



Turning policy priorities into effective change

Why this issue is important

Policy successes or failures will often define a government and make or break political careers. There have been [many successes](#) that have stood the test of time, including memorable ones such as the national minimum wage and the privatisation of public utilities. But there are plenty of high profile examples of governments running into difficulties that have forced U-turns ([forests](#)), caused unanticipated political difficulties (identity cards and [NHS reforms](#)), or seen them become mired in implementation problems ([Audit Commission abolition](#)). The failure of policies to deliver their expected results wastes resources, disrupts services, undermines public confidence in government, and damages ministerial careers.

The roots of a policy's success or failure often lie in decisions made early on. The incentives in the UK are to move hastily after forming a government – the timetable for measures requiring legislation is driven by the Queen's Speech and the prospect of reshuffles mean ministers are understandably keen to get going quickly. The trick is to combine pace with effective implementation.

Early challenges and how they can be addressed

- **Establish clear priorities that drive action:** There are obvious limits to how much the next government (and the front line) can do at once. So ministers need to set clear priorities from the outset – otherwise decisions about where attention and resources are focused will be dictated by events. It is important that any policy carries a clear timetable with mechanisms built in to monitor and report progress. Clear responsibility needs to be assigned for tracking progress on behalf of the minister. Often it is junior ministers who are [better placed](#) than secretaries of state to devote time to driving implementation: bringing external stakeholders on board, championing specific policies within departments, and monitoring progress.
- **Think implementation from the outset:** Many policy ideas that look good on paper cannot feasibly be implemented. Countless National Audit Office reports and public grillings by the Public Accounts Committee highlight the frequency with which initiatives are approved on the basis of unrealistic time and cost estimates. Before proceeding with big announcements that lock-in decisions, ministers need to be confident that their policy can be delivered on time and within a realistic budget; that capacity is available or can be created; and that opposition has been overcome or at least anticipated. With policy professionals often lacking training or direct experience in delivery, it's vital that frontline practitioners and operations specialists provide input throughout the design process.
- **Enable effective challenge:** The post-election period will inevitably see incoming ministers wishing to make rapid progress on their policy priorities and the Civil Service striving to prove its ability to deliver. The risk is that there is little internal challenge. This danger can be compounded if other potential sources of challenge – such as No.10 – lack capacity or are too pre-occupied with a mass of other reforms (as happened with the [Lansley health reforms](#)). Very few policies are better for a lack of robust stress-testing. Officials should be given explicit permission to offer constructive challenge – indeed it should be made clear that it is their responsibility to give their best possible advice. One minister did this by explicit [red/blue teaming](#) (where officials are tasked with

advocating opposing views). Routine challenge should also be invited from frontline practitioners and external stakeholders who have the ability to make or break a policy. Such engagement, providing it's meaningful, will also help bring them on board.

- **Create the space to learn:** It is very difficult to get everything right first time. Nor is it necessary to pin down everything at once if policymakers build in space for adaptation. Changes then wouldn't look like backing down – or risk the political opprobrium that invariably comes with anything that resembles a U-turn. There are options for testing and prototyping that can help avoid costly, large-scale false starts. Phasing implementation, like the gradual introduction of [automatic enrolment into pensions](#), also allows lessons to be learned and adaptations to be made before an initiative is scaled up.
- **Make sure the prime minister is on board:** Silence from No.10 does not necessarily mean consent, as some secretaries of state have found to their cost. Departments have a vested interest in ensuring that No.10 feels some ownership of potentially controversial policies and maintains support if the going gets tough.

Longer-term reform priorities

This government and its predecessors have put in place reforms to improve the quality of policy making. These are worth sticking with – and building on in the longer term:

- **Introduce better pre-implementation scrutiny:** The Cabinet Office (or Treasury) should [assess](#) the 'implementability' of departmental policy proposals on a routine basis before the government becomes committed to a particular approach. The Economic and Domestic Affairs Secretariat, Implementation Unit, and Major Projects Authority have all offered pre-implementation advice on an ad hoc basis during this parliament. But we are a long way from the more comprehensive approach seen – to considerable effect – in countries such as [Australia and Canada](#).
- **Improve the quality of evidence and evaluation:** The [What Works Centres](#) have begun to improve the evidence base in key areas such as education and justice. There needs to be broader coverage of policy areas and evidence of effectiveness should be tied into spending decisions – as Oliver Letwin and Danny Alexander have promised. Better evaluation of policies is also important if decision-making is to be informed by a high-quality evidence base. Whitehall should take a more strategic approach to evaluation. Currently, [evaluation activities](#) are under-resourced, commissioning is incoherent, and evidence that is produced often fails to reach decision makers.
- **Strategically deploy expertise:** In the long run, government needs to address its deficit in implementation expertise. But while there are still skills gaps, specialists need to be [deployed](#) (as the Major Projects Authority is beginning to do) to the highest priority or riskiest projects based on whole-of-government, not departmental, interest. Project leadership continuity is also important.
- **Reduce churn in junior ministerial ranks:** Given the important role junior ministers can play in driving implementation, there is a clear case for ensuring leadership continuity for important projects – as seen with the [London Challenge](#) schools programme under Stephen Twigg and pensions reform under Steve Webb.
- **Create capacity for addressing long-term complex policy challenges:** All too often, governments end up responding to crises rather than preventing them. The next government needs far [greater capacity](#) to respond to long-term challenges that threaten our well-being. It needs to build up its horizon scanning function and also strengthen internal co-ordinating mechanisms. Equally, it must either develop internal capacity for longer-term thinking or establish an external body that can do this along the lines of the [Australian Productivity Commission](#).