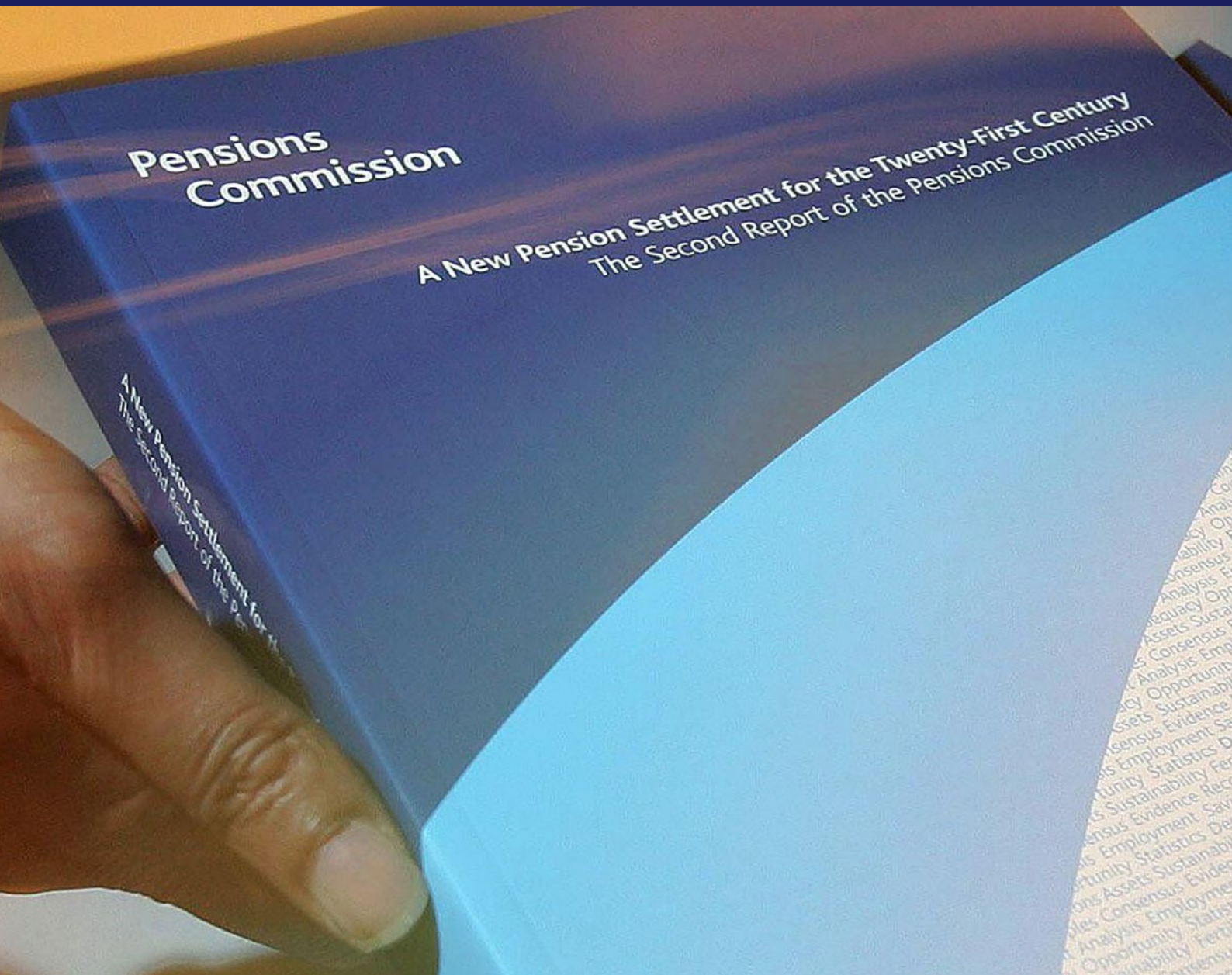


Reviewing reviews

Lessons from past independent policy reviews



About this report

This report explores what lessons the government can learn from past independent policy reviews. It looks at why reviews are commissioned and how they have been set up and run. The report makes recommendations for reviewers and officials on how to run a review, and for government on effectively commissioning them, and more systematically learning the lessons from past reviews.

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Summary

Independent reviews can be a useful tool in the policy making process. They can bring in expertise, bolster credibility and create political distance to help make progress on complex or contentious issues. The Labour government has in its first six months in office set up over a dozen such reviews to examine important policy areas, from social care to housing, even though the prime minister has now expressed scepticism about whether it is right for ministers to “outsource” policy thinking in this way. In this it is following the example set by not only the last Labour government but also the subsequent coalition and Conservative governments, which found reviews a useful tool that have, in some cases, led to meaningful long-term reform.

But not all reviews translate into delivery. Some get the politics wrong and fail to generate momentum for reform; others are set up more as a political tool, to defer or avoid taking action; others still lack focus or take so long that any initial impetus is lost.

Strikingly, there is no guidance for when to establish a review, or how to set up and run them. This report seeks to address that gap, taking lessons from past independent policy reviews.

Recommendations in brief

Lessons for reviewers: set up

- 1. Understand the government’s motivation for setting up the review.** Reviewers should have a frank conversation with the commissioning minister – before starting the review – as well as speaking to relevant civil servants, special advisers and external policy experts to understand why the review has been set up.
- 2. Be clear on the scope of the review.** Reviewers need to be clear what problem the government is asking to be addressed, and what is within the review’s scope and what is ruled out.
- 3. Agree a feasible timetable from the start.** A minimum of six months will be needed for most reviews, but some can require much longer. Too long a timetable, however, risks losing political momentum for reform.
- 4. Be realistic about the time and effort involved.** The lead reviewer should ensure they are able to dedicate the required time and resource – which might include asking departments to remunerate reviewers if it will help get the right people.
- 5. Get the right mix of seniority and skills in the review team.** Reviewers should ensure they have sufficient resource to conduct the analysis and engagement required and, in most cases, that the secretariat is led by a senior civil servant.

Lessons for reviewers: undertaking the review

1. **Consider how to launch the review externally.** Reviewers need to think about how they present the review to the public and interested parties who may want to engage with it, while taking care not to narrow options too early.
2. **Develop an approach for identifying and working with key external stakeholders.** Engagement can take place through advisory groups, consultations and/or public events – but should be led by the nature of the stakeholders and aim of the review.
3. **Keep internal stakeholders on board.** The review team should engage key players across government from start to finish, to avoid ‘not invented here syndrome’. Reviewers will need to work out how to balance internal engagement with credible independence.
4. **Consider using robust economic analysis to convince the Treasury.** This can be necessary to bring potential sceptics on board, particularly where proposals may affect growth or have spending implications. Reviewers should consider whether this is best done in-house or externally.

