framework, along with a discussion of how it could be better aligned with local-level participatory Wellbeing Visions and with Future Generations initiatives.

About This Brief

This policy brief was developed by the coalition of organisations that convened the two events described above: the WEAll Ireland Hub, FEASTA, Coalition 2030, UCD CITO, Merge EU Project and the School of International Futures. It draws on rapporteur notes, audio transcripts, table documentation and participant contributions from both events.

The WEAll Ireland Hub acts as an independent convening partner across both jurisdictions – bringing institutions, networks and knowledge together, supporting processes without owning them, and building shared capacity for long-term thinking across the policy community.

For further information or to engage with this work, contact the WEAll Ireland Hub via weall-ireland@feasta.org.

School of International Futures (SOIF) is a global non-profit transforming futures for current and next generations.. The School of International Futures supports the Irish Long Term Governance Hub which is made up of this coalition of organisations including WeAll Ireland, FEASTA and Coalition 2030.

For further information or to engage with this work, contact SOIF via info@soif.org.uk.

