

Lightning Country Snapshot: Ireland

Rachel Iredale, Research Ireland

25th March 2026 / MLE in Science Communication in R&I, Topic 3 Meeting

Rachel.Iredale@ResearchIreland.ie



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Enhance Engaged Research to Strengthen Irish Society

Research Ireland will reimagine how our funded research engages with the public, to **strengthen** Irish society. We will enhance public engagement to include engaged research, which will grow public trust in research and demonstrate its value in everyday life as well as increase the relevance and impact of the research itself. This trust will challenge misinformation and contribute to greater societal cohesion and resilience.

Curiosity
Capability
Competitiveness

Charting Ireland's Research
and Innovation Future

2026–2030

The CervicalCheck Scandal

In 2018, it emerged that hundreds of women in Ireland who later developed invasive cervical cancer had not been informed that earlier smear-test audits revealed errors in their results—errors that, if correctly communicated, might have prompted earlier intervention.

✓ Why this was a failure of science communication

1. **Critical scientific information withheld from patients:** CervicalCheck had an *open disclosure policy*, but it was poorly implemented. Audit findings that showed earlier smear tests which were incorrectly read were not routinely shared with the women affected, leaving them unaware of scientifically significant information about their own health.
2. **Lack of transparency and unclear communication protocols:** Independent inquiries concluded that the system suffered from poor governance, unclear reporting lines, and inconsistent disclosure practices. Doctors were informed of discrepancies but were not required to tell patients, resulting in inconsistent and often badly handled communication that undermined trust.
3. **Miscommunication about the limits of screening science:** Cervical screening is probabilistic, not diagnostic, and false negatives can occur. However, official communication materials had overstated the certainty of results and failed to adequately explain screening limitations. This contributed to public misunderstanding.
4. **Damaged public trust in scientific and medical institutions:** As a result, trust in Ireland's screening programmes collapsed. Many women felt misled not only by the incorrect tests but by the failure to communicate errors honestly and promptly, a fundamental breach of scientific transparency and patient rights.

Loss of Trust

- Severely damaged trust in national cervical screening
 - Broader mistrust in the Health Service Executive and overall health systems governance
 - Confusion and loss of confidence in scientific communication about screening
 - Long-term emotional and psychological fallout for affected women
 - Persistent concerns, even after reforms, due to repeated failures
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- Oversimplified messaging led to false trust, later replaced by public shock.
 - Rigid narrative control, defensive communication, and poor handling of disclosures damaged trust.



National Science Advice Forum

Impact 2030: Ireland's Research and Innovation Strategy set out the intention to develop new science advice structures across Government.

- Prof. Aoife McLysaght appointed as Government Science Advisor in October 2024
- 12 members appointed to the new National Science Advice Forum in March 2026.
- It is recognised that science advice in policy formation has become more complex and that it is impossible for one individual to have the depth of expertise needed to advise on all scientific matters.
- The purpose of the NSAF is to bridge the gap between scientific expertise and public policy, covering areas like natural sciences, engineering, medicine, social sciences, and humanities.
- Membership will be for a period of three years and participation in the forum is voluntary and unremunerated.

Gianpiero Cavalleri	Professor of Human Genetics	Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland
Stefano Sanvito	Professor. Chair of Condensed Matter Theory in the School of Physics	Trinity College Dublin
Gordon Harold	Professor of the Psychology of Education and Mental Health	University of Cambridge
Sarah A Gleeson	Professor in Sustainability Geoscience at the School of Earth Sciences	University College Dublin
Ronan Glynn	Health Sector Lead	EY Ireland
Deirdre Ahern	Professor in Law	Trinity College Dublin
Colum Dunne	Professor. Dean of the School of Medicine	University of Limerick
Róisín M. Owens	Professor of Bioelectronics	University of Cambridge
Brian Ó Gallachóir	Professor of Sustainability	University College Cork
Barry O'Sullivan	Professor at the School of Computer Science & IT	University College Cork
Eimear Kenny	Chair and Professor of Genomic Health Icahn School of Medicine	Mount Sinai, New York
Neil J Rowan	Professor. Director of the Bioscience Research Institute	Technological University of the Shannon

