

How can Behavioural Insights Inform Public Policy Making?



A policy brief to support the Northern Ireland Civil Service
in identifying opportunities for embedding Behavioural
Insights

June 2025



Executive Summary

This paper synthesises findings from desk-based research conducted by Ulster University (UU) to support the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) decision making regarding the continued role of behavioural insights. In presenting options for consideration, it outlines three key routes governments can use to access behavioural insights and an overview of opportunities for the application of behavioural insights across the five stages of the policy cycle. These are set within a Programme for Government (PfG) framework. The review identified six key considerations associated with the use of behavioural insights in policymaking. Each of these areas has potential implications for rigour, uptake, outcomes, and the overall policymaking process itself. These are presented to equip decision makers with a more robust context against which to select options and to ensure that any selection that is made has the opportunity to be transformative. Finally, five recommendations are made regarding next steps:

- Conducting empirical research to identify the facilitators and barriers to accessing NICS provision of behavioural insights, including with current and past project sponsors;
- Undertaking engagement with staff to explore the benefits and opportunities of BI delivery model options within the NICS context;
- Evaluating capacity to fund and staff the resource effectively, whether through internal hires or external expertise;
- Developing a framework for capacity building within the NICS;

and, integral to all the above;

- Establishing a collaborative working group.

Introduction

EPIC Futures NI is a Local Policy Innovation Partnership (LPIP) led by UU and funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), Innovate UK and UK Research and Innovation (UKRI). It aims to develop a local policy innovation partnership to solve place-based challenges. Workstream 2 (Behavioural Insights) supports EPIC Futures NI's aim of creating evidence-based solutions to fair and inclusive employment. One strand of this workstream involves working with Northern Ireland's (NI) Department of Finance (DoF) to explore opportunities for NICS to develop its current capacity to apply behavioural insights (BI), including within the policy cycle. For the purpose of this paper the work stream will be referred to as 'the project'.

In the original application this was articulated as follows:

*"Through a process of co-design, a programme will be developed and delivered to upskill senior strategists in government and the public sector on how to embed behavioural insights into their strategies and policies. **O9:** Reports, academic articles, policy briefing, training course. **Dissemination:** Workshops, training courses, website, social media, print media, conference.*

The aim of the project is for DoF and UU to work in collaboration towards realising the potential of BI for policymaking in NI by answering the research question,

How can behavioural insights inform public policy making?

The aim of this paper is to reflect a desk-based review of the use of BI across governments, intended -

1. To inform, providing subject matter overview and providing context, within a wider policy landscape.

2. To present options, in terms of i. routes to accessing behavioural insights; and ii. routes to embedding behavioural insights in existing functions

3. To recommend context relevant options regarding next steps.

4. To equip decision makers with sufficient subject matter knowledge and its translation into business relevance as to make decision regarding next steps.

1. Informing - the current state of play

Behavioural science is

“a scientific discipline whose topic of study is individual human behaviour, group behaviour and population behaviour and factors that influence these”¹.

It is informed by the scientific fields of psychology, sociology, neuroscience, anthropology and economics. It aims to understand the underlying mechanisms of human behaviour by integrating empirical data from experiments, observations, and theoretical models. Policy makers have been working with evidence generated by behavioural science for many years². Over the past 20 years behavioural science has experienced an additional surge of interest, with this resulting in rapid development of opportunities for local and national government to engage with behavioural scientists. The skillset in-house typically reflects knowledge and qualifications in behavioural science (including psychology, economics and political science), often with additional, supplementary behavioural science expertise from think-tanks, universities and research institutions that support public organisations in applying BI³. This has included bodies being set up to bring learning from behavioural science to support behaviourally informed policy making and delivery using BI. **Behavioural insights** are,

¹ West and Michie, 2022 p.1.

² Graf, 2019.

³ OECD, 2017.