Lessons for reviewers: landing recommendations

1. **Ensure government is not surprised by the final recommendations.** Prepare the ground with officials and politicians, ensuring that no one who would make decisions as a result of the review is surprised by its outcome.
2. **Engage opposition parties.** This can help to land the review to a more positive political reception, and is particularly important in the run-up to an election.
3. **Consider publishing interim findings before writing the final report.** This helps test the waters and steer the remainder of the review, particularly where an issue is contentious.
4. **Have a plan for promoting recommendations after publication – and checking progress.** Reviewers can play an important role both in championing recommendations but also in ensuring that government follows through. They should seek agreement on a method for doing this – for example, by continuing in a formal advisory role or producing progress reports.

Lessons for government: commissioning a review

1. **Consider whether an independent review is the right vehicle.** This decision will be based on the trade-off between external credibility and retaining internal control in exploring the topic at hand.
2. **Be clear about the purpose and scope of the review.** Getting the terms of reference right is key, but clear direction should also be provided through private discussions or correspondence.
3. **Consider whether to opt for a single reviewer or a multi-person review with a chair.** Options include a formal commission of various sizes, or one reviewer with an advisory panel. Whatever the format, a strong lead reviewer is a must.
4. **Ensure reviewer(s) have the credibility and capability required.** Consider whether the review is suited to an expert in the field or might benefit from an outsider perspective – each can bring a different type of credibility.
5. **Allocate officials with sufficient seniority to the review team.** In most cases, a senior civil servant should be appointed as the lead official. The review team must have the skills required, drawing from people outside the parent department or civil service entirely if appropriate.
6. **Keep in regular touch with the reviewer throughout.** The expectation for this should be set from the start.

Lessons for government: taking a systematic approach to reviews

1. **The Cabinet Office should publish guidance on how to set up and run an independent review.** This should be for both officials and lead reviewers, and focus on the practical aspects of setting up and running a review.
2. **The Cabinet Office should keep a list of past independent reviews and a directory of review mentors.** This would help policy makers to draw on insights of past reviews, and encourage current reviewers to learn from those with prior experience.
3. **Government should systematically learn from reviews.** Following a review's conclusion, the parent department should run a short 'lessons learned' process involving both the reviewer and the review team, with a view to helping future reviews.
4. **The Policy Profession should consider how best to build skills among civil servants on how to both commission and support reviews.** This could involve both developing material based on lessons learned exercises as well as convening a network of people who are working on or have worked on reviews.

Introduction

In its 2024 election manifesto Labour committed to commission numerous reviews in some critical areas where it had yet to settle policy. Nine months into office most of these have been established, including the review of the curriculum and assessment under academic Professor Becky Francis, a three-person strategic defence review, and the review of sentencing, led by former Conservative minister David Gauke.

But ministers have also commissioned reviews that were not foreshadowed in the manifesto, including the quickfire Darzi review of the NHS, and the review of work inactivity, being led by the former chair of the John Lewis Partnership, Sir Charlie Mayfield.

This government is hardly the first to use external reviews – they were common under New Labour and that example was followed by the coalition and Conservative governments.¹ Earlier governments had used some ‘focused’ reviews, such as the Rayner efficiency reviews under Margaret Thatcher, but tended to leave big subjects to the more formal royal commission, which have fallen out of fashion in recent decades.

Yet despite recent governments’ repeated use of reviews, there seems to have been little attempt within government to develop a template for how to establish or run one – nor to learn when (or when not) to use them. Indeed, the prime minister has recently expressed scepticism about whether it is right to “outsource” policy thinking in this way, alongside wider concerns over the influence over policy and delivery of standing arm’s length bodies.² That view may be informed by lack of evidence of when reviews help policy makers – and when they do not. Also conspicuous by its absence is any guidance for reviewers on how best to conduct them – and, crucially, to ensure that their findings are influential.

This report attempts to start to fill that gap: to learn from past experience, and encourage the government to do that itself. We looked at past reviews and spoke to several high-profile reviewers, as well as drawing on our existing case study of the Pensions Commission³ – widely regarded as one of the most significant policy reviews.

Different reviews take different forms. Internal reviews are a frequent feature of policy making inside government. Some are made public, such as this government’s pensions landscape review, but many are not. Independent reviews on the other hand are run at arm’s length from government and led by an external figure, with the commissioning and reporting both made public.

Where there are multiple reviewers they may be referred to as a ‘commission’. The most formal of these are termed ‘royal commission’, however, these have become increasingly uncommon, with the last royal commission – on reform of the House of Lords – running from 1999 to 2000.⁴ The term ‘review’ is used to encompass a wide range of policy making activity and there are no clear or widely agreed criteria for what makes a review ‘independent’.

Independent policy reviews are, however, distinct from public inquiries (which have proliferated in recent years), which tend to be established when something goes wrong and investigate specific events rather than broader policy questions, though there are similarities. Both involve extensive evidence gathering, typically make recommendations that can include policy as well as more operational or procedural changes, and are frequently set up when a government wants to be seen to be taking action.⁵ Public inquiries can be either statutory, under the Inquiries Act 2005,^{*} or non-statutory, operating without a specific legal framework.

This report focuses on independent policy reviews, and includes an analysis of a sample of those commissioned from 2010–24. Many of the findings, however, are also relevant to internal reviews.

* Statutory inquiries can also be set up under other acts of parliament, such as the Inquiry into Historical Institutional Abuse Act (Northern Ireland) 2013.

Table 1 **Types of inquiries, commissions and reviews conducted by UK government**

	Statutory inquiry	Non-statutory inquiry	Royal commission	Independent review	Internal review
Establishment	By a minister		By means of a royal warrant at the request of a secretary of state ⁶	By a minister	
Topic	Whenever 'particular events have caused, or are capable of causing, public concern, or there is public concern that particular events may have occurred' [*]		Typically substantive and/or contentious policy areas		A range of policy areas
Legal basis	As set out in the Inquiries Act 2005 ^{**}	No legal basis			
Composition	Chair-led with the option to include panellists		A large, chair-led panel, of typically 10 to 16 people	Led by a single reviewer, or a panel of reviewers	Varies widely
Independence from government	Established by ministers, but then independently run				Run internally by government
Publication of findings	Reports published and public access to proceedings provided where possible ⁷	Typically published, but no specific duty to publish reports or documents	Typically published as a parliamentary paper	Reports typically published, usually by government, often with other supporting documents	Typically private for internal use by government, but some findings may be public

* The basis for holding a statutory inquiry is defined by Article 1, section 1 of the Inquiries Act 2005, which states that a minister can establish an inquiry whenever "particular events have caused, or are capable of causing, public concern, or there is public concern that particular events may have occurred". Non-statutory inquiries are not bound to follow the Act in how they operate, but would be established on the basis of a similar logic.

