

Report on one year pilot of an all-Ireland Science Media Centre

Background

The Science Media Centre (SMC) is an independent press office established in the UK in 2002 in response to media scare stories around the MMR vaccine, GM foods and stem cell research. While there was never a strategy to export the model to other countries, it happened organically as counties noticed the difference the SMC made to the quality of science reporting in the UK news. By the time of the Covid pandemic, there were [six well established SMCs](#) around the world, several more organisations running SMC-like services and a longer list of countries expressing an interest. As the network expanded and it became clear that the SMC's model and services worked well in countries with very different science and media ecosystems, the UK SMC began to look to our nearest neighbour. With encouragement from contacts in Ireland, Fiona Fox, Founding CEO of the UK SMC, initiated a consultation process to establish whether there existed a need and an appetite for an SMC in Ireland North and South.

The consultation started in earnest in June 2023 with a visit to Dublin to meet science press officers, scientists and science reporters. A - meeting was hosted by Airfield Estate, a registered charity and research institute. Airfield's CEO, Claire Mac Evilly, worked closely with the SMC in its early days as a research communicator at the University of Cambridge. Over several months Fiona met with 133 key representatives of the science and media community, the vast majority of whom expressed strong interest in having an SMC on the island of Ireland. Issues raised during these discussions included:

- Science does not have the prominence it deserves in the Irish and Northern Irish news media.
- There are very few specialist science journalists. Instead, science stories are often covered by general news correspondents.
- While issues around covid, climate change and tech are driving more interest in and understanding of the importance of science stories, they are still too often the 'poor relation' to media space given to politics, sport, international and arts.
- This lack of prominence feels increasingly at odds with the rising importance of science and science communication on the island of Ireland: much world class research; many science-based and tech companies; a growing commitment to public engagement post-pandemic; and the importance of climate change and net zero in

an agricultural economy.

- Extra resources to help get science into the media and to ensure journalists have easy access to the best experts would be welcomed by the science community, journalists and policy makers.

Over the next twelve months, the consultation process provided a strong mandate from the science community to explore the prospects for an SMC on the island of Ireland. At that stage, however, there was no organisation able to take on the project to set up an SMC. Thus, it was agreed that the UK SMC would run a one-year all-Ireland pilot to demonstrate proof of concept. This was completely new. No other SMC around the world has emerged via a pilot run by an established SMC in another country, and the project was variously described as an experiment/trial/pilot. The project also had support from UK SMC trustees and the SMC Global Network who were interested in exploring whether an established SMC running a pilot could work in other countries.

Between May 2023 and the start of the pilot in June 2024, we:

- set up a legal agreement with Airfield in Ireland allowing them to host the pilot.
- raised the funds from Irish and Northern Irish supporters to run the pilot (1).
- worked with UK trustees and key stakeholders in Ireland and Northern Ireland to shape the pilot.
- devised success criteria.
- assembled an advisory group chaired by Claire Mac Evilly. (2)
- advertised for and recruited a senior press manager based at Airfield to lead on delivering the day-to-day services (3).

Pilot success criteria

- A senior science press manager appointed and operational.
- Expert database populated by a broad range of scientific experts from universities, research institutes and science agencies.
- Meetings held with the key Irish and Northern Irish news outlets. Key contacts identified, engaged and signed up to join Pilot All-Ireland SMC press lists.
- An SMC proactively offering two of the core SMC services – Rapid Reactions (RR) to breaking news and Roundups (RU) of 3rd party comments on new findings.
- Examples of how these comments have been used by news media in Ireland in a way that can be shown to have:
 - given a voice to scientists on breaking news allowing evidence-based expertise to reach the Irish and Northern Irish public (RR).
 - contributed to more balanced, measured and accurate reporting of new research findings (RU).
- Evidence that quotes from Irish and Northern Irish scientists are being shared to international media by the SMC Global Network.
- Identifying scientists who have not done much media and making them available to

journalists.

The pilot started on 1st June 2024, reported on in an extremely supportive [news article](#) by Kevin O’Sullivan, Environment and Science Editor in the *Irish Times*, describing the Centre’s goals as “tackling misinformation and enhancing public understanding”. The early weeks and summer of 2024 were spent populating the all-Ireland SMC database of experts with Irish and Northern Irish scientists, creating good press lists and compiling a list of all the research press officers keen to receive call outs and work with the pilot. By September 2024, the pilot was ready to start delivering the two key services that all SMCs deliver: comments from scientists on big breaking news stories with a science angle (known as Rapid Reactions) and third-party comments from experts putting newsworthy new research findings into context (known as Roundups).