“lessons derived from the behavioural and social sciences, including decision making, psychology, cognitive science, neuroscience, organisational and group behaviour”⁴,

Of the 631⁵ bodies globally applying BI, the majority (51%⁶) are government owned or government financed. 399 of the 631 are situated in Europe, more than in any other continent. A map depicting the locations can be viewed in Appendix A. **The work carried out, often commissioned by and in collaboration with policy teams**, focuses on bridging the gap between policy/strategy and action, with the aim of improving outcomes and lowering costs, and can include:

- Policy reviews to identify policy and system driven barriers to supporting public behaviour change
- Designing evidence-based, scientifically underpinned interventions to support work strategies, and systems tailored to real behaviour
- Measuring (for example, service delivery) and evaluating to use data to improve understanding of what works, what does not, and why
- Supporting stakeholder engagement
- Creating feasibility checks to ensure sustainable adoption of new processes, tools, or cultural shifts
- Running experiments - testing solutions on a small scale before rolling them out

Reviewing BI interventions is not within the remit of this paper. For the purpose of context, however, a review by the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development OECD of BI unit impact as early as 2017 (see Table 1), identifies seven key success factors associated with integrating BI more generally.

⁴ OECD, 2017.

⁵ Naru, 2024.

⁶ OECD, 2025.

Success factor	Proportion of units
Impact and scalability of projects	87%
Buy-in from senior executives	83%
Recruitment and retention of BI talent	80%
Sustainable funding	73%
Efficient use of BI comparative advantage	67%
Alignment with political priorities	67%
Return on investment of the unit	59%

Table 1. Success factors identified by BI units (OECCD, 2017⁷).

Wider BI scoping of opportunities for the application of BI, and benefits it can deliver, is underway globally, with organisations including the World Health Organization⁸ (WHO) and the United Nations Children’s Fund⁹ (UNICEF) incorporating learning from behavioural science into strategy and operations.

⁷ OECD, 2017.

⁸ World Health Organisation, 2025.

⁹ UNICEF, 2025.

2. Presenting options

- i. Routes to accessing behavioural insights expertise
- ii. Routes to embedding behavioural insights in existing functions

i. Routes to accessing behavioural insights expertise

Desk-based research to identify **where** behavioural science is currently embedded in governments globally identified three key routes¹⁰ with some approaches comprising two or more simultaneously:

1. *Central model*

A specialised team typically situated within central government, that works across departments on an in-house consultancy basis. This supports a strategic approach that reflects shared ownership of wider policy issues and consistent application of BI across departments. This includes integrating the staff from the BI team into existing teams on a temporary basis. The original Nudge Unit, situated in the Cabinet Office, is an example of a central model.

2. *Diffuse model*

Units embedded within individual departments or a specialised agency at central government or local government level. This allows for the development of departmental subject matter expertise and is facilitated by ‘closeness’ to policy owner expertise. This is reflected in the approach taken in Singapore, Australia and Canada.

3. *Project model*

Behavioural insights resources acquired and applied according to specific projects and initiatives. This includes commissioning support on a consultancy basis from external providers, including businesses with BI expertise and behavioural scientist academics. This can be supported by the creation of Behavioural Science Call-Off’ frameworks¹¹ with the United Kingdom government’s Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) currently employing the project model.

¹⁰ OECD, 2024.

¹¹ Contracts Finder, 2023.

ii. Routes to embedding behavioural insights in existing functions

Typically, BI is embedded to complement more traditional policy tools. Its role is to support and enhance existing frameworks so that policy is designed and delivered using science underpinned insight into how people think and behave. This approach recognises that people exist and behave in relation to systems and social environments. It seeks to explore these relationships so that policy is better designed to reflect them. Routes to embedding BI span the policy cycle (see Figure 1), with it contributing to:

- Problem identification
- Problem analysis
- Policy design
- Policy assessment, including screening
- Policy implementation
- Monitoring and evaluation