** Statutory inquiries can also be set up under other acts of parliament, such as the Inquiry into Historical Institutional Abuse Act (Northern Ireland) 2013.

Why independent reviews are commissioned

Reviews can help make better policy for particularly complex or contentious issues

Ministers have long commissioned independent reviews of difficult policy areas. The benefits are clear. They allow a minister to ask someone they trust to look at a problem over a period of time – a concentrated focus that a minister in government is unlikely to be able to bring. In effect, ministers are contracting out some of the ‘thinking time’ they struggle to find in government, and the officials supporting the chosen reviewer are largely liberated from the immediate demands of ministerial requests, parliamentary questions and the other demands of civil service life.

Reviews need not be trapped in departmental silos and can remain at a distance from political pressures. A secretariat of officials can be drawn from beyond a single department, and reviewers can engage with many outside players where government itself may feel inhibited. Most reviews are underpinned by robust analysis that is put into the public domain, in many cases before the review’s conclusion. Potentially controversial changes can be floated by the review before ministers are required to make a decision on them, which allows both for pitch rolling but also for the water to be tested before ministers decide to dive in (or step back if the review is poorly received).

External reviewers can offer additional credibility to proposals that may meet resistance if the government went straight to suggesting a way forward itself. This is often reflected in the selection of distinguished reviewers, or individuals who offer credentials that the government feels it lacks itself. The very fact that someone is an outsider or of different politics to the government can create momentum for reform.

But not all reviews translate into delivery. In some cases governments use a review to postpone or avoid a decision. In others, reviews miss the mark or get the politics wrong. Others take so long that the initial impetus is lost, the commissioning minister moves on and their successor is less engaged, or the government itself runs out of time.

There are different motivations behind commissioning policy reviews

Governments commission reviews for many reasons. These range from responses to crises when government needs urgent policy ideas, to simply wanting to show it is acting when it is not sure what it wants to do. Often, motivations are mixed. The topics chosen, however, are typically complex and contentious. Lord Burns, former Treasury permanent secretary and lead of several reviews, has said:

“Very few of the things I’ve been engaged in have been black and white... They are all things where the arguments are finely balanced, sort of 55–45.”⁸

Understanding the government’s intended purpose for a review can be valuable for reviewers, the teams working on it, and external actors trying to engage with it.

The broad reasons that reviews are commissioned include:

- **To lay the groundwork for desired policy changes.** This was a feature of the way Gordon Brown used reviews as chancellor – where the review was part of the process of gaining consent, and adding credibility, but the government (or at least the commissioning minister) was already clear on what they wanted to do. Brown, for example, used the Wanless review of the NHS in 2002 to provide the basis for his intended policy of tying increased health care funding to an increase in National Insurance contributions. Indeed he chose Sir Derek Wanless as the reviewer over Lord Adair Turner, who wanted to ask more fundamental questions about the health service.
- **To build external consensus in advance of potentially difficult policy choices.** Similarly to the above, this used to be the rationale for setting up royal commissions: take big, intractable issues, involve the great and the good, and hope that a prolonged process of internal deliberation and evidence taking helps lay the ground for significant reform. The government has said that building a “national consensus” is the aim of the recently announced (and long-running) social care review.⁹
- **To help the government understand a problem as a precursor to developing a new policy approach.** This is a more upstream sort of review – using a review to frame a problem and allowing for more in-depth analysis than would be possible within the confines of normal day-to-day business. The 2020 review of the drugs market in the UK, led by Dame Carol Black, falls into this category.
- **To develop ideas on an area where the government has identified a problem but has yet to decide on a way forward.** Recent examples include Theresa May’s review of labour market enforcement in 2017 by the former head of the No.10 Policy Unit under Tony Blair, Matthew Taylor.
- **To review progress of policy and its implementation.** This is often done when a new minister or government enters office. For example, in 2010 George Osborne commissioned an immediate review of the implementation of automatic pensions enrolment by a team of three reviewers.* Similarly, Boris Johnson commissioned Sir Doug Oakervee to look at the future of the troubled HS2 project early in his premiership in 2020 and Liz Truss asked Conservative MP Chris Skidmore to review the government’s approach to the delivery of net zero during her short spell in No.10.
- **To bring an external perspective to the search for efficiency savings.** Many governments have judged that external input can be helpful in finding efficiency savings in public spending. Margaret Thatcher called in the former Marks and Spencer chief executive Lord Rayner to lead efficiency reviews to look for savings in government spending, something the coalition repeated with a rapid review of government spending in 2010 by Sir Philip Green.

* ‘Making automatic enrolment work’, commissioned by George Osborne when he became chancellor in 2010 and completed by October of the same year, was led by a panel of three people: Paul Johnson, David Yeandle and Adrian Boulding.

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- **To garner influence internationally.** Some reviews are not principally aimed at a domestic audience but at setting direction on the global stage. The best example of this is the Stern review on climate change commissioned by Gordon Brown in 2005, which was designed as a way of gaining influence in advance of upcoming COP meetings.

Of course, there is a final – more cynical – reason why governments might set up a review:

- **To look to be doing something while kicking the can down the road.** Reviews can enable a minister to prevaricate, point to something happening without having to take action. There are plenty of reviews that come to nothing – and it may be because the minister who set them up saw them as a stalling technique. Gordon Brown only agreed to the establishment of the Pensions Commission on condition of a timetable that meant its final report would fall the other side of the 2005 election – holding out the prospect that he might be in a position to bury the findings by then.¹⁰ However, this does not always work out as planned: the Pensions Commission ended up paving the way for major reform during his time as prime minister.

The 2010 Browne review of university tuition fees and the 2015 Airports Commission chaired by Sir Howard Davies, both scheduled to report shortly after the next general election, appeared to be timed to push a difficult issue beyond the election to avoid the need for government to declare a policy position beforehand. In the case of the Browne review there was an explicit agreement between the then business secretary and his shadow not to raise the issue of a rise in tuition fees during the election to ensure whoever won had freedom of manoeuvre.

There are different motivations behind the reviews the Starmer government has set up

Since the general election in July 2024, Labour has commissioned various reviews for various reasons, many fitting the template set out above. Some, for example, have been to lay the groundwork for difficult decisions to come – most notably the internal Treasury review of the fiscal inheritance and the Darzi review of the NHS in England. Both were commissioned within days of the election, with the political intention of making clear that current problems are the fault of previous governments.

While the NHS review was independent (Lord Darzi is a former Labour minister, but now sits as a cross-bench peer), the rapid Treasury review was internal – though it arguably would have carried more weight if it had been undertaken by an outsider rather than Treasury officials. In a similar vein, but also with the intention of producing policy ideas, Labour has set up an independent commission on the water regulatory system under the leadership of Sir Jon Cunliffe, a former senior civil servant and deputy governor of the Bank of England, in response to failures in the sector.

