



WHAT CAN POLICY MAKERS DO TO REDUCE THE RISK OF FAILURE?

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Implementation is one of the most important parts of the policy development process but is often overlooked and a leading cause of policy failure. In this article, Simon Newman looks at some of the reasons why and discusses what policymakers can do to reduce the risk of failure.

Policies are the laws and principles that shape our behaviour and reflect political commitments made by Government. They often result in significant changes that affect millions of people, yet history is littered with examples of high-profile failures that demonstrate the challenges faced by policymakers in getting it right the first time.

Implementation is a key part of the policy development process and is about turning the goals and objectives of a policy into a set of actions that can help improve its chances of achieving desired outcomes. Doing it properly can help policymakers manage change in a coordinated way, reducing the impact on those affected by it while making the most efficient use of resources. Implementation can also help the early identification and resolution of problems.

But policy is often subjected to significant challenges, external influences, and pressure from Ministers on Civil Servants to deliver results quickly. Short-termism due to frequent elections and intense scrutiny on Government proposals creates an environment where quick wins are prioritised. This is especially true where more substantive, longer-term benefits are not expected to be realised for many years.





So what are the main reasons for failure and what lessons can we learn to avoid making the same mistakes. First of all, it's important to remember that policy development is a complex process where each stage is designed to help build a robust business case for change. As with any large organisation, those responsible for it can suffer from a 'silo-mentality' where they work in isolation from others and fail to recognise or fully understand the circumstances, attitudes or experiences of those whom the policy is aimed at.

This also applies to implementation staff, who may not be involved in the early stages of development, leading to missed opportunities to identify potential problems that could derail the policy further on.

Another reason for failure is that Ministers may have pre-conceived ideas about certain issues that can affect their thinking. Political ideology, allegiance to party ethos or the championing of a particular cause over others, can all influence the direction and scope of a policy. The role of the civil servant here is crucial, providing advice that is firmly based on sound evidence in order to help Ministers make more informed decisions.

As we have seen recently, policymakers are frequently expected to develop solutions quickly in response to a sudden situation, problem or event. Policies developed in this way can often be a knee-jerk reaction, yet this approach can be problematic as reliable and trusted information about the issue may be scarce resulting in assumptions being made that may not prove to be correct. As with the recent Covid-19 pandemic, the speed at which the virus spread around the world created panic, forcing Governments to develop and implement solutions rapidly.

At a more personal level, implementation requires specialist skills. While the Government has access to a huge number of people, the complexity and wide-ranging scope of most policies means that it has to rely on others to do the implementation, often with mixed results.

Finally, poor implementation can be the fault of failing to understand the problem properly in the first place. It's something I witnessed during my time as a Civil Servant where the focus of policymakers quickly shifted to the development of solutions to a perceived problem without fully understanding the true nature of it. Missing this vital step in the process results in policy that fails to solve the problem and makes for an almost impossible implementation.



So how do we overcome these issues and increase our chances of success when implementing policy? The first thing policymakers should do is to start thinking about how they are going to implement their policy right at the beginning of the process. By developing policy with implementation in mind, potential pitfalls can be identified quickly and addressed.

Secondly, clearly defined roles and responsibilities are absolutely essential in boosting the chances of successful implementation. Appointing a Senior Responsible Owner (SRO) to oversee the delivery of the project can help improve accountability and bring together all relevant parties involved in it. Of course, it's also essential that the SRO fully understands what is expected of them and is prepared to commit the time and effort the role requires.

Thirdly, it's really important to have a clear idea about what success looks like. Being able to describe and communicate clear goals and milestones are essential. It helps keep people focused, which is especially important when implementation takes place over a number of years. Quick-wins can be a good thing in that they can provide reassurance to Ministers about progress.

Finally, policymakers need to recognise the importance of their implementation teams having the right skills. Dedicated project managers, planners and pragmatic delivery-focused people can bring a structure to essential implementation.

In conclusion, lessons learned from previous policy successes and failures can help establish what works and what doesn't. The Civil Service and Government have worked hard over the past few years to get a better grip of implementation, investing heavily in improving the skills and capabilities of staff. The creation of the Infrastructure Projects Authority in 2016 and its role in improving the delivery of major projects has been a huge step forward with its simple dashboard to monitor progress.

Ultimately, however, policymakers must become more proactive in the way they manage the Government's workload. Constantly seeking examples of good practice from the UK and beyond, including from the private sector, can help embed a culture where a more structured and organised approach has a greater chance of achieving the desired outcomes.

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