Science Media Centre



Science
Media Centre
All Ireland

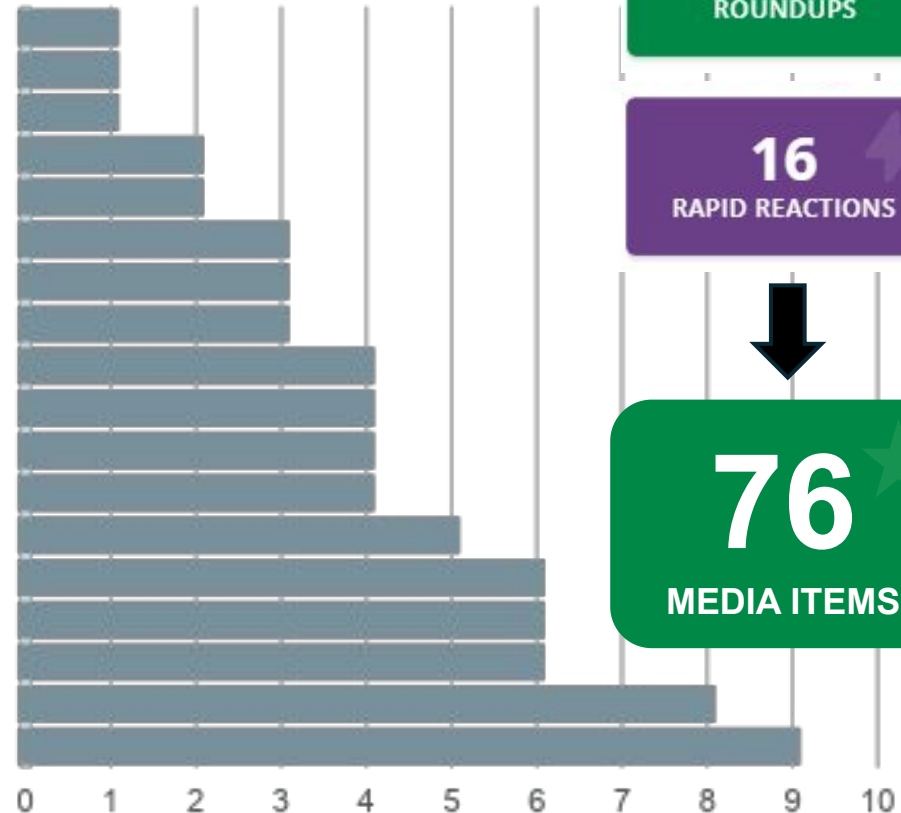
- ❑ SMC Global is an international network of not-for-profit organisations working to improve the public understanding of science, by injecting evidence-based information into headline news, particularly on controversial or breaking science stories when most misinformation occurs
- ❑ SMCs provide journalists with timely access to expert commentary on the news of the day.
- ❑ The USP of an SMC is that they can provide (a) rapid reactions to breaking news and legislative developments and (b) expert analyses of new research relevant to lay audiences.

ADAPTING TO THE NEWS CYCLE



Number of Stories per Expert Reaction

Exercise for depression
Climate adaptation plan
Lancet food systems review
Paracetamol during pregnancy review
Prostate cancer screening
Bird flu in cattle in Europe
Weight loss drugs
Hurricane Melissa
Beef trade under EU-Mercosur deal
Food preservatives and cancer
COP30 concludes
COP30 preview
Antidepressant physical side effects
Ireland's HIV rates
Social media restrictions for under-16s
Bluetongue virus detected in NI
Flooding from Storm Chandra
Trump's claims link between autism & paracetamol



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ROUNDUPS

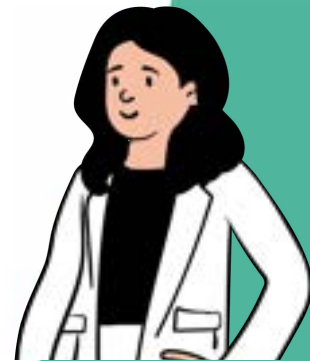
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RAPID REACTIONS

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MEDIA ITEMS

Take away messages



Science Communication Strategies required in Ireland for the following issues:

- **ENERGY TRANSITION:** Data centres, grid capacity, renewables debate
- **WATER:** Quality in terms of agricultural runoff and algal blooms; Flooding
- **DIGITAL REGULATION:** AI governance, digital fairness, and social media will be key issues during Ireland's EU Presidency in the second half of 2026
- **PHARMACEUTICAL MANUFACTURING:** Ireland's major role in global biotech production and biotech research tends to increase coverage of drug research

Role of Research Ireland: Science Week, Parliamentary Questions, Partnership with RTE

Lightning Country Snapshot Estonia

Annely Allik, Estonian Research Council

25th March 2026 / MLE in Science Communication in R&I, Topic 3 Meeting

annely.allik@etag.ee



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Estonia: Crisis Science Communication Landscape

