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Co-Centre Research Spotlight
‘How to write a policy brief for engagement and impact’

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17 Feb 2026 Co-Centre Research Spotlight Series

Dr Christian Reynolds - Who am I?

- Reader at the Centre for Food Policy, City St Georges, University of London.
- Teach on the Master in Food Policy,
- Research Focus on sustainable food systems and food waste.
- Supporting UK National, Devolved (Scottish/England/NI) and Local (Sheffield/Islington)
- Nutrition Society Food Systems theme lead. IFST Sustainability working group.
- Recent publications:

Talk outline

Part 1 – What is a policy brief , how to write a policy brief for engagement and impact

Part 2 – Planning who to target for policy briefs in Ireland and NI

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What is a policy brief?

SHORT DOCUMENT

ABOUT A PARTICULAR POLICY-RELATED SITUATION OR PROBLEM

PROVIDES EVIDENCE AND ANALYSIS

GIVES RECOMMENDATIONS

FOR A PARTICULAR AUDIENCE

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What's the format?

- Well organized
- Structured
- Clear and concise
- Read in a hurry by a busy, senior figure
- Should not be long or wordy
- Internal vs External briefs

1 page | 3 page | 10+ page

Different detail in the brief depending on page length

(is anything over 3 pages a "brief"?)

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Signposting and framing is key

- Ensure you're **framing** the issue in a way that builds support.

- Does your framing work for your target audience?

Understanding who your audience is and what their job entails is crucial. What is their sphere of influence and what change can they implement?

- Be very clear: what the current policy you want to change is.
- Set the scene: Identify the shortfalls of the current policy. Where is this policy
- failing, why and how can your recommendations improve the status quo?
- Be aware of how policies are made in that specific institution.
  - *Use non-technical, clear and coherent language.*
  - *Use active not passive language – engage, deliver etc*

Check out George Orwells essay "Politics and the English Language" (1946) https://www.orwellfoundation.com/the-orwell-foundation/orwell/essays-and-other-works/politics-and-the-english-language/

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What is a policy recommendation?

Advice designed to influence policy decisions targeted at an individual or group with the authority to make them; what policy should they adopt?

Designed to shift decision-makers faced with different options on what to do towards the recommended policy.

Often draws on evidence of what causes the problem the policy is designed to address and/or evidence of impact of the recommended policy.

Extend beyond providing “policy options” or “policy implications” to recommending the course they take.

Researchers and others who engage with the evidence have a responsibility to make policy recommendations to ensure policymakers can benefit from evidence

- Is there a best option or are these a raft of policy recommendations to be used together?
- **Incrementalism** – policy change is often small and incremental, you need to give a range of options.

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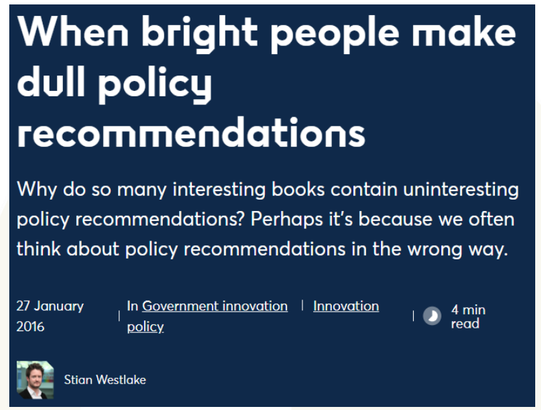
Keep your narrative and argument in the policy recommendations.

- **Adviser's approach**. This involves trying to write down the best set of measures to tackle a particular problem.
  - *"the list of recommendations actually represents a good programme of action for government to take".*
  - *"it doesn't put a premium on originality. After all, most good policy ideas aren't original, and most original policy ideas aren't good."*

- **Wonk's approach**. Here the point is to be original, ideally in a way that proceeds directly from the argument of the rest of the book
  - *"reader gets ideas they haven't heard before (or at least, a strong rationale for ideas that are rarely proposed)"*
  - *"a) It generally doesn't aspire to be a complete solution to the problem – the point is to say something new and Interesting rather than to list all the things that need to be said. (b) The advice is on average more likely to be wrong than if you follow the adviser's approach"*



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Westlake (2016) "When bright people make dull policy recommendations" https://www.nesta.org.uk/blog/when-bright-people-make-dull-policy-recommendations/

