

Creating Our Future – A Book of Inspiration

A national conversation on research in Ireland



Ciarán Seoighe
Deputy Director
General, Science
Foundation Ireland

Creating Our Future sought to understand what challenges and opportunities the people of Ireland experience. It created a conversation on how research can play a role in addressing those challenges and seizing those opportunities. Over 18,000 submissions were received, analysed, and synthesised into 16 thematic areas. The response showed that the people of Ireland want their voice to be heard and that they have confidence in the promise and potential of research to transform lives and create sustainable societies.

The *Creating Our Future* campaign

The value and impact of public investment in research and researchers was brought into stark relief by the Covid-19 pandemic. The public and policymakers looked to science for a way forward and ultimately for the successful development of a vaccine in record time. In the midst of this global pandemic, while we still struggled with how to reopen our society, we built on the public's interest in research by asking them to consider how research could contribute to creating a better future for everyone.

Creating Our Future was a unique public-engagement activity on research, at a scale not previously undertaken in Ireland. The engagement was based on international best practice, on learning from other countries that had opened similar dialogue on research with the public. The Flemish Science Agenda received over 10,500 questions from the public, to be addressed by scientists. Similarly, the Dutch National Research Agenda unified people across the Netherlands to consider what areas of research were important to them.

Here in Ireland, the campaign was championed by An Taoiseach, Micheál Martin, and Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Simon Harris. From August to November 2021, the people of Ireland were invited to submit their ideas. The campaign asked the public to send us their ideas based on a flexible, open-ended question: *Tell us your idea for what researchers in Ireland should explore to create a better future.*

What set this exercise apart from other national campaigns was the extent of the inclusive dialogue on research. From Donegal to Kerry, people gathered in town squares, car parks, community centres,

schools, higher education institutions, and companies to discuss how research can play a role in creating a better future for everyone.

This 'national brainstorm' brought those who would not usually participate in discussions on research into the conversation. Marginalised groups and younger people were encouraged to get involved. The conversation was brought to their doors through interactive sessions involving researchers who are passionate about telling the story of their research. All of this activity drove the audience to an online portal that captured all of the submissions.

18,000+ submissions

We had set a target of receiving over 10,500 submissions. Of utmost importance was to ensure we had an inclusive dialogue and widespread engagement from all sectors of society. But we underestimated the level of engagement, and when the portal closed at the end of November 2021, a total 18,062 valid submissions had been received from people of all ages, communities, sectors, and counties.

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This achievement was down to the many individuals and groups who supported the campaign, including the governmental and societal representatives on the advisory forum, chaired by Julie Byrne of Nokia Bell Labs. The advisory forum supported and challenged the campaign team to ensure it remained true to the aim of an inclusive and accessible dialogue. This partnership with a diverse group of stakeholders was vital to achieving the level of diversity in our submissions.

When the submission stage closed, we moved to the tasks of reading, categorising, and synthesising the 18,062 submissions. The expert committee, chaired by Professor Linda Hogan of Trinity College Dublin, along with 70 volunteer national and international researchers from across all disciplines, worked in seven multidisciplinary teams to apply their expertise to analysing the findings. All ideas were read. The group took great care to ensure that the voice of the public was honoured and accurately reflected in their deliberations. The *Creating Our Future* Expert Committee Report gives a detailed account of the methodology, including the rationale for the clustering of themes.

Themes and recommendations

After its detailed study and analyses, the expert committee organised the ideas and findings into 16 themes (see Figure 1). Many of the ideas submitted were relevant to more than one theme, reflecting the nature and complexity of the issues we face as a society. The Expert Committee Report is a rich resource for government, policymakers, representative bodies, and researchers, clearly indicating the wide range of people's concerns, interests, and understanding of the role that research can play in

improving our society. It provides expert commentary to contextualise the submissions, calls to action that could address these, and nuggets of ideas from the public.