The strategic defence review will look at the changing nature of the threats facing the UK and develop new recommendations for the defence programme. It is being led by Lord Robertson, a former Labour defence minister, Dr Fiona Hill, a former US presidential adviser on national security, and General Sir Richard Barrons, a former commander of Joint Forces Command. While it comes hard on the heels of two so-called “integrated” reviews described in 2021 as a “comprehensive articulation of the UK’s national security and international policy”¹¹ conducted internally by the Johnson and Sunak governments, it does buy Labour time to consider how to increase defence spending to 2.5% of GDP as part of the multi-year spending review, which will conclude in June 2025.

Commissioning an external review of the curriculum, as Education Secretary Bridget Phillipson has, contrasts notably with Michael Gove, who drove changes to curriculum content from within his department. Meanwhile, Sir Michael Lyons and Dame Kate Barker’s review of new towns is designed to take forward the next stage of the government’s plans to increase housebuilding and present ministers with options for how it might achieve this.* They may see this as an opportunity to build some degree of consensus on both the need for and the location of new towns as part of the government’s ambition to deliver much higher housing numbers.

The Ministry of Justice has commissioned three independent reviews since the election – on sentencing, criminal courts and the placement of girls in the children and young people’s secure estate. The government has already taken unpopular measures to reduce sentences and push through prison building in response to the dire state of prisons and criminal courts. So while these reviews are expected to propose new recommendations for future policy, the government likely also envisages them playing a role in building public consensus for these unpopular decisions, and any more that are still to come.

The choice of the former Conservative justice secretary David Gauke to lead the sentencing review suggests the government hopes it will create a degree of cross-party consensus around the proposals (as well as tap into his experience) and make it easier for them to ward off potential political criticism of changes proposed.

* We put forward our own recommendations on the topic in a recent paper. See Metcalfe S, *From the Ground Up: How the government can build more homes*, Institute for Government, 2024, www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/how-government-build-more-homes

Table 2 **Independent reviews commissioned by the Labour government, 4 July 2024 to 3 January 2025**

	Review title	Chair(s)	Commissioning department	Planned timing for final report
1	Independent investigation of the NHS in England	Ara Darzi	DHSC	September 2024
2	Strategic Defence Review	George Robertson	MoD	First half of 2025
3	Curriculum and assessment review	Becky Francis	DfE	Autumn 2025
4	FCDO expert reviews: Global Impact, Development, Economic Diplomacy	Ngairé Woods, Minouche Shafik, Martin Donnelly	FCDO	End of 2024 to early 2025
5	New Towns Taskforce	Michael Lyons/Kate Barker	MHCLG	Within a year (September 2025)
6	Independent review of criminal courts	Brian Leveson	MoJ	Autumn 2025
7	Patient safety oversight organisations review	Penny Dash	DHSC	2025
8	Independent review of Carer's Allowance overpayments	Liz Sayce	DWP	Summer 2025
9	Review of sentencing	David Gauke	MoJ	Spring 2025
10	Independent commission on the water sector regulatory system	Jon Cunliffe	Defra	Q2 2025
11	Independent review into placement of girls in the children and young people's secure estate	Susannah Hancock	MoJ	February 2025
12	Independent review of Physician Associates and Anaesthesia Associates	Gillian Leng	DHSC	Spring 2025
13	Keep Britain Working	Charlie Mayfield	DWP	Autumn 2025
14	Independent commission on adult social care	Louise Casey	DHSC	2028

Source: Institute for Government analysis of various gov.uk announcements. • Notes: Independent reviews are those led by a person or people outside government (not ministers or civil servants), where there is a stated intention to publish the findings. Planned reporting date is as stated in documents or webpages from the review announcement on gov.uk. Where multiple reports are planned (e.g. an interim and final report), the later date is shown. Where multiple reviewers have been appointed, but there is one lead reviewer, only this person is named. The FCDO has commissioned three "expert reviews" in parallel, which are combined as one in this table.

How reviews have worked in the past

There is no template for how to carry out a review

Despite the regularity with which ministers commission reviews from outsiders, there is no set model for doing so. The minister may select a single reviewer, or appoint a team to sit on a commission. They may or may not be paid. However, reviewers often have expertise in the subject area, or credibility with a key audience for the review. For example, as chancellor in 2001 Gordon Brown asked former businessman and banker Lord Myners to lead an independent review into institutional investors, and George Osborne appointed Sir John Armitt, a civil engineer and former Network Rail chief executive, to chair the Thames Estuary 2050 Growth Commission in 2016.

Terms of reference are typically set by the relevant department, though some lead reviewers are involved in this process. Timescales are also usually set at the start, and range widely: some reviews are quick (such as the recent review by Lord Darzi, which reported after just two months), while others take years. Some involve extensive external consultation and are very much designed for public consumption; others take a lower profile and are more private. Many reviews publish multiple reports in succession, such as an interim report that presents initial analysis and findings, followed by the final report a number of months later.

While the lack of standardisation in the UK means there are few constraints on how reviews are conducted, it means additional time and resource is often spent getting to grips with the set-up and running of the review rather than the topic at hand. It also risks reviews repeating mistakes of the past, and not being as effective in producing useful findings and recommendations for government. Public inquiries, which have a statutory basis and are distinct from independent reviews, suffer from a similar lack of guidance.^{12,13} Both public inquiries and independent reviews can have a substantial impact on government policy, and a more systematic effort to learn from how they have been run in the past could have widespread benefits for the future.

Box 1: A sample of independent reviews, 2010–24

One consequence of this ad hoc approach is that there is no systematic data on reviews held by government. In 2012, two academics, William Solesbury and Ruth Levitt, looked at what they called 'policy tsars'.¹⁴ They counted 267 used by government between 1997 and 2012, which included a mix of reviewers and external people leading policy initiatives where the policy was already largely settled, and which we would not count as reviews.

To look back at the entire period of Conservative-led governments from 2010 to 2024, we have collated a sample of independent reviews commissioned from that period, using a search of Hansard for House of Commons debates titles that included one of the following key words:

* See Methodology section for further information.