Make your policy recommendations (super) SMART

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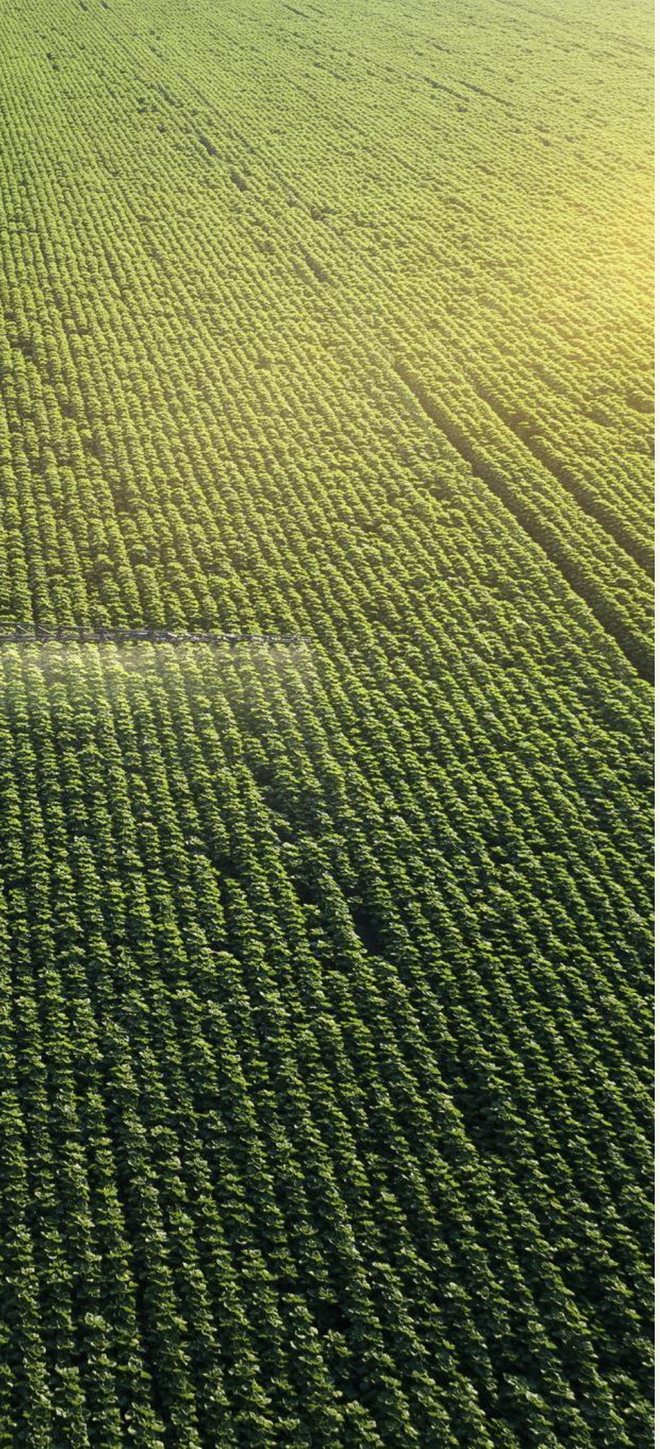

Examples

- The Department of Agriculture should allocate [50 million] in funds to schemes to enable minoritized ethnic groups to enter farming, including through schemes to provide access to land and finance

- The Food Standards Commission should introduce a new regulation setting the level of permitted pesticide in horticultural products to align with latest scientific evidence, and enforce it through regular monitoring (less specific but still specific enough)

Include the right information in your policy recommendation

- To increase the chance of your policy recommendations being adopted and implemented, propose them with the following seven key pieces of information:
- **Specific target population**: Who is the policy aimed at? Who is doing the changing?
- **Responsible actor**: Who is responsible for delivering the policy?
- **Monitoring or evaluation plan**: How will the policy be monitored and evaluated and will that be conducted independently?
- **Time frame**: What is the time frame of the policy? Is the time frame defined or ongoing?
- **Cost and budget**: How much is the policy likely to cost and is there a budget allocated?
- **Evidence**: What evidence is the policy based upon?
- **Theory of change**: How is the policy theorised to work? What are the key assumptions underlying how it is theorised to work? (is my recommendation viable? Does the recommendation seem feasible?)

Target population	Responsible agent	Monitoring or evaluation	Timeframe	Cost/budget	Evidence	Theory of change
57%	71%	24%	50%	9%	19%	56%

- Largest proportion of policies (29%) were proposed without any of the above information!
- Compared to 8% of policies proposed with all the above information

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Theis (2022) "How to turn your policy ideas into reality" https://castfromclay.co.uk/how-to-guides/how-to-turn-your-policy-ideas-into-reality/
Is Obesity Policy in England Fit for Purpose? Analysis of Government Strategies and Policies, 1992–2020. Dolly R. Z. Theis, Martin White. The Milbank Quarterly 2021 https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0009.12498

Further reading – when academics write policy briefs etc.

