

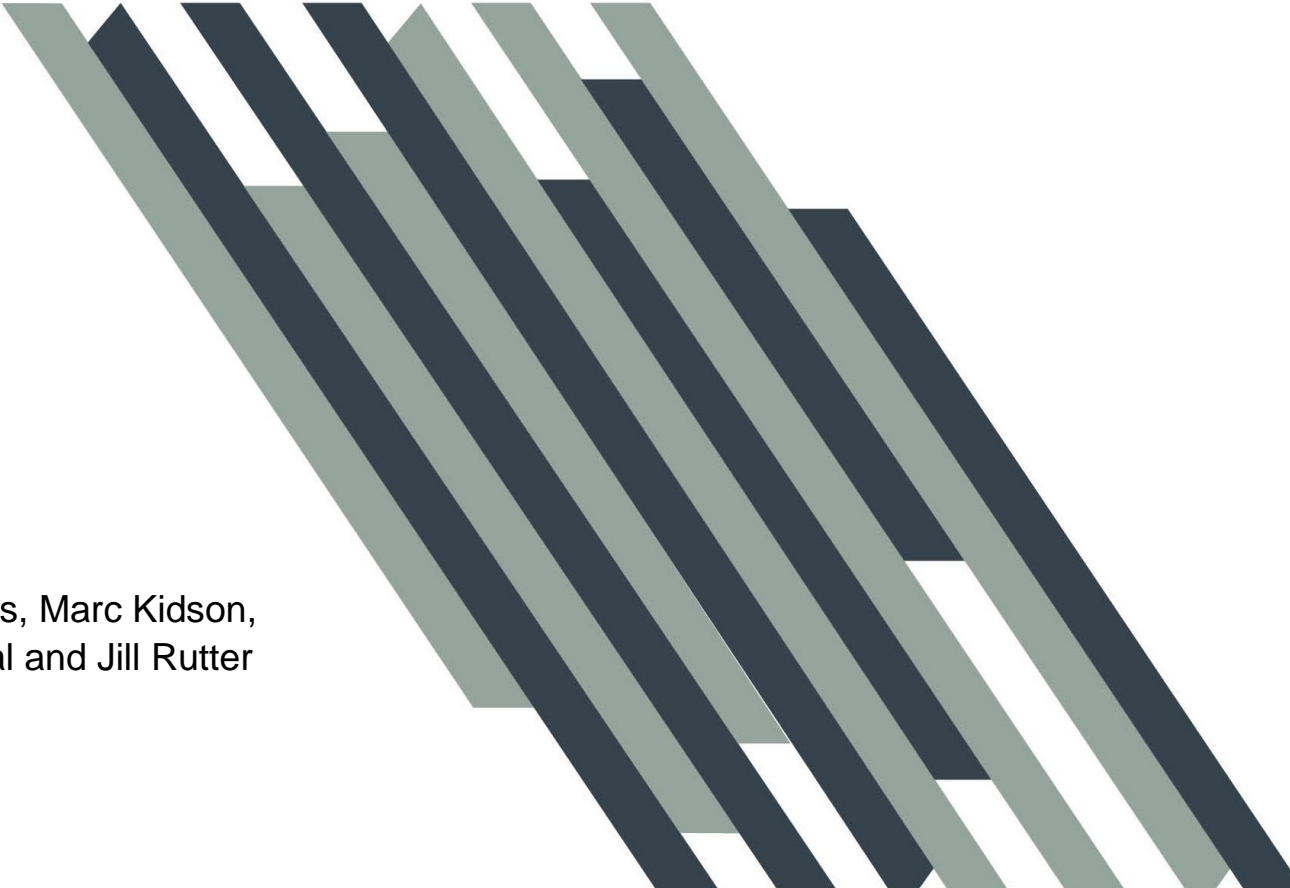
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Doing them Justice

Lessons from four cases of policy implementation

Emma Norris, Marc Kidson,
Petr Bouchal and Jill Rutter

A decorative graphic in the bottom right corner of the page consists of several parallel diagonal stripes. The stripes alternate between a dark charcoal grey and a muted sage green color, creating a sense of movement and depth.

About the authors

Emma Norris is a senior researcher at the Institute for Government and led the policy implementation project. She joined in July 2012 and works on the Institute's better policy making programme and on preparing potential ministers for government. She was previously an Associate Director at the Royal Society of Arts (RSA), and before that has worked at the Institute for Public Policy Research, the Centre for Human Rights and Democracy and was a President of Oxford University Student Union.

Marc Kidson is a researcher at the Institute for Government. He joined in September 2012 and has worked across the Institute's programmes on better policy making and Whitehall effectiveness, publishing papers on Civil Service capabilities and how policy making is organised in departments. Prior to joining the Institute he worked in student representation and has an undergraduate degree in Philosophy, Politics and Economics from the University of Oxford.

Petr Bouchal is a researcher at the Institute for Government. He joined the Institute in April 2012 and has his work has focused on the Whitehall Monitor and on financial leadership in government. Prior to this he worked at the Open Society Fund in Prague, focusing on good governance. He has also worked with a national chapter of Transparency International and provided research assistance to a University of Oxford project on parliamentary politics. Petr holds an MPhil in Politics from the University of Oxford and a BA in International Relations and Economics from Tufts University in the United States.

Jill Rutter leads the Institute for Government's work on better policy making. Before joining the Institute, Jill was Director of Strategy and Sustainable Development at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. Prior to that she worked for BP for six years, following a career in the Treasury, where she was Press Secretary and Private Secretary to the Chief Secretary and Chancellor, as well as working on areas such as tax, local government finance and debt and export finance. She spent two and a half years seconded to the Number 10 Policy Unit.