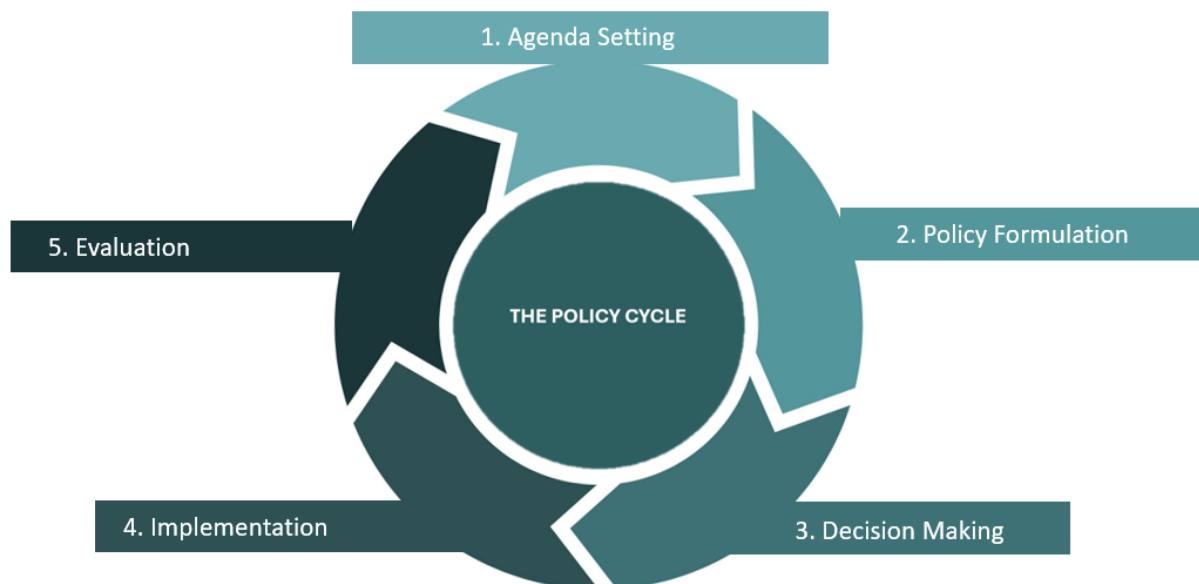


Figure 1. Five stages of the policy cycle (Source: present author, 2025).

To support a more localised approach, examples of how BI has been applied to support policy making across various policy stages have been mapped onto NI's PfG¹² (PfG) in Table 2. The PfG outlines the Executive's priorities aimed at making a real difference to the lives of people in Northern Ireland. These priorities are, by their nature, not discrete challenge areas. Each may include several wicked problems. The sample provided aims to give some insight and examples of BI projects that have aimed to tackle some of the problems falling within the priority areas, giving a sense of the possibility BI brings. Some examples of work already undertaken by NICS are included.

¹² Northern Ireland Executive, 2025.

Cut Health Waiting Times	Increased medical appointment response rates (Ireland)	Implementation and service delivery	https://www.who.int/europe/news/item/22-01-2025-the-art-of-letter-writing--using-behavioural-insights-to-reduce-hospital-waiting-times
Ending Violence against Women and Girls	- Increasing fathers' engagement with Family Hub services (UK, 2022) – identifying barriers and facilitators - School-based dating-, relationship- and gender-based violence prevention (BIT, currently underway, 2025)	Implementation	https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6398b2c8e90e077c34f20391/Summary_Applying_behavioural_science_to_promoting_uptake_of_family_hubs_services.pdf https://www.bi.team/projects/stop/
Better Support for Children and Young People with Special Educational Needs	Nothing specific to this priority has been identified thus far.		
Provide More Social, Affordable and Sustainable Housing	How can Behavioural Public Policy contribute to tackling the UK Housing Crisis? Behavioural insights as route to facilitating wider policy, for example by identifying barriers to public engaging with shared ownership schemes and the Lifetime ISA (LISA).	Formulation and Decision making	https://thebehaviouralist.com/portfolio-item/identifying-and-assisting-fuel-poor-homes/ https://thebehaviouralist.com/portfolio-item/how-can-we-encourage-the-take-up-of-smart-technology/ https://thebehaviouralist.com/portfolio-item/haus/
Safer Communities	Behavioural Crime Prevention – nudges, tugs and teachable moments	Implementation	https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/security-crime-intelligence-innovation-institute/publications/research-briefings/behavioural-crime-

			prevention-using-nudges,-tugs-and-teachable-moments-in-crime-prevention-communications
Protecting Lough Neagh and the Environment	• A Behavioral Approach to Water Conservation: Evidence from Costa Rica		https://hdl.handle.net/10986/22156
Reform and Transformation of Public Services	• LPS debtor behaviour (Northern Ireland) • Advance Care Planning (Northern Ireland)	Implementation Formulation	https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/articles/advance-care-planning-now-and-future

Table 2. Examples of how and where BI has been applied mapped onto Northern Ireland's Programme for Government (source: present author, 2025).

