

An All-Ireland SMC – Consultation Report

As part of the development of a global network of Science Media Centres, the Global SMCs Coordinator and I initiated a project to explore the appetite for an all-Ireland Science Media Centre. This has taken the form of a consultation with key representatives of the science and media community (see list of people consulted [here](#)) involving face to face meetings or larger group meetings. These meetings have been taking place since May 2023.

The philosophy of the UK SMC is that ‘The media will do science better when scientists do the media better’. Twenty years on we have demonstrated many times that scientists can inform and influence public debates on science by engaging more effectively with the news media.

The SMC Mission

To provide, for the benefit of the public and policymakers, accurate and evidence-based information about science and engineering through the media, particularly on controversial and headline news stories when most confusion and misinformation occurs. To champion and facilitate high standards in science communication and reporting.

This report will summarise the key findings of the consultation on an all-Ireland SMC and present a plan for a one-year pilot SMC – a feasibility project – to start work in June 2024.

Headline Summary of Consultation

- Science community and science journalists largely agree that science does not have the prominence it deserves in the news media.
- There are very few specialist science journalists and science stories are often covered by general news correspondents who have less of a grasp of science.
- This lack of prominence is at odds with the rising importance of science in Ireland and Northern Ireland which is home to much world class research and many science-based companies.
- Many feel that this situation is starting to change – with the combined impact of climate change and the pandemic pointed to as raising the appetite for good science amongst journalists, the public, and policy makers.
- The pool of scientists appearing in news media is too small – journalists rely on ‘go to’ media-friendly scientists rather than searching out subject-specific experts.
- Strong support from both scientists and journalists for the SMC helping to increase the plurality of voices available to the media and encouraging younger up-and-coming scientists into the media.
- As with many other countries, there is a big challenge with polarised debates, misinformation, and ‘culture wars’.
- There is a well-established and growing commitment to public engagement amongst scientists and institutions. In part to raise the profile of science and enhance the reputation of research institutions, but also more broadly to enhance public understanding of science; to ensure public and policy debates are informed by the best evidence.
- Many talked of the timing of this pilot feeling right – post pandemic and with growing recognition of the need for science to drive behavioural change and innovation because of climate change.

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- Initiatives like ‘The Conversation’ and RTE’s ‘Brainstorm’ are popular but the journalists wanted to stress that articles written by scientists should not be seen as a substitute for news journalism on science, which should accurately explain science but also interrogate and scrutinise.
- Journalists highlighted increasing constraints on a section of scientists employed by government and wanted direct and open contact with a larger number of these experts.
- Many universities were keen to raise the profile of Irish scientists outside of Ireland and Northern Ireland – getting wider reach to UK and global media.
- All said the pilot should be an all-Ireland one.
- Any SMC would need to be seen to be independent of any one university or agency.
- Any SMC would need to help scientists to deliver societal impact beyond their work being published in science journals and discussed at conferences.

The Pilot

(i) Support for the Pilot

- There is strong and enthusiastic support for a one-year pilot amongst the scientific community and science journalists.
- List of those consulted can be found [here](#).

(ii) Success Criteria

- A senior science press manager appointed and operational.
- Pilot All-Ireland SMC expert database populated by a broad range of scientific experts from universities, research institutes, and science agencies.
- Meeting held with the key 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 Round Ups (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 scientists are being shared to international media by global SMC network.
- Identifying scientists who have not done much media and making them available to journalists.

(iii) Important Caveat to Success Criteria

SMCs are set up to improve the media coverage of science and ensure that the public are hearing the best evidence – most especially at times of crisis, in the reporting of contentious or complex new findings, or when there is a scientific controversy. To achieve this, we use academic scientists from the country’s universities and research institutes. The UK SMC has undoubtedly helped to raise the profile of scientists in the UK and international news. But this is a positive by-product rather than a core goal.

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The Pilot All-Ireland SMC should be viewed not as additional PR for science but as a new initiative that sits firmly in the following kinds of areas:

- Tackling misinformation
- Enhancing public understanding of science
- Championing higher standards in science reporting and science communication
- Improving science and data literacy in news media and amongst the wider public
- Ensuring policy makers have greater access to measured and evidence-based information on topical controversies

Modest

The one-year pilot will be small and modest. We hope that the senior press manager, working alongside the UK SMC, will be able to demonstrate a ‘proof of concept’: that the core services developed by global SMCs would be used in Ireland. However, this individual will be on their own and cannot possibly deliver the level of service that the established SMCs offer – most of whom have a staff of between 5 and 10 people.

Scope of pilot

There was interest from some in broadening the centre to include a wider set of experts from outside science. An SMC Ireland could explore this in the future but given the limited capacity, the pilot will focus on recruiting scientists, engineers and social scientists.