Examples of the proof of concept

A list of science stories that the pilot SMC worked on can be found on the [all-Ireland SMC website](#). Here are some selected highlights:

Rapid Reactions

Proposed ban on disposable vapes. In September 2024, the [SMC shared comments](#) from Irish experts from Limerick and RCSI on the government proposal to ban disposable vapes. These comments were broadly positive about the proposal but emphasised the important caveat that this was not a ban on all vapes which have been shown to be better for smokers than cigarettes. They also described the scientific reasons why disposable vapes are problematic. These comments were picked up by the news media, including extensively in the [Irish Times](#), and one of the experts was interviewed on RTE thanks to the SMC ‘Rapid Reaction’.

Storms. In late November 2024 and early January 2025, Ireland was hit by Storms [Bert](#) and [Eowyn](#) bringing flooding, disruption to transport, and power outages in many homes and tragically one death. The pilot SMC went into action immediately, putting out a call for comments to the press officers and experts on the all-Ireland database. Comments were shared with Irish news media from seven experts at TCD, UCD, Galway, Maynooth and Cork. These comments were issued in the form of expert responses to the kinds of questions journalists were asking around impact on critical infrastructure, risks of landslides or rain on snow, links to climate change, and resilience of Ireland’s energy infrastructure. The comments were picked up in a wide number of news outlets, including [The Journal](#), [Irish Independent](#), the [Irish Times](#) and [Silicon Republic](#). And the SMC set up several broadcast interviews with the experts on *RTE*, *Virgin Media’s Tonight Show* and *Talk Radio*.

Mpox in Ireland. In February 2025, the SMC issued a [comment](#) from an infectious disease’s

expert at UCD as the public health authorities confirmed the first case of mpox in Ireland, comments picked up in the [Irish Independent](#).

Roundups

Roundups of third-party comments on new research findings were used less by Irish and Northern Irish journalists than responses to breaking news (see below for explanation). Thus, while many Roundups were produced, a relatively small number were used by journalists. However, the all-Ireland SMC circumvented this obstacle in part by responding to studies that had either an Irish or Northern Irish author, separate country-specific data, or were on subjects of special interest to Ireland North and South.

As a result, the SMC Round Up comments were used on new studies on [rewilding](#), and on [predicted deaths](#) from climate-related heat waves. Other Roundup comments were used on a [new study](#) on how mutations in bovine flu make it more specific to humans, and on [Lancet studies](#) on colorectal cancer and a new definition of obesity. Some of these Irish and Northern Irish experts were also quoted in international media including the [Daily Mail](#), [Financial Times](#) and the US-based [Stat News](#).

Quotes from Irish and Northern Irish Scientists used in international media

It is important to note that while many university press officers are understandably keen to see the all-Ireland SMC get their academics into international media, that was not among the success criteria for the pilot. This is because SMCs are generally registered as charities with the goal of improving the understanding of science in the public of their countries. However, because SMCs are often responding to global science stories and we sometimes share each other's content, we did see several examples of global media outlets using quotes gathered by the all-Ireland SMC. These included comments from scientists at almost every university on the island of Ireland on the announcement of Nobel Prize winners for [Physics](#), [Chemistry](#) and [Physiology or Medicine](#), which were used in the [Financial Times](#), [CNN](#) and the [BBC](#).

News journalists on the Island of Ireland using comments sent via the UK SMC

Another way of showing that the Irish and Northern Irish media would likely use an all Ireland SMC is examples where journalists picked up comments sent from the UK SMC. These included comments on several stories throughout the pilot including news of [human cases of bird flu](#), scientists' reaction to the [outcome of Cop29](#) and reactions to the [death of a UK child from measles](#). Kevin O'Sullivan of the *Irish Times*, a key advocate for an SMC on the island of Ireland, has used SMC UK quotes for several years.

Press Conferences

The only SMC service the one-year pilot did not include in its success criteria was press conferences. These have become a major part of how SMCs around the world improve the quality of science in the news and challenge anti-science narratives and misinformation. But

SMCs rarely run them in the set-up phase as they are time-consuming and therefore unsuitable for a one-person pilot. However, as the pilot progressed, we did begin to invite Irish journalists to selected UK SMC press conference. Northern Irish journalists would have received the invite via the UK SMC. By the end of the year, we had several Irish and Northern Irish journalists attending these briefings from titles like *BBC Ulster*, the *Irish Times* and *Independent* and the *Irish Farmers Journal*.

One stand-out success towards the end of the pilot was a joint SMC UK and all-Ireland [Background Press Briefing](#) set up to counter a misinformation campaign on social media about the safety of Bovaer, a type of food additive approved for dairy animals which is designed to reduce methane emissions. The social media scare story went viral during December 2024 with video clips showing people pouring allegedly dangerous milk down the drain and conspiracy theories about Bill Gates trying to poison us. The SMC quickly planned an expert panel to challenge these claims and to brief science reporters on the science around reducing methane in agriculture. With the help of the communications team at the University of Galway, the UK SMC was able to add Dr Sinead Waters, a leading Irish scientist to the panel. The press conference was a great success – attended by 20 journalists of whom six were Ireland-based. The media coverage was extensive and much of it was led by Dr Waters' description of the social media misinformation as a 'wakeup call' to scientists about the importance of communicating these innovations to the public. 'Conspiracy theory on methane reducing cow feed a 'wake-up call' scientists say' was the headline on the [Irish Examiner](#) and 'Methane-reducing science at risk from misinformation' on the [Irish Farmers Journal](#). The Galway scientists' quotes also appeared extensively in UK news titles including the [Times](#), [Guardian](#) and [I](#).