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Introduction

A policy goal – whether improving pensions uptake or tackling underperformance in schools – is just an aspiration until the hard work of delivery begins. But successive governments have struggled with translating policy ideas into change on the ground. This has been well documented in a rich literature on policy failure that covers many decades, from Dunleavy's *Policy Disasters* to King and Crewe's *Blunders*.¹ Weak implementation can have particularly damaging effects for citizens, or even mean policies fail to reach their audiences at all. Disadvantaged people are often least able to bear these costs. Most recently, this is evident in the case of Universal Credit where some aspects of implementation resulted in the potential exclusion of more vulnerable service users.²

The Institute has previously suggested that rigorous policy design which takes delivery into account is a fundamental of good policymaking.³ We have looked at how to implement specific types of policy effectively, including projects which rely on large and complex IT solutions;⁴ market-based reforms;⁵ and policies which aim to decentralise power and services.⁶ We have also done an in-depth case study of a project success – the 2012 London Olympics.⁷ But we have not looked before in detail at the translation of policy ideas into action on the ground in the area of social justice. In this publication we also discuss the role of politics and politicians in implementation, a subject that is too often neglected. Government is different to managing a company; politics inevitably creates contingencies and pressures which make implementation more complicated. Our research shows how these pressures can sometimes be pre-empted and managed, and demonstrate the positive role that politicians play in driving effective implementation.

This overarching report focuses on drawing out the particular challenges and implications of implementing social justice policies – but we also draw out lessons with wider applicability. Our research is based on four in-depth case studies, published separately in conjunction with this analysis. The case studies we have examined are:

- **The London and City Challenges:** a school improvement programme that ran in the capital ran from 2003 to 2011 and later in Greater Manchester and the Black Country
- **The 2001 Fuel Poverty Strategy:** the way the government went about implementing the 2001 commitment to end fuel poverty by 2016, which focused on improving energy efficiency for vulnerable households
- **Sure Start Children's Centres:** the expansion of a targeted local programme to enhance the life chances of disadvantaged children through early education, health services, family support and childcare to universal roll-out of 3,500 Centres offering integrated services for families with young children

¹ Dunleavy, P., 'Policy Disasters: Explaining the UK's Record', *Public Policy and Administration*, June 1995 vol. 10 no. 2 52-70; King, J. & Crewe, I., *The Blunders of our Governments*, One World Publications, London, 2013

² Tarr, A. & Finn, D., *Implementing Universal Credit*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation and Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion, 2012

³ Hallsworth, M. & Rutter, J., *Making Policy Better*, Institute for Government, 2011, retrieved 8 July 2014 from <http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publications/making-policy-better>

⁴ Stephen, J., Myers, J., Watson, D., & Magee, I., *System error: fixing the flaws in government IT*, Institute for Government, 2011, retrieved 8 July from <http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publications/system-error>

⁵ Gash, S., Panchamia, N., Sims, S., & Hotson, L., *Making Public Service Markets Work*, Institute for Government, 2013, retrieved 8 July 2014 from <http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publications/making-public-service-markets-work>

⁶ Gash, T., Randall, J., & Sims, S., *Achieving Political Decentralisation*, Institute for Government, 2014, retrieved 8 July from <http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publications/achieving-political-decentralisation>

⁷ Norris, E., Rutter, J., & Medland, J., *Making the Games*, Institute for Government, 2013, retrieved 8 July 2014 from <http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publications/making-games>

- **Auto-Enrolment in pension:** the policy to boost private savings for pensions by requiring all UK employers automatically to enrol their staff into a workplace pension, staging from 2012-17.

Our case studies focus on policies implemented in the 2001-10 period, with the exception of Automatic Enrolment which is due to complete its implementation in 2018. The reforms were recent enough to be well remembered by research participants and remain highly relevant, shedding light on a range of common implementation issues. That each was at least partially complete in its delivery at the time of our research also meant that people who were involved were willing and able to reflect on implementation lessons.

The studies range from generally acknowledged successes, for example the London Challenge, to much more equivocal outcomes such as in the cases of fuel poverty. Automatic enrolment has been a success to date, but some believe its hardest tests are still to come. This mix of success and challenge provides opportunities to learn from what works, and reflects the reality of policy implementation, which – despite the tendency to focus on fiascos and disappointment – is rarely an outright failure.

Aims and method

The purpose of this publication is to illustrate what is distinctive about implementing policies that focus on social justice and the lessons these examples provide for the implementation of policy more generally. The case studies are also useful in their own right. We have published them in full separately so that readers can consider the distinct lessons for different kinds of implementation.

Our research does not attempt to conduct a thorough evaluation of the impact of the programmes. For example, we make no attempt to provide a definitive judgement on the precise impact of the London Challenge on educational attainment in England's capital. This is partly because doing so would have taken significant resources away from our main research interests, but also because in some cases such work has already been conducted or is currently underway.⁸ Instead, we drew on existing evaluations of programme success (where available) and focused our attentions on generating a deeper understanding of the main design and implementation choices that contributed to areas of success and failure within each programme.

The research is based on the following activities:

- 70 interviews with key stakeholders from inside and outside of government
- desk research including academic literature, policy documents and formal evaluations
- four 'policy reunion' roundtables – Institute for Government events that brought together key people from central government, local government, delivery organisations and others to discuss how effective implementation was and what could be learned.

By examining the case studies at our policy reunions, and through our other research, we sought to paint a clear picture of the successes and challenges of implementation. We also worked with an advisory group, and used contact with expert policymakers and implementers to test our cross-cutting findings. Most importantly though, our research has focused on capturing the reflections of those closely involved in the programmes to identify areas of agreed success and failure.

⁸ Baars, S., Bernardes, E., Elwick, A., Malortie, A., McAleavy, T., McInerney, L., Menzies, L., & Riggall, A., *Lessons from London Schools: Investigating the success*, Centre for London, 2014, retrieved 8 July 2014 from <http://www.cfbt.com/en-GB/Research/Research-library/2014/r-london-schools-2014> – the authors recently found that the London Challenge was a key factor in the dramatic improvement in London's schools' performance in the period 2000-14.

Both in their more limited form in this overarching report and in their own separate publications, the case studies are presented in a way that is accessible to those who have little or no background in the policy area – but we hope they can also provide insights to those more closely involved in those policy areas.

The structure of this report

This report comprises two main sections.

The first section presents our cross-cutting analysis of what the case studies have taught us about the distinctive features of social justice policies, and the implications for implementation of those policies.