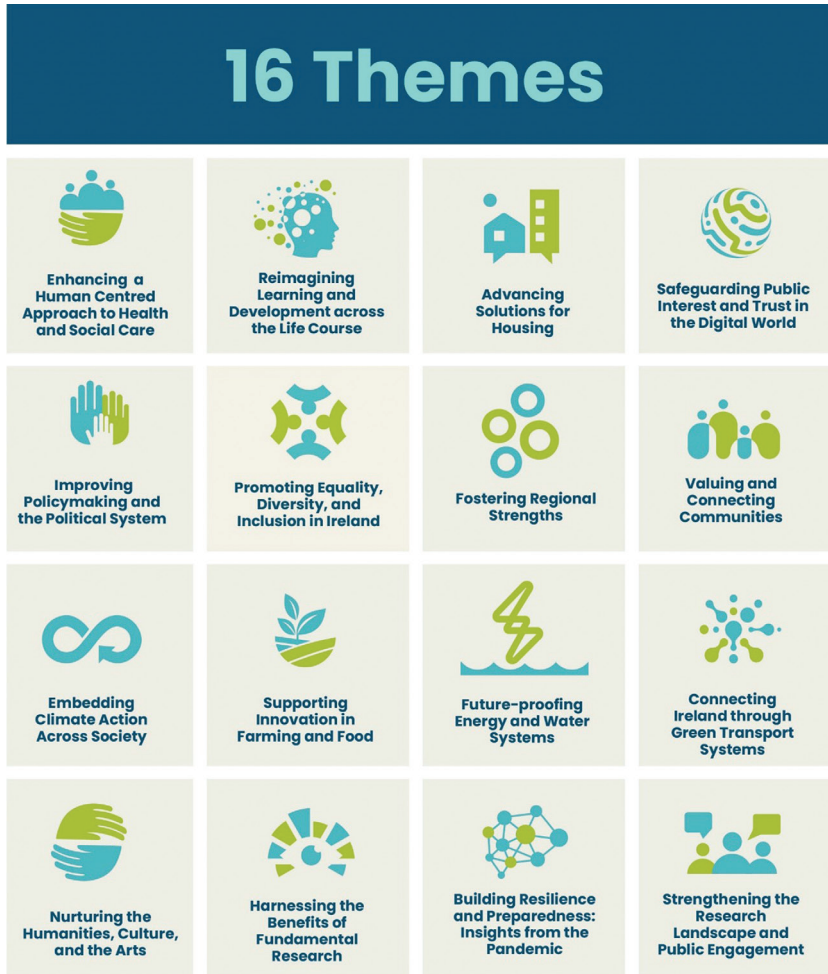


Figure 1: *Creating Our Future*: 16 themes

Arising from their analysis, the Expert Committee Report also set out five recommendations that the public would like researchers to explore to create a better future (see Figure 2).

- 1 Solutions for the future cannot be developed in silos - everything is connected. Researchers should explore ways to live within our planetary boundaries with integrated sustainable solutions.
- 2 Accelerated research efforts are required in mental health and infectious diseases to improve quality of life and strengthen Ireland's resilience in the face of future disruptions.
- 3 Researchers should design, implement, and evaluate bespoke Irish solutions for services and infrastructure (from housing to transport and energy). These efforts should account for our unique geography, society, and heritage so that they benefit all.
- 4 Irish research needs to be at the cutting edge of emerging digital technologies that improve people's lives, increase public trust, and make for a more inclusive and fair society.
- 5 Research is required to harness the power of communities to generate local and systemic change in Ireland (from green initiatives to education and the future of work).

Figure 2: Five recommendations

In July 2022, Minister Harris published the outcomes from *Creating Our Future*. The Expert Committee and Campaign Reports, together with the 18,000+ submissions, have all been published online at www.creatingourfuture.ie.

Next steps

Policymakers, researchers, educators, and students at all levels are encouraged to explore this rich database as a source of new ideas from the minds of the people of Ireland. The 'Book of Inspiration' contains the voice of the public from a unique period; it reflects their desires to improve our society, and their ideas for opportunities to pursue in order to address the challenges we face.

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The outputs and recommendations from *Creating Our Future* are integrated into the government's new national research and innovation strategy, *Impact 2030*. They are also aligned with a number of ongoing and upcoming programmes, including the newly established National Challenge Fund, which is funded by the EU's Resilience and Recovery Fund.

We in Science Foundation Ireland (SFI) were entrusted to manage the campaign, and we worked hand in hand with a broad suite of stakeholders, ably assisted by Havas Ireland, whom we contracted to support the programme. The SFI team continues to work with the government and with all of our partners to support the implementation of the recommendations. Everyone has a role to play in ensuring that the voice of the public is reflected in their work. I encourage everyone to seek inspiration from the public by reviewing the Expert Committee Report and exploring the ideas in the interrogable database on the *Creating Our Future* website at www.creatingourfuture.ie.

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