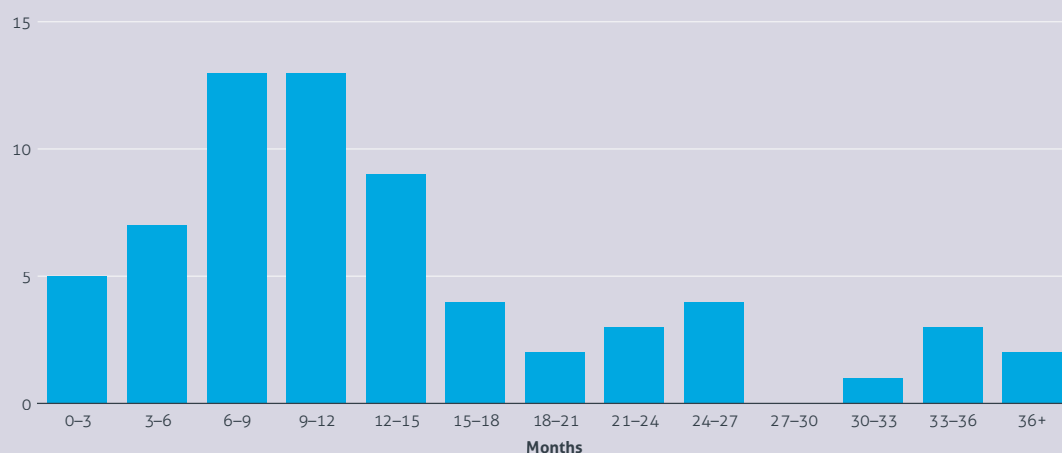
- Review
- Commission
- Independent
- Reform

We then manually checked these debates to identify the review being referred to, and assessed this against our inclusion and exclusion criteria – as set out in the Methodology section.

This sample is neither comprehensive, nor likely to be fully representative of all independent reviews conducted in this period. We are aware of some high-profile independent reviews that do not feature in this sample, and it cannot be used to compare the number of reviews commissioned in this period with others. For example, our Hansard search criteria means the Independent Public Service Pensions Commission, led by Lord Hutton, was not included in this sample. Similarly, the sample only includes one of the three of reviews led by Dame Carol Black in this period.* Nonetheless, this sample provides a useful snapshot of the reviews commissioned during this period, and the reviewers asked to lead them.

The sample includes 66 reviews commissioned from 5 May 2010 to 4 July 2024 that have since publicly reported. There was on average just under five reviews commissioned each year in our sample. However, there was substantial year-to-year variation, with as many as 10 reviews commissioned in 2018 under Theresa May.

Figure 1 **Independent reviews by length, 2010–24 (sample from Commons debates)**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Hansard debates, 2010–24. Notes: Sample includes independently led reviews identified as the topic of House of Commons debates between May 2010 and July 2024. See Methodology for full inclusion and exclusion criteria.

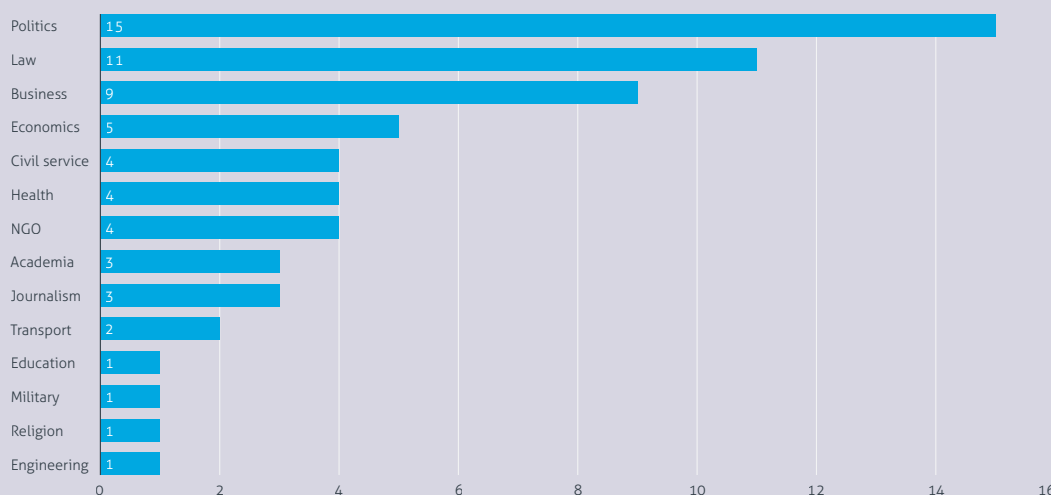
* The Independent Public Service Pensions Commission was discussed extensively in House of Commons debates, but was not the subject of a debate with a title including any of our four key words. While the Review of Drugs led by Dame Carol Black was included, her reviews on the sickness absence system and the impact on employment outcomes of drug or alcohol addiction were not for the same reason.

Almost three quarters of lead reviewers were male (48/66), while a quarter were female (16/66). And two reviews had multiple reviewers but no clear lead.* This could indicate some reduction in the extreme gender imbalance Levitt and Solesbury found in the earlier period, when 85% of their tsars were men.¹⁵

The length of review varied substantially from just two months to years. Over half of reviews took less than a year from commission to publication (38/66), while two reviews in our sample lasted over four years.**

Lead reviewers were drawn from a range of professional backgrounds, with the most common being politics (15), law (11) and business (9). However, it was notable how many reviewers in our sample had worked across sectors. We attempted to allocate these reviewers the professional background in which they spent the longest portion of their career.

Figure 2 **Professional background of independent reviewers, 2010–24 (sample from Commons debates)**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Hansard debates, 2010–24. Notes: Sample includes independently led reviews identified as the topic of House of Commons debates between May 2010 and July 2024. See Methodology for full inclusion and exclusion criteria. Professional background is that in which the reviewer spent the longest proportion of their career prior to conducting the review. Two reviews had multiple lead reviewers, and are not included here.

* The two independent reviews with multiple lead reviewers were the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission, which reported in 2020 and was co-chaired by Sir Roger Scruton and Nicholas Boys-Smith, and the Disabled Facilities Grant (DFG) and Other Adaptations review in 2018, led by Sheila Mackintosh, Paul Smith, Helen Garrett, Maggie Davidson, Gareth Morgan and Rachel Russell.

** The two reviews lasting more than 36 months were the 2022 Ockenden review of maternity services at Shrewsbury and Telford Hospital NHS Trust, led by Donna Ockenden; and the Independent Review of the Work Capability Assessment, which published five reports from 2010 to 2014 following the Welfare Reform Act 2007 – the first three of which were led by Malcolm Harrington, while the final two reports were led by Paul Lichfield.

The Starmer government has commissioned several reviews of public services, and drawn more heavily on reviewers with a public sector background

It is perhaps not surprising that the current government has targeted reviews into the public sector given the poor performance of many public services and the prominence they had in Labour's election platform. More striking, however, is that while it has continued the practice of appointing reviewers who are credible leaders in the relevant sectors, such as Penny Dash in health care and George Robertson in defence, including from the public sector, it seems much more reluctant to use reviews as a way of tapping into business expertise.