Success criteria met

The one-year pilot came to an end on 1st June 2025, at which point the senior press manager's contract concluded and the UK CEO stepped back from day-to-day involvement in the project, handing over the reins to the advisory group led by Claire Mac Evilly. Despite only having one member of staff, by the end of the pilot the database had recruited 223 scientists and 48 press officers, across 27 Irish and Northern Irish universities, research institutes, and science agencies. Press lists hold 65 journalists across 20 Irish and Northern Irish news outlets. 24 Rapid Reactions were issued and 20 Roundups. The pilot also got on the radar of the Department for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science with an invite to Fiona to speak at their Building Ireland's Scientific Future: A Summit for Vision and Progress. Unfortunately, Fiona could not attend and Claire represented the pilot on her behalf.

It is the firm view of the trustees of the UK SMC and Airfield that the one-year pilot SMC has met its success criteria and demonstrated proof of concept. We are confident that with a

larger staff and more time to demonstrate its value, an all-Ireland SMC would bring added value to the science media relations ecosystem in Ireland, North and South and would be a successful member of the growing global network.

Lessons and Challenges

- News climate - Fortunately there were no big anti-science or scare stories during the one-year pilot. The downside of this was that the SMC was unable to demonstrate a key USP of helping counter major misinformation in news.
- The year we chose was also a year where politics and international affairs dominated the news agenda, including local and national elections in Ireland and wars in Ukraine and the Middle East.
- We noted considerably less appetite in the Republic of Ireland for science stories that were big in other European countries, like the row over whether to license new anti Alzheimer's drugs and the April 2025 power outage.
- Perhaps the biggest challenge was the discovery that a significant amount of the reporting of new scientific studies that ends up in the Irish and Northern Irish news media is being done outside of the island Ireland. For example, many of the reporter by-lines on Irish and Northern Irish news reports on journal studies came from UK based journalists either working in news agencies like *Press Association* or with UK science journalists whose news outlets have syndication agreements with Irish counterparts (e.g. the *Guardian* and *Times* with the *Irish Times* and *Independent*). This was a significant challenge for the pilot as supporting the measured and accurate reporting of new research through providing third-party comments is a key element of any SMC's success. However, the all-Ireland SMC was able to learn from other SMCs around the works with a similar challenge, including the New Zealand SMC, and we were lucky enough to have a staff member from SMCNZ who visited the all-Ireland SMC and advised on alternative approaches (see above).
- As we already knew there are not many specialist science journalists in Irish and Northern Irish news and as with those SMCs in similar situations it remains a challenge to get general news reporters interested in science. This will be a major challenge for the all-Ireland SMC going forward, but it one that SMCs in Taiwan, New Zealand and Australia have successfully overcome.
- Much media coverage of science in Ireland, North and South comes from the publication of reports from the Irish and NI government and its arm's length science agencies. The pilot was unable within the short time to establish the necessary relationships with these bodies to get embargoed access to these reports which is needed to gather independent responses.
- One of the key relationships for the pilot was that between the SMC and research communications staff at the different universities and science organisations. Those research press officers that regularly found experts for the SMC pilot were the ones who are most enthusiastic to see the project as they can see the value added that the SMC can deliver. Building on these relationships will be critical to the success of

the SMC

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- Atlantic Technological University (ATU)
- Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies (DIAS)
- Engineers Ireland
- Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)
- Health Research Board (HRB)
- Kainos
- Novartis
- Queen's University of Belfast (QUB)
- RCSI University of Medicine and Health
- Science Foundation Ireland (SFI)
- Sustainable Energy Authority Ireland (SEAI)
- Trinity College Dublin (TCD)
- Ulster University
- University College Dublin (UCD)
- University of Limerick

(2) Advisory Board

- Claire Mac Evilly, CEO Airfield Estate (Chair)
- Jonathan McCrea, Science Journalists and Presenter
- Dr Claire O'Connell, Science Writer
- Dr Robert Grundy, Director of Innovation and Partnerships at Catalyst •

Luke Pierce, Recent Science Communications Graduate

- Prof Alan Kelly, Head of School of Food and Nutritional Science, UCC •

Sarah Jones. Director NI Science Festival

- Suzanne Lagan, Communications Manager Queens University
- Fiona Fox, CEO SMC UK

(3) Adam Murphy appointed as Senior Press Manager to run the year-long all-Ireland pilot. Adam, a former Fame lab winner from Ireland had experience and science journalist on a popular science podcast, was recruited from a research comms role at DCU.