3. Reflections and lessons learned on the application of BI to support policy making

The review identified six key considerations associated with the use of BI in policymaking. Each of these areas has potential implications for rigour, uptake, outcomes, and the overall policymaking process itself. These were supplemented by findings from a preliminary stakeholder engagement exercise designed to explore participants' perspectives on BI and its application within a public policy context, with the data collected during the NI Leadership and Governance Conference in April 2025. The areas for consideration are presented at this early stage to allow for them to be *reflected on, added to and considered*, in terms of creating opportunities to design an approach to manage them effectively and potentially to mitigate them entirely.

1. Semantics and lack of clarity leading to misaligned directions and intentions:

- behaviour change, behavioural science, behavioural economics, behaviourism, behavioural insights – shared language to support aligned understanding
- public trust considerations
- behavioural insights being perceived as a panacea

2. Not applying BI but labelling it as such:

- ineffective, negative outcomes that do not deliver
- inaccurately measuring outcomes
- diluting the rigour and value of behavioural science as an academic discipline
- no sustained trust/loss of trust

3. Individualising responsibility for what are societal challenges, which may in turn mean shifting accountability away from government (see UNICEF's 'social+behaviour change')

4. Not 'designing in' the system support needed for uptake:

- lack of awareness of the resource
- knowledge gap regarding accessing the resource

- knowledge gap regarding benefits of using the resource
- inability to access behavioural science resource
- absence of motivation to use the resource – e.g., practical and perception related barriers

5. Not clearly identifying and recognising the limitations of BI

- it is not the route to tackling all problems
- when it **is** the route to tackling a problem this still does not guarantee outcomes

6. Unethical or irresponsible use of BI

- data related ethical concerns and issues of privacy, consent and selective application of solutions may arise.

4. Conclusion and recommendations

The paper has introduced BI within the behavioural science context, outlining how it is acquired and applied within a government context globally. It has condensed and localised what is a rapidly expanding resource and knowledge base. This is an overview designed to support NICS exploration of opportunities to develop its current BI provision. It aimed to facilitate conversation and further enquiry as DoF and UU work in collaboration towards realising the potential of BI for policymaking in NI by answering the research question,

How can behavioural insights inform public policy making?

Examples of BI's application to the work of government globally were presented against a PfG framework. None of the examples was presented as being the one solution to a problem area. None of the examples is intended to position public behaviour as the problem. BI is identified as a route to understanding behaviour and to supporting wider approaches made by government in reviewing, designing and implementing how its systems work to serve and support that same public¹³. The identified reflections and

¹³ Hallsworth, 2023.

lessons learned highlight areas for continued consideration and improvement, especially within the context of broader NICS expertise and the perspectives of the wider NI public.

On this basis the paper concludes with the following recommendations for next steps:

- Conducting empirical research to identify the facilitators and barriers to accessing NICS provision of behavioural insights;
- Undertaking engagement with staff to explore the benefits and opportunities of BI delivery model options within the NICS context;
- Evaluating capacity to fund and staff the resource effectively, whether through internal hires or external expertise;
- Developing a framework for capacity building within the NICS;
- Using OECD and other BI review and guidance resources, including the LOGIC (Leadership, Objectives, Governance, Integration, Capability) framework¹⁴, designed to support further embedding of BI using 15 key principles, and guidelines¹⁵ formulated to support an ethical approach;

and, integral to all of the above,

- Establishing a collaborative working group.

¹⁴ OECD, 2024.

¹⁵ OECD, 2019.