- **Musandu (2016)** "How to write actionable policy recommendations" https://www.researchtoaction.org/2013/07/how-to-write-actionable-policy-recommendations/
- **Parsons, Headings, Doherty, Barling, and Heron. (2022)** "Making policy recommendations: a fine balance between demonstrating relevance and demonstrating naivety" in "Guiding Principles for translating evidence on diet shift for people in the real world" Food Standards Agency https://www.food.gov.uk/research/consumer-interests-aka-wider-consumer-interests/guiding-principles-for-translating-evidence-on-diet-shift-for-people-in-the-real-world?print=1
- **Wolfe**, R. (2013) 'Policy Briefs: A guide to writing policy briefs for research uptake'. Available at: blogs.lshtm.ac.uk › griphealth › files › 2017/01 › Policy-briefs-guide_2015
- **Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology** (n.d.) 'How to write a policy brief'. Available at: https://www.parliament.uk/mps-lords-and-offices/offices/bicameral/post/about-post/writing-a-policy-brief/
- **Tyler, C.** (2013) 'Top 20 things scientists need to know about policy-making' Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/science/2013/dec/02/scientists-policy-governments-science

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platforms
(How I mapped the IE & NI policy landscape with Overton)

Objective

- Map which policy-making organisations in Ireland and Northern Ireland cite or publish on the Co-Centre's topic platforms to identify engagement priorities and overlaps.

Data & scope

- Overton is a database of policy documents and the research papers which they cite. It covers around sixteen million policy documents.
- Source: Overton policy database (IE + UK>NI sources)
- Topics (platforms): P1.1, P1.2, P1.3, P2, P3, P4, P5
- Query design: Curated keyword bundles per platform (e.g., P5 = "global supply chain", "post-Brexit trade agreement", "food policy", etc.).
- Filters: Source country/region (Ireland; UK> Northern Ireland)

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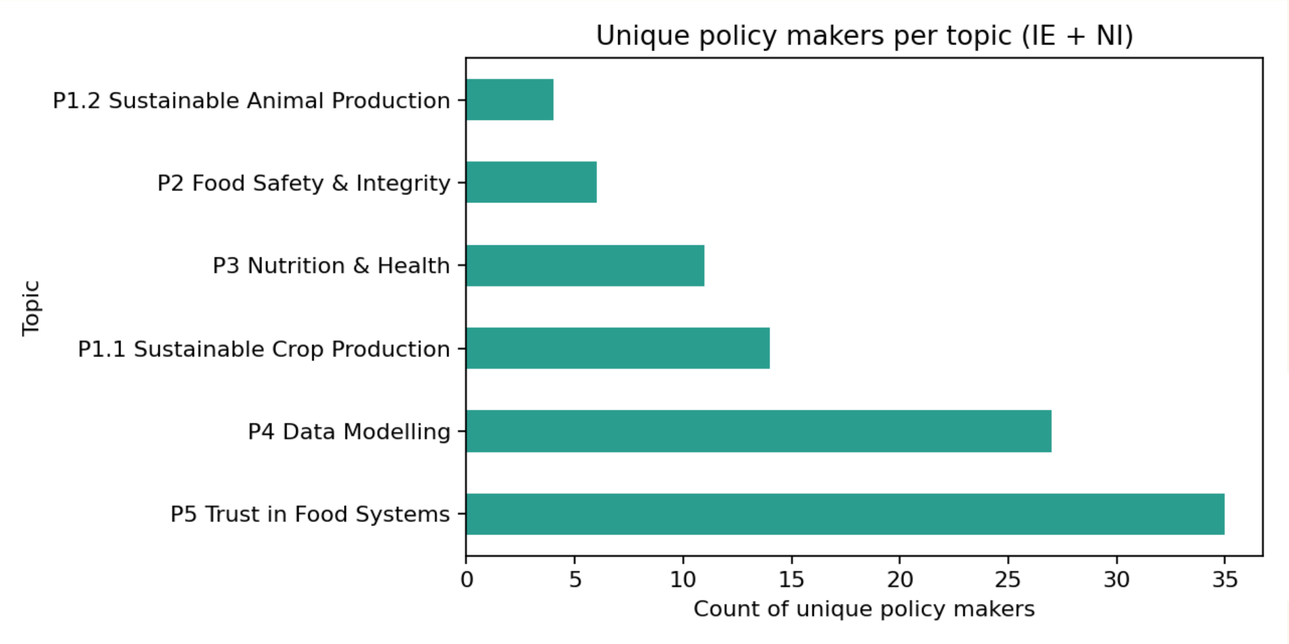
How many unique policy makers are there across the different topic platforms?