- Small, highly digital country with centralized crisis communication coordination
- Lead coordination by Government Office of Estonia
- Strategic Communication Unit monitors **public opinion & misinformation trends** (incl. social listening tools)
- In crises, citizens are directed to the national portal **kriis.ee** for verified information

Sectoral responsibility: **relevant ministries communicate evidence in their policy domains**

👉 Science communication during crises often relies on **government experts rather than formally embedded external scientists**

COVID-19 remains the most prominent recent case in Estonia where crisis science communication was actively coordinated at the central government level

- The Government Office played a key role in rapidly synthesizing scientific evidence and ensuring its broad dissemination through strategic communication efforts.
- **A Council of Science Advisors** composed of experts was established under the Government, which regularly prepared reports and analyses.
- Special attention was given to Ida-Viru County and Russian-speaking communities, where public trust was lower and people were more exposed to Russian information channels.
- As a result, the national vaccination campaign was strategically launched there first, based on public opinion monitoring that showed higher hesitancy compared to other regions.

One science communication success story

COVID crisis also triggered **innovative science outreach initiatives**

- University of Tartu campaign collecting citizens' questions and providing science-based answers
- Science explainer video series by Estonian Young Academy of Sciences
- Strong cooperation between **government, universities, media and civil society**

Key success factor:

Human-centred communication: listening first, then explaining science

This helped maintain relatively high overall trust in science in Estonia.

Crisis where communication was insufficient: COVID-19

However, several tensions weakened communication impact

Challenges

- Scientists sometimes communicated **via media before policymakers**, creating confusion about decisions
- Political leadership changes **trust gaps between scientists and government**
- Strong exposure to Russian information space, including promotion of Sputnik vaccine and discrediting western vaccines
- Public perceived **scientific uncertainty as disagreement or inconsistency**

Result: overall solid coordination, but **trust fragmentation and message timing issues reduced effectiveness**

Main actors responsible for communicating scientific evidence to the public during crises

Government Office / Strategic Communication Unit

- Coordinates national messaging
- Monitors public opinion and misinformation
- Directs crisis information flows

Line Ministries & Government Agencies

- Provide **domain-specific expert communication**
- Example areas: cyber security, animal diseases, health risks

Scientific Community & Universities

- **Advisory councils, public explainers, media engagement**
- Often **informal but influential communicators**

👉 Additional actor: civil society fact-checking initiatives such as Propastop monitoring hostile information operations.

Emerging Challenge: “Slow Science Crises”

Example: Onshore Wind Farms Debate

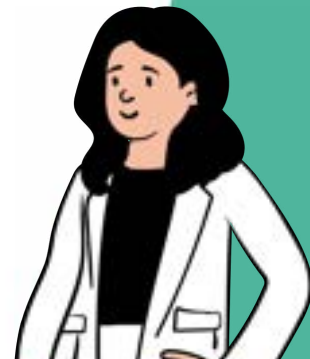
- Onshore wind farm development in Estonia has triggered strong debates among local communities, developers, and state authorities. No clear “right vs wrong” evidence narrative
- Noise & Health Concerns. Scientific data: no proven health impact; community experience: mixed perceptions, trust gap.
- Different Priorities – Government: climate & energy security; Communities: landscape & quality of life.
- Scientific explanations often arrive after polarization occurs.

Key Insight:

- Not a failure of science, but a crisis of communication timing and trust
- Lack of neutral trusted mediators
- Protest movements sometimes instrumentalize science arguments
- Long-term, polarized conflict between **different scientific interpretations and societal values**

Take away messages

- **Data $\neq$ trust**
- **Science alone $\neq$ value conflict resolution**
- **Early engagement $>$ late correction**



Take away messages

- **Prepare early.** Crisis science communication capacity must be built *before* a crisis, including trusted expert networks, clear protocols and audience insight tools.
- **Ensure strong central coordination.** Leadership from the Government Office of Estonia helped maintain coherent messaging but this must be combined with structured cooperation with universities and independent scientists.
- **Keep messages simple and consistent.** In crises, clarity matters more than volume. Conflicting evidence-based messages from different actors can quickly undermine public trust.
- **Communicate for different information environments.** Targeted outreach is essential when trust levels and media exposure differ across regions or language communities.
- **Address slow science conflicts, not only acute crises.** Long-term polarised debates for example on environmental issues can gradually erode trust in science and institutions if not actively managed.





Thank you!