Academics, legal experts and politicians have always been asked to lead reviews, but both the New Labour and Conservative-led governments frequently appointed lead reviewers from a business background, with their selection presumably designed to bring insights not so readily available inside government and win credibility with the business community. Levitt and Solesbury found 40% that of policy 'tsars' appointed between 1997 and 2012 had a business background with only 28% coming from public services. Our sample of reviews suggests that Conservative-led governments from 2010 to 2024 seemed most keen on people with a political or legal background though they also commissioned business people to undertake some high profile reviews.

By contrast Starmer's government has commissioned only one independent reviewer from a business background: Sir Charlie Mayfield, the former executive chair of the John Lewis Partnership, who has been asked to lead a review on the role of UK employers in promoting healthy and inclusive workplaces.

There is no guarantee of implementation

Most independent reviews are tasked with putting forward recommendations, but governments retain discretion on whether or not to adopt them. They can be used to publicly test the water at arm's length from government, before making a policy commitment. However their public nature means there is normally some pressure for government to act on them – as opposed to internal reviews, the details of which often remain in the department.

Many reviews have simply been consigned to sit on a shelf for various reasons. Often there is a lack of political will to take action; for example, because of backlash from the public or particular stakeholders, or because the commissioning politicians have moved on. This was the fate of the National Food Strategy by Henry Dimbleby, which Michael Gove commissioned as secretary of state at Defra in the May government but was ultimately delivered to George Eustice in 2021 under the Johnson government and its recommendations were not pursued. This is also an issue for public inquiries, where their ever-expanding length has limited implementation of recommendations.

In many cases, cost is a key barrier to getting the backing for implementation – not least where a recommendation requires substantial additional spending, meaning the Treasury is a key stakeholder.

In other cases, there may not have been strong political backing for action on a particular issue in the first place, with the review acting as a holding measure to buy further time. For example, back in 2015 the Airports Commission recommended building a third runway at Heathrow following extensive analysis and public engagement. During the drafting of this paper in early 2025, the government announced its support for Heathrow expansion. But undoubtedly a key reason construction had not begun in the intervening 10 years has been a lack of political backing from successive prime ministers, including David Cameron, who was in No.10 when the commission was established in 2012, and Boris Johnson, whose constituency was just a few miles from the proposed site for Heathrow expansion.

Sir Howard Davies told us that when he presented to the prime minister the not unexpected recommendation for a third runway at Heathrow, his response was as though “a case of Salmonella had broken out at the kitchens in Eton. He was horrified.” Often government will adopt some, but not all, recommendations, or will use modified versions of proposals. For example, the Browne review (commissioned by Labour in 2009 but published under the coalition) recommended removing the cap on university tuition fees; the government decided instead just to hike, rather than remove, the cap.

Reviewers often have a sense of whether their recommendations are likely to be taken up, but how they approach maximising the likelihood of this varies. Some focus on closely engaging with government to test and develop recommendations; others see this as compromising their independence. So how to balance a review's independence with the benefits of government engagement to help land recommendations internally is a key consideration for reviewers.

Another key part of getting a review's proposals adopted is ensuring recommendations are implementable. Drawing on expertise both within and outside government can help work through how proposals would work in practice – something public inquiries have been less effective at doing.

Government often issues a formal response to an independent review, setting out its response to findings and recommendations, and what action it plans to take. Occasionally, a review's terms of reference require government to formally respond – such as for the 2022 Independent Review of Children's Social Care led by Josh MacAlister. A formal government response can be an important step towards implementing recommendations, but can also cause delays if it comes several months after a review's publication.

One of the most successful independent reviews was the Pensions Commission established in the mid-2000s by the Labour government. It was long, taking almost three years from start to finish – in part to delay the results until Gordon Brown hoped to make the switch from No.11 to No.10. But the three-person commission used that time well by first publishing their evidence base to build consensus that they had identified the right problem (which was different to their initial commission), and then to socialise the package of their findings.

Crucially, too, their core proposal of automatic enrolment, with an employer pension contribution, was balanced with other measures such as the raising of the state pension age so that benefits and pain were spread around. That contrasts with the now-shelved 2011 Dilnot review of social care. That proposed a lifetime cap on care costs, with the hope of stimulating the emergence of private insurance up to the cap, but did not propose how to fund it – which led successive governments to delay implementation even when it had been put on the statute book.

Lessons learned from past reviews

Lessons for future reviewers

There is no one type of review, or reviewer. Some people have done multiple reviews for government; others are thrown in at the deep end. Some come with extensive experience inside government; others are appointed precisely because they are outsiders who can bring a fresh perspective. Some come with a track record in the sector they are looking at, or of grappling with the sort of issue they are being asked to address; others are picked because they come with no preconceptions. Even so, there are some general principles that reviewers agree on as important for leading a review that has some likelihood of having results.

Set up

1. Understand the government’s motivation for setting up the review

Reviewers should try to understand the motivation behind the government’s decision to set up a review to help shape the approach they take. Is the government genuinely interested in new thinking, or just asking for a review to give respectability to conclusions it has come to already? It is also important to understand the extent of political support for a review – the Airports Commission appeared to be a ploy by top civil servants to force the prime minister to confront a difficult decision he was keen to avoid. From the outset, reviewers should speak to the relevant civil servants, special advisers and external policy experts to understand the starting point for the review.

2. Be clear on the scope of the review

Past reviewers differ on whether it is worth attempting to negotiate the terms of reference. But it is important to be clear on what problem the government is asking to be addressed, and what is within the review’s scope and what they want to rule out from the start – and whether that will fatally flaw the review. However, terms of reference are not immutable. The 2020 Review of Drugs was in two parts that had separate terms of reference, with the second set building on the part one of the review. The Pensions Commission in the mid-2000s notably went back to government after its initial evidence-gathering phase to say that the question it had been asked to address was not the key question for the broader issue it had been asked to look at, and was allowed to broaden its scope.*

* The Pensions Commission had been asked to look at the closure of defined contribution pension schemes in the private sector, but found this was much less important than the fact that so few private sector employees had access to any employer supported pension scheme.

3. Agree a feasible timetable from the start

In some cases, the timetable for a review is decided by electoral politics – this was true of some reviews that were designed to kick a difficult issue beyond an election, such as the Airports Commission or Browne review of student fees. But where possible, reviewers should ensure they are given sufficient time to gather evidence, analyse the problems and test out solutions. This will mean a minimum of six months for most reviews. Dame Carol Black, who has undertaken many reviews for government, said she thought a year was usually necessary to go through all the stages.

Longer time frames may occasionally be necessary, but going too long incurs the risk that the political moment and the sponsoring minister may be gone, making implementation of reforms harder. For example, the Dimpleby review was commissioned in 2018 by Michael Gove but only published in 2021 by his successor, George Eustice, who largely rejected the recommendations.