There are **43 unique Irish and NI policy-making organisations**.

Top organisations (number of topics in which they appear):

GOV.IE — 6
Irish Environmental Protection Agency — 6
Northern Ireland Executive — 5
Lenus: The Irish Health Repository — 4
Northern Ireland Assembly Research and Information Service — 4
Safefood — 4
Teagasc – the Agriculture and Food Development Authority — 4
Belfast City Council — 4

(then: Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, Royal Irish Academy, Climate Change Advisory Council, Oireachtas Éireann, Trócaire, Oireachtas Éireann Library & Research Service, Western Development Commission, at 2–3 topics each)

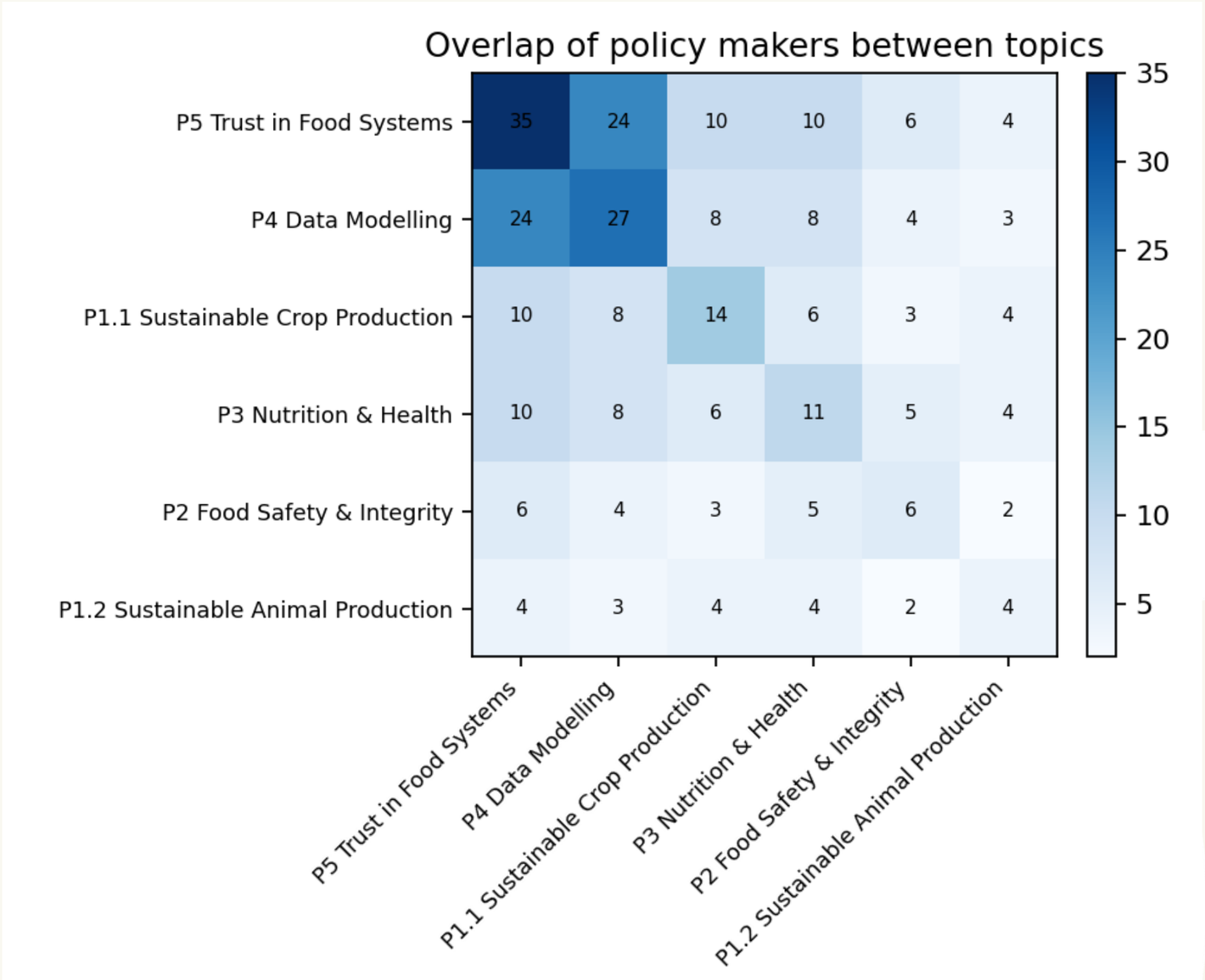


(*P1.3 Sustainable Food Processing had no IE/NI policy sources returned in this Overton query*)

Overlap between topics (shared policy makers)

The **overlap matrix** shows where the same organisations straddle multiple platforms (notably P4↔P5).