The second section looks at implementation more broadly, and sets out 11 lessons which we think apply more generally across a range of policies. It also captures what could have been done differently in the examples used in our case studies.

The four in-depth case studies are published in full as separate publications. Each case study presents the background to the policy, the story of implementation including key moments and transition points, and concludes with lessons about the challenges and successes of implementing the policy.

1. Social justice policies – features and implications

The implementation of social justice policies has much in common with the implementation of other types of policy, as we will cover in the next chapter. However, there are some distinctive features of social justice policies that are particularly significant when designing and implementing policy. These challenges must be considered early on in the policy process so that planning can take account of them. Below we highlight these features as they have emerged from our case studies and outline their implications for implementation.

Complex and contested

Campaigners, politicians and citizens are often driven by the desire to tackle social problems. But apparent consensus over the need to address a problem can quickly turn into disagreement about what its causes are and how those causes should be tackled. For example, the cross-party endorsement of a Child Poverty Strategy before the 2010 election belied the parties' quite different views of what leads children to grow up in poor households. In fact, the Coalition has deferred redefining child poverty, allegedly because of internal disagreements about its causes. In part this is because such problems often have a number of drivers which are difficult to disentangle and for which conclusive evidence is hard to find.⁹ These difficulties hit home when trying to design policy, making it harder to get agreement between stakeholders on which interventions are most appropriate, and complicating judgements about what constitutes success.

Implications for implementation

It can be difficult to measure progress

When the cause of a social problem is complex or contested, it can be difficult to determine what is most important to measure during implementation. For example, Children's Centres were intended in particular to address the life chances of disadvantaged children, but there is no single definition of what is meant by 'life chances' and in any case, improvement will only manifest itself over the decades of a child's life.¹⁰

This means policymakers have to use proxies to guide their decisions on implementation. The choice of these, however, can influence implementation activity, for example, if you take improved workforce participation of mothers as a proxy for child life chances, focus may shift towards employment advice and childcare and away from early education. It may be best to avoid relying on a single indicator, particularly if the indicator focuses narrowly on outputs, such as the number of Children's Centres built.

There will often be factors that cannot be controlled

Because government's attention and resources are finite, or because the scope for government action is limited or even undesirable, policymakers have to choose where to focus their efforts. As a result, implementation can be knocked off course, or its true impact masked, by factors that lie outside of policymakers' immediate control.

⁹ Bradshaw, J., *Measuring Child Poverty: Can we do better?* Child Poverty Action Group, accessed 6 June 2014: <http://www.cpag.org.uk/sites/default/files/CPAG-Povertyarticle-measuring-cp-0213.pdf>

¹⁰ Oxford University & DfE, *Evaluation of Children's Centres in England*, Oxford University website, 2009-15, retrieved 9 July 2014 from <http://www.education.ox.ac.uk/research/fell/research/evaluation-of-children-centres-in-england-ecce/>

As we saw with the Fuel Poverty Strategy, the heavy weighting of policy towards improving energy efficiency was vulnerable to unexpected shifts in energy prices or incomes. The successful delivery of large numbers of energy saving interventions, which did make people's homes more energy efficient, looked like a failure when energy prices started to rise dramatically and pushed people back into fuel poverty. This is a persistent danger in areas of social justice, from recessions reducing employment and incomes to stock market fluctuations disrupting pensions provision.

Experienced differently by different people

In framing issues of social justice there is an understandable tendency to focus on binary conditions and artificial dividing lines: a household is either fuel poor or not; a student either gets five A*-C grades or they do not. As a result, the design of policy (such as eligibility for a particular service or benefit) can be binary too: one group of people are eligible for an intervention; others are not. However, this apparent simplicity masks huge differences among different people who qualify for an intervention. It is often those most in need that are hardest to help. Different interventions or approaches are needed to reach them rather than other easier-to-reach people who are also eligible.¹¹ 'One size fits all' can be an ineffective approach for implementing policy more broadly, but the inadequacy of standardised solutions can be particularly evident in tackling social injustice. At the very least, policymakers need to consider how policy may need to be adapted or what additional measures may be required to reach groups that experience the same problem but to a more severe degree, such as additional advice or advocacy.¹²

Implications for implementation

It is hard to identify those most in need

When implementing policy, in practice the most in need are often the 'hardest to reach'. There may be particular barriers for some groups such as not having English as a first language or being part of a transient community. An individual or group may be harder to reach because of their local context too. As Naomi Eisenstadt said to implementers of Sure Start, 'Most poor children don't live in poor areas.'

This is further compounded when people do not identify themselves in the target group defined by policy makers. For instance, many pensioners having to choose between heating and eating would not identify with the label 'fuel poor'.

There are often incentives to focus on 'low-hanging fruit'

The pressure to demonstrate results from a policy can lead departments, or those they charge with implementation, to neglect the hardest cases in favour of maximising the number who 'cross the line'. This is a constant risk when commissioning services, demonstrated by 'creaming' the easy cases and 'parking' the more difficult, as we identified in our work on public sector markets.¹³

Without clear prioritisation and incentives, persistent and severe cases can be left unsolved. This was a feature of Warm Front scheme to offer energy efficiency upgrades to fuel poor households in the period we looked at, which was primarily judged on the number of households assisted rather than the size of the gains made, encouraging scheme managers to deliver high volumes of measures in the easiest-to-treat homes.

¹¹ Katz, I., La Placa, V., & Hunter, S., *Barriers to Inclusion and Successful Engagement of Parents in Mainstream Services*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2007, retrieved 9 July 2014 from <http://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/files/jrf/barriers-inclusion-parents.pdf>

¹² Dunning, A., *Information, advice and advocacy for older people*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2005, retrieved 9 July 2014 from <http://www.jrf.org.uk/publications/information-advice-and-advocacy-older-people-defining-and-developing-services>

¹³ Gash, S., Panchamia, N, Sims, S., & Hotson, L., *Making Public Service Markets Work*, Institute for Government, 2013, retrieved 8 July 2014 from <http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publications/making-public-service-markets-work>

Boundary-spanning

Both in their causes and their effects, issues of poverty or disadvantage rarely fit neatly within the boundaries of a single government department, agency or public service. As the Institute for Government's partnership with the Big Lottery Fund has highlighted, 'people's lives are messy and complicated' and it is rarely possible to see the 'whole person' when providing support, particularly in the public sector.¹⁴ Government has made progress in areas, such as rough sleeping, through concerted programmes of action with cross-cutting structures which look at the problem in the round.¹⁵ But in general implementation encounters huge challenges of co-ordination, particularly over the longer term.

