

Policy making in a crisis

A civil servant's guide





The civil service, in my view, is at its best when... it's under pressure and it has to come up with quick solutions... people have to step up and make decisions. And they do so quite well, in my experience.



George Eustice
Secretary of state for the environment (2020–22)

Prompts for officials

Crises place unique and distinct pressures on the civil service. Whether far-reaching, like the Covid pandemic, or more contained like severe weather, they demand fast, confident decisions from ministers and the civil servants tasked with advising them.

This guide distils insights from current and former civil servants into practical prompts for officials facing their first crisis response or looking for effective practices that can be applied to other high-priority policy areas when time is short, and the stakes feel high. Each section contains a series of questions officials can ask themselves – or their teams – when preparing advice.

They are designed to help civil servants operationalise what works in a crisis, such as clarity of purpose and robust decision making, while mitigating familiar challenges, including insufficient stress-testing and consideration of longer-term impacts.

While some prompts will be more relevant than others depending on the nature of the crisis, in most cases each should be considered, even if only briefly, to maintain rigour alongside speed.

Clarifying short-term objectives and considering long-term impacts

- Do you know what the minister expects of you and your team during the crisis? Are you clear on their top priority and red lines and are you taking steps to regularly sense check your understanding of these?
- Are you clear on who will be responsible for considering longer term impacts and how you can ensure they are not drawn into the immediate crisis response?
- Are you monitoring emerging, but non-urgent, issues that you can hand over to other policy teams for fuller consideration now, or after the immediate crisis has passed?
- Imagine it's six months from now and the headlines are negative. What failures are being attributed to how this policy was designed and implemented? How can you address these risks now?

Making fast but rigorous decisions

- Do you know which governance structures – across your department, and more widely – could be used or adapted to get things moving once your minister has provided a steer? Are they suitable for making decisions rather than simply providing updates and assurances?
- Who needs to be in the room to make critical decisions (rather than who *wants* to be)? Do they have the right expertise and authority? Are they clear about what is expected of them – including what should be escalated, when and to whom?
- Are there any other decision-makers in your department, and across government, who you should keep updated? Who is checking in regularly to ensure they are aligned on the aims and scope of your advice? Are there any risks, sensitivities or system or population impacts that need to be managed and escalated?
- What assumptions are driving your response? Who can you test and validate them with outside the core team?
- What are the minimum levels of oversight and assurance that cannot be dispensed with – even if it is a rapid, light touch impact assessment or fraud risk check - to maintain pace while ensuring that advice to ministers remain robust?

Closing the policy-operational divide

- Who is critical to implementation and how can you work with them to understand their perspectives and requirements ahead of time? Consider: government departments, agencies, public bodies, different tiers of government, the private sector and civil society.
- How can you rapidly stress-test your policy options internally and with affected parties (e.g. making use of red teaming^{*})? Are you being clear on what the purpose of your engagement is at this point in the policy development cycle and how different groups can best contribute to making the policy workable (e.g. advise on how to make the plan work or highlight potential risks that need to be addressed ahead of time)?
- Are ministers hearing about operational impacts and risks directly from the people responsible for delivery? Who is missing from the conversation that could offer a different perspective?
- How will you learn from implementation rapidly? What feedback loops can you use or build?

^{*} Red teaming is a range of critical thinking techniques to aid decision-making and overcome biases. See Red Teaming Handbook for a detailed explanation.

Rapidly mobilising data and insights and using them well

- What information do you need to be able to produce robust advice for your ministers? What do they need to know to make good decisions?
- Are you confident in the quality, accessibility, and timeliness of the data you are using to advise ministers? What are the limitations and have you communicated these?
- Are there existing forums or relationships that you can pull on to either rapidly understand the latest evidence to inform your advice or to access data that is not available to government?
- Have you thought about the impact of key policies on different groups, whose experiences may differ from those in decision making positions? Have you built in processes to capture their insights?
- Have you established feedback loops to understand how your interventions may need to be adapted for people or organisations in special circumstances or with additional needs?

Innovating and learning from the past

- Has something like this happened before in your department, Whitehall or devolved governments that could provide useful learning?
- What assumptions about “how things are normally done” can you challenge?
- How can you better prepare for the next crisis now you’ve had this experience? How can you help others be better prepared?

Getting the right people with the right skills, and supporting them

- Which skills do you need (and already have) and which skills do you need to bring in from elsewhere in government or from outside?
- Does your team have the right balance of specialist expertise and generalists? Does everyone have one distinct role?
- Have you got connections with people outside Whitehall that you can reach at short notice and are they ready to be briefed and advised on sensitive topics (including having the relevant security clearance)?
- Who will oversee staffing? Are they clear on who is available (and in what capacity) and have they developed any contingencies plans for when people become unavailable at short notice? Do you have hand over processes in place?
- Do you have plans in place to protect your team's wellbeing? What are you doing to ensure your team feels valued and motivated during and after the crisis?

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