Plan joint briefings/roundtables around these overlaps to make one touchpoint serve two programme areas.



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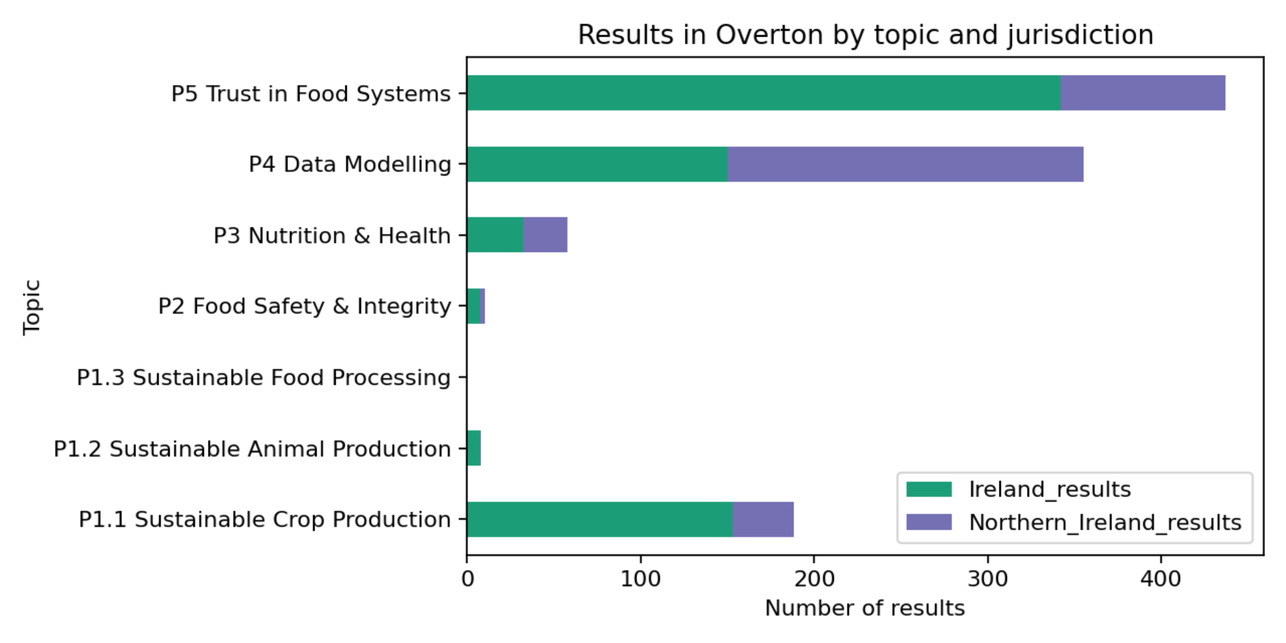
Jurisdictional spread (IE vs NI) by topic

- Totals across all topics: **Ireland 691** results vs **Northern Ireland 365** results in Overton results.
- Topic-level pattern:
- **P4 Data Modelling** skews to NI (205 NI vs 150 IE).
- **P5 Trust in Food Systems** skews to IE (342 IE vs 95 NI).
- **P1.3 Sustainable Food Processing** returned **no** IE/NI policy sources in this query (potential gap or keyword issue).



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So what?

Top line policy makers.

- GOV.IE and Irish EPA appear across all/most mapped topics;
- NI Executive spans many topics—high-leverage interlocutors.

Other policy makers to develop relationships with

- **P5:** Oireachtas Éireann / Library & Research Service, Belfast City Council, RIA, IIEA, Trócaire, Safefood
- **P4:** NI Assembly Research & Information Service, Oireachtas entities, IHREC, NORA/NOREF-adjacent bodies (as listed), ESRI, National Open Research Forum.
- **P1.1 & P1.2:** Teagasc, Irish EPA, GOV.IE (agri briefs).
- **P2:** Food Safety Authority of Ireland, Belfast City Council, Safefood.
- **P3:** NI Executive, Belfast City Council, GOV.IE, IHREC, Bord Bia (diet/health & school food).

Jurisdictional pattern:

- Overall IE (≈691) vs NI (≈365) results.
- P4 skews NI (≈205 NI vs 150 IE); P5 skews IE (≈342 IE vs 95 NI).

Shall I run more searches or conduct further topic analysis?

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Foodcocentre.org

Thank You

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Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science

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