Implications for implementation

There is potential mismatch between organisational cultures

Even where different organisations have a shared stake in the implementation of a policy, progress can still be held back by different ways of seeing the problem. For instance, the well-documented health impacts of fuel poverty did not translate into joined-up implementation between the Department of Health and Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) under the Fuel Poverty Strategy. The property-focused policy measures (e.g. installing energy efficiency measures in homes) from Defra did not fit well with the person-focused approach of health practitioners. This meant people like Health Visitors and GPs – who could have been advocates for programmes like Warm Front – did not guide their patients towards it as often as they might have.

Whitehall departments cannot force coordination, especially at a local level, but greater attention to how a policy is communicated to different implementers can make joining up more likely.

Policy risks losing coherence over time

Most of the pressures during implementation weigh against maintaining co-ordination, as organisations balance ever-increasing priorities. It can also be difficult to ensure reliable information is shared between different stakeholders.

Formal governance plays an important role in keeping the different bits of a policy moving in concert, but attention should be paid to the functions governance needs to play. For instance, in co-ordinating the implementation of automatic enrolment, the DWP had a 'project board' for senior oversight, a 'project managers' group' to bring together the main implementers – the Department of Work and Pensions, (DWP, National Employment Savings Trust (NEST) and The Pensions Regulator (TPR) – and the 'Shared Intelligence Forum' to connect in a wider group of stakeholders.

Emotive

Issues of social justice are highly charged and this is often harnessed to great effect by advocacy groups to raise the profile of an issue and secure its place on the political agenda. This can mobilise stakeholders and provide a shared sense of purpose that transcends organisational boundaries. However, to tap into this, politicians can be tempted into 'silver bullet syndrome' when setting out their policies – simplifying the problem and offering seemingly obvious solutions that will in fact only have a partial effect.¹⁶ Similarly, political attention can be skewed towards a policy that addresses the here-and-now. When existing pensioner poverty is an immediate concern of advocacy groups and elderly voters,

¹⁴ Hughes, N., *Connecting Policy with Practice Programme in 2013*, Institute for Government, 2013, retrieved 9 July 2014 from <http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/our-work/better-policy-making/connecting-policy-practice-people-powered-change>

¹⁵ Wilson, W., *Rough Sleeping*, House of Commons Library, 2014, retrieved 9 July 2014 from <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/research/briefing-papers/SN02007/rough-sleeping-england>

¹⁶ Jeffreys, P., 'Silver Bullet Syndrome', *Shelter Policy Blog*, 3 June 2014, retrieved 9 July 2014 from <http://blog.shelter.org.uk/2014/06/silver-bullet-syndrome/>

it requires a significant counterweight like the Turner Pension Commission to encourage politicians to focus on the long-term needs of future pensioners.

Implications for implementation

The way a problem is framed can affect commitment

The 'narrative' that accompanies a policy affects the way that policy is interpreted and delivered by others. Silver-bullet approaches like 'naming and shaming' underperforming schools to drive up standards has been a common tactic in the Department for Education over the past two decades, but can complicate relationships with those who are expected to act.

The very different approach of London Challenge, which saw the poorest-performing schools labelled as the 'keys to success' still drew on emotive issues, but sent a more positive message based on collaboration and support.

It can be difficult to make tough but necessary choices

In an area where there is a vocal coalition of interests keeps the pressure on government during implementation, a range of decisions become politicised. For instance, suggestions that eligibility for subsidised energy efficiency measures could be removed from better-off pensioners to target resources more closely on the fuel poor was consistently ruled out by ministers, who were concerned that it would be unacceptable to influential lobby groups.

Entrenched

The challenges of poverty, an ageing society, or educational inequality have been with us for a long time. Indeed, they have been the subject of many policy interventions by central and local government over the course of many decades.¹⁷ With this in mind, it is unreasonable to expect any new policy to make an impact overnight.

Yet the incentives in politics tend towards the short-term and immediate, emphasising solutions that can be implemented within a parliamentary term, or 'token gestures' that happen quickly but leave fundamental problems untouched. These pressures towards short-termism are an inevitable part of implementing in a political environment. Even beyond politics, a sustained commitment to improve school standards or to fuel-poverty-proof a dilapidated housing stock is unlikely to outlast most of the people who help to get the issue onto the agenda in the first place.

Implications for implementation

There can be a lack of focus on long-run capability

Good social justice policy helps people, communities and systems become more resilient in the long run. However, to do this policymakers need to consider where implementation can be broadened or deepened, even if this means moving more slowly or investing more upfront. For example, while the delivery of new children's centres buildings, or co-location in existing buildings, was driven hard by the Department for Education, less attention was initially given to building up the workforce of centre managers that would embed the centres as a public service.

Political transitions create risk

Implementing policy with a long-run view makes it likely that it will cut across electoral cycles. Transitions between ministers in the same government are enough to introduce uncertainty in implementation, as happened with successive ministers wanting to make their mark on how automatic

¹⁷ Harris, J., *Social Evils and Social Problems in Britain 1904-2008*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2009, retrieved 9 July 2014 from <http://www.jrf.org.uk/publications/social-evils-social-problems>

enrolment was being introduced. But this is magnified when there is a wholesale turnover of administration.

Cross-party engagement on major projects can significantly reduce some of this risk, but runs counter to the instincts of many ministers and political incentives. A clear diagnosis of the problem and strong external support for addressing it (as we have discussed above) can help to keep it on the agenda in the face of an unconvinced new government.