4. Be realistic about the time and effort involved

Some reviewers said that the review required a greater time commitment from them and their team of officials than initially expected by the department. In light of a review's scope and timeline, the reviewer, or team of commissioners, should ensure they are able to dedicate the time and resource to deliver it. It is not uncommon for reviewers to be unpaid, in part because many are drawn from the great and the good. However, departments should be prepared to pay reviewers if it helps get in people with the right knowledge and experience. Sir Howard Davies told us that the refusal of the department to pay the airport commissioners meant he felt he had to minimise the calls on their time.

5. Get the right mix of seniority and skills in the review team

While most reviewers we spoke to were complimentary about the teams they worked with, it is not a given that a reviewer will be offered the team they need. If a department wants to hobble a review, it may see it as a place to dump poor performers. In other cases, people have been offered insufficiently senior officials to lead a review – one message was that, in most cases, reviewers should ensure the secretariat is led by a senior civil servant, who will have some clout both in the parent department, but also across the rest of Whitehall.

Reviewers should also ensure that they have the analytic skills they need, are able to bring in external hires if they want and enough budget to undertake external engagement and commission external research if necessary. The right team is critical to a successful review and this is an area where a reviewer may need to insist on having the right support in place.

Undertaking the review

6. Consider how to launch the review externally

One of the key things about independent reviews is they are independent from government – and reviewers should consider how the launch of the review can support the review’s external credibility. Josh MacAlister, who led the review on children’s social care, had extensive discussions with the department over setting up a separate webpage for his review, which he said was important for demonstrating publicly the review’s independence, given the negative feelings that many care experienced people had about government.

Ed Balls, who was involved in many reviews from both the Treasury as an adviser and as secretary of state for children, schools and families in the Brown government, advised that reviewers should not close off options in any early statement or interview. Instead, he recommended issuing a call for evidence after an initial scoping exercise.

Reviewers should also consider how their launch might affect engagement with those within and outside of government, and how that aligns with the review’s aims. For example, while the review of foreign direct investment led by Lord Harrington was independent, it was explicit about its close engagement with government. The terms of reference stated that senior officials would oversee the review and ministers would be regularly updated on its progress, and the review was eventually published alongside the 2023 autumn statement. For a review focused on making the UK a more attractive place to invest, this signalling from the start was likely helpful in communicating to business the government’s support of the review.

7. Develop a coherent approach for identifying and working with key external stakeholders

One of the big advantages of an independent review is that it is a good way of involving external stakeholders, so it is critical to have a strategy on how to tap into their expertise and insights. That may also involve engaging the public more broadly. One of the big successes of the Pensions Commission was its ‘pension day’ events with employers and employees, designed to build support for the proposals. Where there is a single reviewer, establishing an advisory group or board can be a way of bringing credibility with important external constituencies and be useful for testing proposals without risking fudging recommendations by drafting through committee.

8. Keep internal stakeholders on board through the process

Involving external stakeholders is important, but keeping internal players on board can be as critical to success. This will include the review’s parent department (or departments), but likely also other key stakeholders in government such as No.10, the Treasury, other relevant departments or arm’s length bodies, and devolved administrations. That means keeping all engaged at all stages – avoiding the risk of ‘not invented here syndrome’.* In some cases, reviewers have had to use their personal networks inside government to unblock Whitehall intransigence.

* ‘Not invented here syndrome’ describes a negative attitude towards ideas that come from an external source.

9. Consider using robust economic analysis to take to the Treasury

One of the differences between external reviews and policy developed inside government is the transparency of the presentation of the analysis. Economic analysis can be necessary to bring potential sceptics on board – and this is particularly true of the Treasury, where proposals may affect growth or have spending implications. Reviewers should consider who is best placed to do this analysis. Josh MacAlister thought the external economic modelling commissioned for his review on children's social care was important in underpinning the credibility of its recommendations. But it may not be sufficient. Some of the hostility from cabinet ministers to the recommendations of the Airports Commission – which included detailed economic analysis – came from them putting strong constituency interests first. Evidence cannot always trump raw politics, either at a national or constituency level.

Landing recommendations

10. Ensure government is not surprised by the final recommendations

Most reviewers undertake a review to help effect change. Critical to that is landing recommendations. Reviewers we spoke to generally agreed that there was a need to prepare the ground internally to land recommendations and ensure that no one who would make decisions as a result of the review was surprised by the outcomes. Some reviewers went further, negotiating and adapting recommendations as they were being developed so that the receiving department could commit straight away to accepting and implementing them.

11. Engage opposition parties

One big advantage independent reviewers have over government is their ability to engage opposition parties. This can be crucial to landing their recommendations to a more positive political reception, but it can also help ensure that recommendations survive a change of administration – which is critical in particular for reviews that take place in the run-up to a potential 'change election'. The fact the Pensions Commission engaged Conservative shadow ministers was important in ensuring that the proposals were taken forward after the 2010 election (albeit after a brief 'implementation review' commissioned by the incoming chancellor, George Osborne). Similarly, Josh MacAlister, now a Labour MP, has seen his proposals for children's social care that were published under the Conservative government now taken up by the education secretary, Bridget Phillipson.

12. Consider publishing interim findings before writing the final report

One approach some reviews have used is to produce an interim report before finalising recommendations – particularly for issues that require substantial analysis and/or are highly contentious, such as public sector pensions.¹⁶ This allows the reviewer to float initial findings publicly, and test reactions to them, which can help steer the review's final stages before conclusions are finally nailed down.

13. Have a plan for promoting your recommendations after publication.

Publication is not necessarily the end of the process; many reviewers planned to stay engaged in the policy area to support implementation. Ed Balls has argued that reviewers should specifically request they are given the opportunity and resource to produce a follow-up report a year after the final report publication to “hold government’s feet to the fire” on delivering the recommendations.

Some reviewers have taken up formal advisory roles in government to support implementation. Others have taken on external advocacy roles – Andrew Dilnot reckoned he is still spending half a day to a day a week advocating for adult social care reform, despite his report being published in 2011. While conducting the review, lead reviewers should actively consider what structures could be set up or commitments made to support implementation of recommendations afterwards, and what role they might want to play in this. However, in some cases this may not be possible. Reviewers on the Airports Commission were excluded from further involvement because of the planning aspects of their recommendations.

Since independent reviews are largely one-offs, one of the recommendations to both reviewers, and to the people working on them, is to talk to people who have done reviews before – particularly, but not exclusively, if they are in a similar area.

For external reviewers, speaking to others with experience coming from outside and having to navigate the government system can offer insights they won’t get from their team of officials. For civil servants, getting advice from those who have previously worked on review teams can help smooth the transition to what can be a markedly different experience to their day-to-day: no longer working for ministers, more autonomy and a more public facing role in some cases, with review teams often named in final reports. In many cases the clear bond between the reviewer and the officials working for them was obvious, as well as the sense that for some civil servants this was a more satisfying way of working.