Appendix A

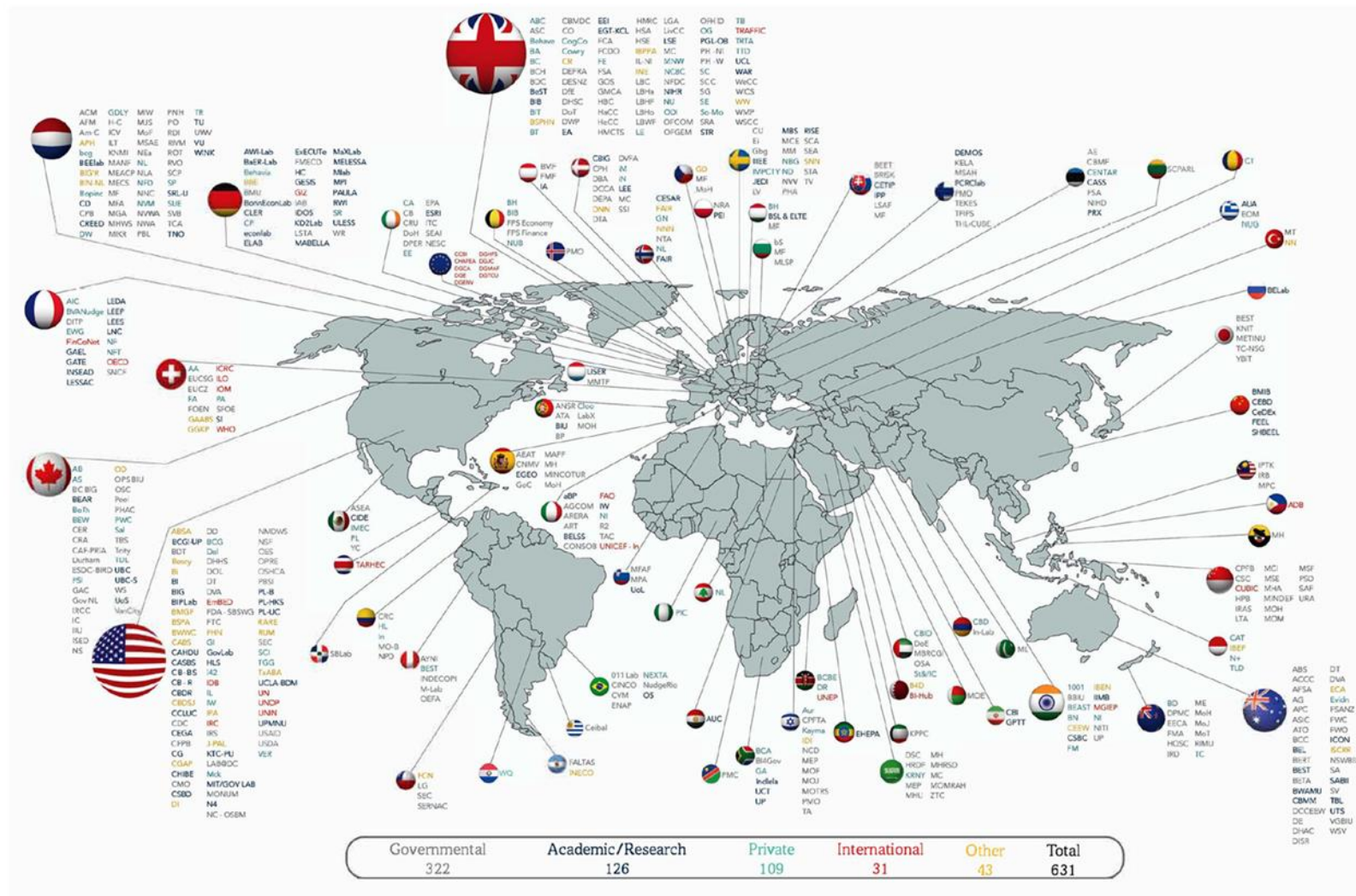


Figure A.1. Distribution of behavioural public policy bodies worldwide (Naru, 2024).

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EPIC Futures NI. Working together for fair and inclusive employment

EPIC Futures NI is a Local Policy Innovation Partnership (LPIP) led by Ulster University and funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), Innovate UK and UK Research and Innovation (UKRI).

EPIC Futures stands for Economic and Social Partnering for Inclusive Innovation and Collaboration and is dedicated to creating a prosperous and sustainable future for Northern Ireland. With a 'place-based' focus the partnership brings together academia, policymakers, business, community and voluntary sector to tackle challenges unique to place. Together, we aim to create evidence-based solutions for fair and inclusive employment across Northern Ireland.

Our main areas of focus include.

- Filling Research Gaps: Developing a holistic understanding of skills and employability at sub-regional levels across Northern Ireland.
- Labour Market Analysis: Identifying trends and behaviours within the current and future labour market to inform responsive solutions.
- Evidence-Based Policy Recommendations: Collaboratively designing policy recommendations that tackle deep rooted skills and employment challenges.
- Building Collaborative Partnerships: Uniting diverse sectors to create fair and meaningful employment opportunities through the advancement of shared goals.

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