2. Eleven lessons for policy implementation

In this chapter, we set out the threads that weave through all four stories, offer 11 lessons for anyone interested in how policy becomes reality, and look at what could have been done differently. Our case studies naturally all exhibit some of the characteristic features of social justice policies, as we outlined in the previous chapter. We have also included detailed lessons in each of our individual case study publications for those with an interest in those particular policies.

But our case studies shed light on the challenges of implementation for a much wider set of policies as well. They recount practical experiences of:

- designing and managing contracts
- working with and through partnerships with local government, public services and the private sector
- finding ways to work cross-departmentally
- maintaining links to what is happening on the ground
- and developing common purpose amongst varied, and sometimes conflicting, groups.

Policymakers were trying to find effective ways to change the behaviour of individuals, households or employers – a feature of a huge range of government policies – or to create a new service or improve an existing one. Implementation often involved the creation of new organisations, which required designing those organisations and their governance, and recruiting the right people to lead them.

For any policymakers and implementers engaged in these activities, the observations, examples and lessons below should provide food for thought on what makes implementation effective. The lessons are not rigid commandments, but capture the most consistent success factors we have found in our research so far. We illustrate each lesson with some concrete examples from our case studies.

Lesson 1: Be clear about the problem and the outcomes that matter most

I think government often gets into a dragon-slaying mentality...which is to say “there’s this hideous fire-breathing monster on the hill over there and I’ve invented this new sword which we’ll gallop off into the distance and slaughter the dragon with”, and make a big announcement about how this thing that nobody’s solved before was going to be solved by them for the first time as if they’re the only people who care about it. And it makes it incredibly difficult when later you discover it isn’t a dragon but it’s a forest fire and your sword’s not much value.

Former director general in a central government department

Policy often starts life as a high-level ambition, like ending fuel poverty or giving children a better start in life. But these goals need to be matched with analysis of the problem. A clear diagnosis of the status quo helps clarify what the more detailed objectives should be, as well as what intervention is needed. Number crunching in the Department for Education and Skills was central to turning a sense that ‘something must be done’ about the poor performance of schools in the capital into the London Challenge’s three-pronged approach of raising the results of the worst performers, narrowing the gap between top and bottom, and growing the number of outstanding schools. These straightforward outcomes could be used by ministers, officials, local authorities and schools themselves to help build appropriate interventions. And they act as a clear judge of success.

Engaging with the problem in detail also allowed policymakers to clarify that there was no single cause of underperformance, but rather it was that different schools struggled with different challenges, from general teacher retention to specific leadership issues. This drove the bespoke nature of the London Challenge interventions that took place in schools.

Clarity about the problem also helps decision makers to make choices during implementation, particularly about where resources should be prioritised. By contrast, where policymakers draft around areas of disagreement between stakeholders – including between different government departments – it can be much harder to know where to focus resources during implementation.

Having tough conversations upfront about aims and outcomes will pay dividends when it comes to measuring success, and can often make it more likely that an incoming minister or government will understand, preserve and build on the policy in a coherent way.

Working out what Children’s Centres were for

The decision to scale up Sure Start from a programme targeted at disadvantaged families presented an opportunity to achieve a number of policy objectives, such as reducing child poverty, improving all children’s life chances, and increasing the employability of the parents of young children. But the tensions between some of these objectives were never explicitly addressed. This made it difficult to decide which of the activities that might occur in Children’s Centres should take priority. Added to this, the pressure of the target to have a centre in every community by 2010 focused attention on creating or finding buildings, sometimes at the expense of clarifying what would happen inside them.

What problem was the Fuel Poverty Strategy trying to solve?

In the Fuel Poverty Strategy, ministers from across government committed to a major policy goal of ending fuel poverty for vulnerable households by 2010 and for all households by 2016. The definition of the problem suggested that low incomes, poor energy efficiency of homes and high fuel costs all contributed to pushing households into fuel poverty. But each of these drivers fell to a different department to address – and in the case of energy efficiency was awkwardly split between two departments with very different agendas.

To make progress on the households most deeply in fuel poverty required a shared sense of how these drivers combined. In the absence of this, individual schemes focused on a narrower range of households who could be helped across the threshold between being fuel poor and non-fuel poor, sometimes missing those most in need.

Lesson 2: Think about implementation while still developing the policy

Above all else, we need to get much smarter at saying, 'Who are the people out there in the real world who are going to have to do things differently as a result of this?' At quite a detailed and granular level, what is it really going to be like for them? Will that work? If it won't, we're going to have to sacrifice some other elements of our policy to make it work.

Former director in a central government department

Our case studies bring home a consistent theme from our other work on policymaking: that policy design and implementation cannot and should not be separated.¹⁸ In particular, policymakers should routinely involve people outside government – including citizens or other end users, as well as those who have insights into their likely behaviour and responses. These groups should be engaged throughout about how elements of the policy will work, not simply consulted on what the department is planning to do. For example, had employers (and not just trade associations) been more closely involved in the initial design of automatic pension enrolment, then regulations which had to be changed mid-course would have been designed more effectively from the outset.

This highlights the distinction between managing the most important stakeholders – for instance, working out where support and opposition may affect government's ability to implement – and involving those at the sharp end of implementation in the details of design. Our research emphasises that ministers are well placed to take a direct role in the former, investing in relationships and broadening the coalition of support that will provide political cover. The latter may require space and time that is often squeezed out by the political timetable of policymaking: seizing on opportunities to do dry runs, pilots or formal trials; using central capacity, for instance the newly-established Policy Lab;¹⁹ or simply examining what has worked elsewhere before committing to full implementation.

¹⁸ See for instance *Policy Making in the Real World*, Institute for Government, 2011, p.6, retrieved 9 July 2014 from <http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publications/policy-making-real-world>

¹⁹ The Policy Lab was launched in April 2014 and sits in the Government Innovation Group in the Cabinet Office. The Policy Lab works with policy teams to test how design principles and methods can improve the pace, quality and deliverability of policy in the Civil Service. It's modelled on a number of international examples, particularly MindLab in Denmark and the Helsinki Design Lab in Finland.