Clear but narrow focus

SMCs are well known for having an incredibly narrow and clear focus which we believe is critical to our effectiveness. Over time this has allowed the UK SMC to describe ourselves as ‘The experts on science for the news media and the experts on news for the science community’. This focus is on:

- The news media
- The wider public
- Science stories with the following elements: contentious, headline news, politicised, subject to misinformation, hyped, especially complex, cutting edge

(iv) After the Pilot

If the pilot is deemed a success, we would be looking to the Irish science community to take on this project and establish a fully staffed all-Ireland organisation. If the pilot is not seen as successful, we would simply not continue it at the end of the year.

(v) Governance

- The pilot project will be run at the direction of the UK SMC in collaboration with Airfield and will be supported by the Advisory Group and the global network of Science Media Centres.
- Airfield will employ one individual on a fixed-term basis for 12 months who will be seconded to the pilot project,
- Donations from the Irish science community for the pilot will be held in a separate account maintained by Airfield.

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- The day-to-day line management and guidance of the person will be led by the UK SMC as part of its oversight and direction of the pilot, with support from the Global SMC Coordinator.
- The person employed will receive additional advice and guidance from the pilot All-Ireland SMC Advisory Group chaired by Claire MacEvilly. Claire is currently the CEO of Airfield. She has worked in science communications in the UK and Ireland for many years and has worked with the UK SMC for 20 years. The Advisory Group is an ad hoc group made up of seasoned scientists, science communicators and journalists. Its main remit will be to assess the delivery of the KPIs and lead on plans to take the pilot forward if successful.
- Legal responsibility for the pilot lives primarily with the CEO and Trustees of the UK SMC.
- The pilot will be assessed by the UK SMC in consultation with the Irish science community, Advisory Group, funders and key journalists.
- If it proves a success, then the Advisory Group will initiate discussions about moving from a pilot run by the UK SMC in collaboration with Airfield to a legal entity in Ireland with the appropriate structure.

(vi) Funding

- In line with the SMC's core value of independence, the pilot will be a multi-funded project with money sourced from the scientific community in Ireland including universities, science-based companies, and funding bodies.
- The budget for the pilot is €150,000. We are asking all those bodies who support the pilot to donate between €5,000 and €20,000.
- There will be an upper limit on donations of €20,000 to ensure the independence of the pilot.
- The donations will be put in a dedicated account maintained by Airfield Estate specifically for the purposes of the pilot project.
- If the pilot does not happen, the funds will be returned to funders. If the pilot takes place, no funds will be returned irrespective of whether it is assessed as successful or not.
- Important to note that those organisations funding the pilot will not get special treatment in any editorial ways. The best scientists will be recruited irrespective of whether they come from an institute that is a funder. This is a donation, not a membership fee or a payment for services. However, all communications about the Pilot All-Ireland SMC in the UK and Ireland will highlight the list of organisations funding the pilot, and funders will be priority stakeholders.
- At time of writing (May 2024) the pilot has received firm funding commitments of from the following organisations: Science Foundation Ireland, Health Research Board, Queen's University Belfast, University of Limerick, Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland, University College Dublin, Maynooth University, Trinity College Dublin, Environmental Protection Agency, Kainos, Sustainable Energy Authority Ireland, Alexion, Dublin Institute of Advanced Studies, Novartis, and Atlantic Technological University. University of Galway and Ulster University also indicated a desire to fund. Additional funders are needed, and we will continue to add to this list.

(vii) Next Steps

- We have now appointed a senior press manager to run the pilot.
- The senior press manager will begin on 28th May, 2024.
- The senior press manager and the UK SMC CEO will stay in touch with and update funders and key stakeholders.

Some Quotes:

Triona McCormack, Director of Research, University College Dublin

“There has never been a more important time for science and researchers to participate in the debate around our society's future and participating in mainstream media is a great way to do this. It's important that we bring our knowledge and expertise to the debate.”

Prof Mark Lawler, Associate Pro-Vice-Chancellor and Professor of Digital Health, Queen's University Belfast

"An all-Ireland Science Media Centre (SMC) would be extremely timely, particularly given recent publicly funded initiatives such as the Shared Island Unit, the Higher Education Authority's North South Research Programme and the All-Island Cancer Research Institute. An all-Ireland SMC would provide an opportunity to discuss and debate key areas of science and research that have societal impact."

Jonathan McCrea, Newstalk/Bauer Media/Whipsmart Media

"In today's landscape, journalists are more under-resourced than ever and often not trained to cover knowledge-intensive areas such as science. As a result, we often get misleading or flat-out wrong headlines or, more commonly, pieces that overemphasise the importance of research. This leads to growing public mistrust in a world where trust is a precious and dwindling resource. I think a pilot of the SMC would provide an invaluable service to Irish media and consequently, the Irish public. An independent body that provides rapid access to research experts across the entire spectrum of science is an extremely attractive proposition and something that I would promote across our media group."

Ends

Fiona Fox, CEO, UK SMC

May 2024

Relevant Literature

- UK SMC Website
<https://www.sciencemediacentre.org/>
- Global SMC Website
<https://www.smcglobal.org/>
- The case for an SMC in your country
[The-case-for-an-SMC-in-your-country.pdf](#)