Lessons for government: commissioning a review

The key considerations for ministers and civil servants commissioning reviews are:

1. Consider whether an independent review is the right vehicle

Independent reviews have more credibility than an internal process, but necessarily entail a loss of control by ministers and the department. Ministers who are not prepared to be challenged and have to deal with some inconvenient recommendations should choose a different route. Current Labour ministers have, for example, chosen an internal review of the government's child poverty strategy (though with a commitment to publish findings), which will allow them to retain control over any recommendations on, for example, the two-child benefits limit, an issue that has proven particularly controversial politically and which an independent reviewer may have proposed abolishing. But it is for this reason, however, that internal reviews may lack credibility. Ministers should consider the trade-off between credibility and control.

2. Be clear about the purpose and scope of the review

This is critical to ensuring that the review is set up correctly, with a clear balance of direction and independence. The reviewer must be given clear expectations of how the review should be conducted, a steer on the analysis and external engagement government is most interested in, and in what form the department wants recommendations. Getting the terms of reference right is key, but setting expectations should go beyond this in private discussions or correspondence, including with other relevant internal government actors.

3. Consider whether to opt for a single reviewer or a multi-person review with a chair

There are pros and cons to having a single reviewer versus a commission or review panel. The latter allows more direct representation of differing interests, and worked well for the Pensions Commission, but can invite 'drafting by committee' and less clear recommendations. Where there are multiple reviewers, having a strong lead reviewer to chair is crucial. In the case of a single reviewer, however, there is often a case for establishing an advisory group or board.

4. Take care selecting the reviewer(s) to ensure they have credibility and capability to conduct the review successfully

No reviewer can embody every characteristic that will make the independent review valuable, but they should be able to add external credibility. Previous experience in the sector or government can be beneficial for engaging stakeholders and navigating the system – but an outsider perspective can also add value, particularly where they have credibility with key stakeholders that the government has less strong links with. However, some reviewers without experience of government have struggled to understand the Whitehall landscape, and therefore effectively land their messages internally.

5. Allocate effective and senior officials to the review team

A good team of officials is often essential to a review's success. Staffing a review with people who lack the appropriate mix of seniority, skills and ability to work effectively and support an external lead reviewer will not deliver results. The department should appoint a senior civil servant as the lead official for most reviews. Where appropriate, the team should include people from beyond the parent department or outside the civil service. Putting together a strong team also signals inside government the priority that the review is being given.

6. Keep in regular touch with the reviewer throughout

Independent does not mean out of sight, out of mind. Ed Balls told us that, as Treasury special advisers to Gordon Brown, one of their important roles was to keep in touch with a reviewer's thinking as it evolved. The expectation of regular contact should be set at the start of the review.

Taking a systematic approach to policy reviews

Reviews can cover a wide spectrum, from a lengthy and high-profile review, with its own external website, wide public engagement, announced with great fanfare to parliament and running for a year or more, to a quick, ad hoc piece of policy consultancy that could have been done internally. In the latter, a minister could simply ask a trusted outsider to take a look at an issue that is worrying them, but for where they either do not have the internal capacity or think they would benefit from an external or more expert perspective.

That spectrum means that it is harder to take a systematic approach (as is more possible for public inquiries). The team covering public inquiries in the Cabinet Office used to have a small dedicated resource to cover reviews, but that no longer exists and any ad hoc requests for support are now fielded by the inquiries team. Given the enthusiasm of the new government for establishing inquiries, government should consider whether it needs to rebuild that capacity.

But even without that, there are steps that can be taken to help.

1. The Cabinet Office should publish guidance on how to set up and run an independent review

Guidance should be set out for both officials and the independent reviewers, and be focused on the nuts and bolts of reviews and made publicly available. This should cover issues such as payment of reviewers, terms and conditions, logistics such as the establishment of review websites, and the staffing of reviews and approaches to handling publication of reviews. This could also include guidance on external engagement. This should draw on the problems that reviewers have encountered in

establishing reviews in the past. Making the guidance available publicly (but updated every couple of years) should reduce the need for ad hoc approaches to the Cabinet Office for advice.

2. The Cabinet Office should maintain a list of past independent reviews and a directory of review mentors

Having a definitive list of past independent reviews would ensure those inside and outside government could easily find and make use of their insights, helping to maximise the impact of this work and avoid duplication. A list of past reviewers (and staff who have worked on reviews) who are willing to share their experiences would also help those new to reviews to find their feet quickly.

3. Government should systematically learn from reviews

After any independent review is completed, there should be a determined attempt to learn lessons on what worked and what did not. This would enable government over time to build up a better basis for understanding when and how best to deploy reviews as part of the policy process. This should be led from within the review's parent department, but involve other relevant parts of government.

4. The Policy Profession should consider how best to build skills among civil servants on how to both commission and support reviews

Understanding how and when to commission reviews, and how working with an external reviewer differs from working on policy inside a department, should both be regarded as skills for policy professionals within government. The Policy Profession should therefore consider how best it can build that capability, by drawing on guidance and past lessons learned exercises, but also by establishing a network of people who are working or have worked on reviews to share experiences.

Annex: Methodology

To collate a sample of independent reviews commissioned under Conservative prime ministers since 2010, we searched the Hansard website for House of Commons debate titles that had one or more of the following keywords in the title:

- Review
- Commission
- Independent
- Reform

We then manually reviewed the Hansard entry and relevant mentioned review to assess if it met the inclusion and exclusion criteria outlined below:

Inclusion

1. The review is a key topic of a House of Commons debate with the title of 'Review', 'Commission', 'Independent' or 'Reform'.
2. The review was led by a person who is not a serving minister, parliamentary private secretary or civil servant at the time of the review being commissioned and published.
3. The review was commissioned by a central government department (therefore excluding those commissioned by the NHS or devolved administrations).
4. The review was commissioned between 5 May 2010 and 4 July 2024.
5. The review reported before 4 July 2024.

Exclusion

1. Public inquiries.
2. The lead reviewer has a statutory role that requires them to conduct the review, or reviews of similar nature.
3. The subject of the review is specific crimes during a defined period, or a previous inquiry or review.

Where the subject of a review identified in the search is the implementation of a previous review, the previous review is included if it fits the inclusion and exclusion criteria. However, the follow-up review is excluded.

Information on reviews was collected manually from various review documents, gov.uk pages and press reports. Length of review is from commission date to publication of the final report, rounded up to the nearest month. Given the range of sectors in which many reviewers have worked, it was not straightforward to categorise their professional background for the purposes of our analysis. However, we have endeavoured to determine professional background based on the professions in which they spent the longest portion of their career.

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