Using early implementation to shape the London Challenge

Between the initial announcement of the London Challenge in July 2002 and its official launch by the Prime Minister, Tony Blair in May 2003, there was an intensive period of planning and development by the team in the Department for Education and Skills. This included detailed data analysis and recruitment to key roles, such as Tim Brighouse as the Chief Adviser for London Schools. But the team also began to implement the emerging model of school improvement. Advisers employed by the department were going into schools and putting together bespoke support to address the most pressing issues. This both allowed them to make an early start on supporting schools and ensured that the strategy that was announced had already been tested in practice.

Making assumptions about employers in automatic enrolment

One of the key challenges in automatic enrolment was to design the regulations governing the obligation to enrol employees into pensions. The right balance needed to be struck between protecting employees to ensure they can start saving into pensions, and allowing enough flexibility for employers so that the regulations accommodate varying circumstances and don't impose unnecessary burdens. Government initially assumed that employers would try to evade the obligation and erred on the side of imposing stricter safeguards.

The result was a set of regulations that were unnecessarily strict and burdensome and often difficult to comply with. Much of this could have been avoided if employers or individuals with understanding of the workings of pensions and payroll had been involved early on. While the department did go through standard consultation processes and made some changes based on the responses, it found that consulting trade associations was not a sufficient way to get input from those who would have to administer the new system.

Lesson 3: Get the right capability

We lacked skills in commercial. We could run procurement exercises for new photocopiers in the DWP offices, but nobody had any idea how to go out and procure a whole pensions administrator and front management.

Deputy director in a central government department

Successful implementation typically requires a broad set of skills and Whitehall has been persistently criticised for gaps in its capability, particularly around programme and change management, commercial, and digital skills.²⁰ One of our interviewees, who has a background in the private sector, reiterated this by saying 'While it has people with awesome drafting and thinking skills, the planning skills were just appalling.'

Often though, implementation also needs to draw on professional capability that it is unrealistic to expect civil servants to have, such as school leadership, to develop and deliver well-informed policy. In all the case studies, the importance of understanding and investing in capability across the board was frequently emphasised.

Working backwards, from how a policy would be implemented to the team of people that would best achieve it, helped clarify what kinds of capability were needed. This relied on

²⁰ The Civil Service, *Civil Service Capabilities Plan 2013*, Gov.uk website, 2013, retrieved 9 July 2014 from <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/civil-service-capabilities-plan>

finding individuals with particular specialisms and skills, as in the case of Tim Jones' recruitment to the automatic enrolment efforts described below, or in the case of bringing Naomi Eisenstadt into government to help establish Sure Start. But getting the right capability also involved combining these individuals into strong teams and getting the right 'fit' between them and the ways they would be required to work. Jon Coles, for instance, when putting together his team for the London Challenge, deliberately recruited civil servants who could thrive working in the outward-facing and responsive way that London Challenge would demand. We were told this ran counter to the dominant culture in the Department for Education at the time.

Sometimes, getting the right fit also includes considering how individuals brought in from outside government can be helped to be effective in the distinctive environment of government. Finding the right capability does not always mean bringing it into the policy team in the department. In the examples in our case studies, the Whitehall teams running implementation sometimes deliberately kept key people 'one step removed' from the department.

Bringing in outsiders to support automatic enrolment

In the case of automatic enrolment, departmental officials realised early on that central government didn't have the capability and expertise needed to build a pension provider from scratch. Drawing on the model used for delivering the London 2012 Olympics, they decided to establish the Personal Accounts Delivery Authority (PADA), a bespoke body tasked with designing and building the new pension provider. This provided more freedom to recruit the right people and to engage with industry on designing the pension product. They also appointed Tim Jones, a retail banking executive, to lead it.

While paying attention to recruiting the right person was critical, Jones did not always find it straightforward to work effectively within the rules and constraints of government. It took both time and determination to make relationships with officials and ministers work.

Lesson 4: Be aware of, and ready to respond to, the wider system

We were asking local authorities to be doing quite a lot at the same time. In some cases it would be quite a lot of children's centres at the same time, but this was also a time when local authorities were doing quite a lot of school building. They had been doing a lot on standards reform. I think that was a stretch. I think it was less a capability issue and more a capacity issue.

Former permanent secretary of a central government department

Policies are never implemented onto a blank canvas; they must compete for resources and attention with other national policies and local priorities. In addition, in many areas there will be a legacy of policies previously implemented, which may include existing organisations, networks and infrastructure that can be drawn on, but also includes existing rules, obligations and expectations to contend with. Our case studies show how the ability of implementation to take account of constraints and assets in the system varies widely. The tendency to keep policy development closed was identified by one interviewee as a risk to understanding the wider system. 'The world of politics is very internalised...The Westminster Village doesn't have a great deal of connection with the outside world and therefore, in a sense, they don't know what they don't know.'

This is recognised by recent efforts in the Civil Service to promote 'open policy making' – where the policy team 'invites broader inputs, expertise and creates space for others to help solve problems'.²¹ Actively taking an interest in the views and knowledge of the people in the system can also help to reveal cross-over with policies being pursued by different parts of government, or even the same department. As shown by the examples below, this may encourage synergies with other initiatives or may flag risks where implementers are likely to be overloaded.

Understanding the pressures on suppliers for Warm Front

The Warm Front scheme was the flagship programme under the 2001 Fuel Poverty Strategy, intended to provide grant funding for energy efficiency measures to low-income households. The significant scaling-up of the new scheme from a more limited predecessor relied on the sectors that provide insulation, draught-proofing and energy advice meeting new demand.

Defra and DTI were not well-placed to consult with these sectors and had few reliable channels to establish what would be possible. However, the Warm Front scheme managers – most notably Eaga – did have strong links with the sector and were able to play an important role in providing the certainty and clarity required for firms to justify long-term investment that would enable them to meet demand.

²¹ The Civil Service, Policy Profession Review, 2013, retrieved 9 July 2014 from <http://resources.civilservice.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/Twelve-Actions-Report.pdf>

Automatic enrolment and ‘Real Time Information’

Automatic enrolment is a complex policy that requires employers and supporting industries to prepare well in advance, for instance by developing and deploying new software. Their capacity to do so was constrained by the fact that not long before the start of automatic enrolment, they had to come to terms with another large change to the workings of payroll systems, Real Time Information – HMRC’s change of the Pay As You Earn (PAYE) tax collection system. There was little, if any, explicit consideration in government of how these two large changes would interact and how the risk of them colliding could be managed.

Lesson 5: Stay close to the implementers

They felt I knew them. I knew their schools. I bothered to get to know them. I went and visited them on their patch, which was crucial.

Former civil servant in a central government department

Bringing others into policymaking is important, but once implementation begins central government also needs to keep strong links with where change is happening. The creation of short feedback loops between implementers and Whitehall enables information about progress to flow easily, allowing officials and ministers to identify and address problems early. If reliable and accurate, this information facilitates both challenge and support – an ethos that underpinned the London Challenge, and was a feature of the distinctive methodology of the Prime Minister’s Delivery Unit under Tony Blair.

The potential for difficult or initially distant relations between Whitehall and the groups it relies on to achieve ministers’ goals means that credible intermediaries are sometimes required to narrow the gap between the department and local delivery. In the case of Children’s Centres, the consortium, ‘Together for Children’, used former directors of children’s services who implicitly understood the perspectives of local authority senior managers. In a similar vein, the London Challenge team recruited respected former head-teachers who had high levels of credibility with schools. They acted as advisers for underperforming schools, working between the Department for Education and the front line. These intermediaries can be vital for government to understand not just what is happening but also what different stakeholders think about the policy and its impact. They also help to filter and compensate for inevitable bias when seeking an accurate picture of progress.

Ministers also have a role to play in keeping in touch with what is happening on the ground. Many of our case studies had examples of ministers using intelligence from constituencies or conversations with citizens to highlight implementation problems, and keep it focused on the people they were trying to help. One former minister explained:

As a minister you need external reference points and you can’t just listen to the advice of your civil servants... You need to keep links to where the policy is being implemented and talk to people who are the recipients of the policy to get feedback from them rather than accept that it’s all intermediated through the civil service machine.

Using 'Together for Children' to work with local authorities

During the delivery of Children's Centres, a bespoke organisation - a consortium of charities and private sector companies called Together for Children - helped the department stay in touch with implementers and support them in meeting their targets.

The consortium was able to recruit people with experience of local government and children's services, who had both knowledge of the policy and credibility with professionals and local government officials. This – combined with a contract with the department that included clear objectives – allowed it to play both the role of an external reference point trusted by ministers, and a conduit for local authorities to feedback to government.

Building relationships between central and local government in the City Challenges

When the London Challenge model was extended to Greater Manchester, the Department for Children, Schools and Families had to contend with a quite different set of relationships locally. In London, the proximity of Whitehall to the local authorities made it easier to build trust incrementally and tap into pan-London networks. In Greater Manchester, a legacy of tensions between local leaders and central government departments meant that suspicion and resistance had to be broken down. Civil servants had to be persistent and willing to spend considerable time in Manchester to build those relationships from scratch. This was time-consuming but essential to the progress that was made.

Lesson 6: Be clear about where and how decisions are made

When it came down to decisions about what was going to happen, like setting up academies, these happened at a very high level. And it wouldn't have happened if you'd left it to the bureaucracy. You are not going to get the likes of Hackney Downs School closed and Mossborne Academy set up by a few bureaucrats in the education department. This was a very, very high level political thing and it had to be handled on that basis.

Former minister

The quality of implementation hangs on countless decisions from the technical to the strategic. Our case studies showed that ministers must be ultimately accountable for the conduct of policy and must take the highest-level decisions, but they cannot be the arbiter of all issues once a policy hits the ground. Instead, they are critical to establishing who has authority to take which decisions. If this framework – what one interviewee described as the 'authorising environment' – is unclear, even small decisions will often default to the centre.

While central oversight is important, unnecessary escalation of small decisions can slow things down and put these decisions into the hands of officials or ministers who do not have the best information to hand or the expertise to decide. This was one of the main drivers behind putting key aspects of delivery of the London 2012 Olympic Games in the hands of the arm's-length Olympic Delivery Authority and the London Organising Committee of the Olympic Games (LOCOG), after learning lessons from the unclear accountabilities and excessive ministerial interference that had been the source of problems for Wembley Stadium and the Millennium Dome.

Clear delegation of spending decisions on London Challenge

Assistance to schools under the London Challenge sometimes had significant cost implications outside of the normal funding formula for secondary education. A requirement that ministers are involved in decisions to approve additional funds could have created a bottleneck in the Department for Education and Skills that would have slowed down the process of responding to urgent needs in schools. However, Stephen Twigg, as Minister for London Schools, established an understanding that he would not need to be consulted on spending below £50,000 for an individual school and his lead official, Jon Coles further delegated decisions below £25,000 to the civil servants working with schools in cases of urgent need.

Lesson 7: Invest in routines to keep implementation on track

These kind of tedious routines were absolutely crucial ... just sitting there, debating it, refining it.

Former director general of a central government department

The delegation of authority, as described in the example above, worked best when it was matched with regular scrutiny of progress both by officials and ministers. This is particularly important given implementation typically takes place over long periods, making maintaining impetus challenging. For instance, the shared set of milestones agreed during the implementation of children's centres created pace among officials, delivery partners and local authorities. The milestones were also critical for helping ministers judge whether or not the policy was on track.

Once milestones had been set, clear and regular routines for staying in touch and measuring progress were critical. This typically involved the establishment of regular check-in meetings between officials and delivery partners. In the case of London Challenge, the discipline of weekly meetings to update each other on progress kept a high sense of accountability, but also meant that problems could be addressed quickly and in the round. In all the examples in our case studies, meetings to monitor progress worked best when they were informed by robust project management data. Children's centres, automatic enrolment into pensions, and London Challenge all invested in strong project management capability – including bringing in external capacity to support existing processes. This allowed them to generate timely and accurate data about progress, and quickly identify and address problems or lags. By contrast, when implementing the Fuel Poverty Strategy, Warm Front scheme managers like Eaga may have had strong routines for managing delivery. Across the strategy as a whole however, time-lags in receiving and processing data on fuel poverty made it difficult to stay in touch with progress.

As the next lesson suggests, routines for tracking progress were often most effective when they involved ministers, who could use their authority to keep others focused on implementation.

Tracking the progress of the Children’s Centres roll-out

The delivery of 3,500 Children’s Centres by 2010 was monitored and progressed by rigorous project management activity. Together for Children, the government’s arm’s-length delivery partner, tracked the progress of each local authority through project management systems which had been developed for this specific purpose by PA Consulting and used this information to keep ministers and officials in touch with progress at regular catch-up meetings. This created a transparent, accurate view of progress and helped central government make decisions about where and when to provide additional support to local authorities.

Lesson 8: Use junior ministers to drive progress

It’s worth reflecting whether that level of ministerial scrutiny was one of the key reasons of success. I happen to think it was, because it meant that you had ministerial oversight and I would always argue that areas that had strong ministerial interest and drive were more likely to be successful.

Former permanent secretary of a central government department

Secretaries of state provide high-level sponsorship and direction for flagship policies, but given the number of calls on their time, a clear conclusion from our case studies is that policy areas where junior ministers were closely involved had the best prospects for delivering. Junior ministers were generally better placed to guide the process of translating broad policy goals into policy that can be implemented, and staying close to – but not on top of – departmental officials. They were also involved in formal and informal check-ins with officials and other implementers to keep up the momentum of the policy, which would range from frequent ‘keep in touch’ meetings to ad hoc requests for information.

Junior ministers also took on pivotal roles in negotiating the boundaries between new policy and other priorities in the department. This came into play particularly when the policy was a departure from normal ways of working, for example, in the case of automatic enrolment in DWP, which was more familiar with delivering major projects like benefit reform directly. Securing interdepartmental co-ordination also hinged on the working relationships between ministers across government, and allowed junior ministers to use the ‘soft governance’ of bilateral meetings and political connections to achieve more joined-up activity.

Wherever aspects of a policy were contentious, junior ministers with good networks beyond government helped implementation to weather opposition or bumps in the road. Stephen Twigg, as Minister for London Schools, was both well connected and respected among London local authorities, who felt he engaged with their interests. Similarly, Lord Whitty as a minister in Defra, was a longstanding champion of action on fuel poverty and developed robust relationships with contractors for the flagship Warm Front scheme, which allowed him to be tough but respected in his dealings with them. As a consequence of their role, continuity of junior ministers appeared to be as significant as that of senior officials. Turnover required vital relationships to be rebuilt and introduced the risk of a new minister trying to ‘make their mark’ on policy that had already been agreed with stakeholders.

A minister with credibility to engage with the outside world

Automatic enrolment has benefited from a junior minister who is seen by industry as highly knowledgeable and credible and who has stayed in post for a number of years. Yet Steve Webb himself does not describe himself as an expert in private pensions, so his role in automatic enrolment has been to encourage officials to engage with industry and employers in order to learn about how the policy is working. Often he has taken on this role himself, engaging with employers and supporting industries such as payroll providers. In one case, he acted as the final 'point of appeal' for payroll providers who raised concerns with government about requirements that proved difficult to implement.

A minister focused on delivery

Beverley Hughes, Minister for Children from 2005 to 2009, took a relatively hands-on approach to the delivery of Children's Centres. She saw her role as bridging the divide between political objectives and implementation on the ground, ensuring that 'policy drift' on the ground is minimised by involving herself in the details where needed. She made use of Together for Children, the department's contracted delivery partner, to stay apprised of progress, but also reach out to local authority leaders to help remove blocks to implementation.

Lesson 9: Allow for and learn from variation

I think clearly every government policy should have 'and we'll learn as we go', as its final clause.

Former director general of a central government department

Being as rigorous as possible in setting out the design of a policy is important but so is recognising that, as one minister told us, 'There are only so many things you can fix before you start'. Our case studies showed that not everything can or should be specified at an early stage, and that government needs to continue to learn and adapt as implementation moves forward. However, the promise of taking an adaptive approach can be hard to live up to once the messy dynamics of implementation have kicked in.

What is clear from our case studies is that learning and improvement does not just happen. The best implementation develops strong and consistent mechanisms to get a clear view of what is happening and to inform decisions about what needs to change. At a very granular level, learning occurs by convening teams to share their insights and experiences. This requires conditions in which they can be open about failure, and challenge each other to explain or justify a particular course of action. This is how Tim Brighouse worked with his team of advisers on the London Challenge, meeting at least fortnightly to update each other. As a result, Brighouse told us, they 'knew with every year a lot more about school improvement, very subtle, that's where I thought national governments had gone wrong. They thought you could impose one answer, I think it's terribly context-bound'.

Even when it is a case of encouraging different actors in the system to learn from each other, central government has an active role to play in encouraging and putting in place systems to support iteration and learning. This may involve catalysing and capturing best practice, as the Labour government tried to do for local government by creating and funding the 'Beacon Councils' Scheme when implementing the Fuel Poverty Strategy. But it also

requires creating the right conditions for others to seek out and adopt best practice. The most important condition for this appeared to be stability. If implementers think that fundamental aspects of a policy are likely to change, there is far less incentive to try and improve the way they are delivering against it.

Creating incentives and opportunities to learn about fuel poverty

Under the 2001 Fuel Poverty Strategy, local authorities were required to report annually on their strategies for tackling fuel poverty in their areas. The opportunity for variation in approaches between different areas could have been an opportunity to learn what works for different target groups (such as the elderly) or different properties (such as solid-walled homes that are hard to insulate). However, Defra did not specify the format that these reports were meant to take, nor did they require assessment of the scale of the problem in each local authority against which to measure progress. As a result, the reporting requirement was not a useful incentive for learning and did not lead to dedicated activities or networks to support learning across the system.

Lesson 10: Build in long-term focus

The dominant culture is not a culture of programmes and delivery, the dominant culture is of policy formation, they just don't understand the risks they're taking by not prizing continuity in these key roles to the extent they should. And it's bizarre, because they keep on falling over in a heap.

Chief executive of an arm's-length body

Continuity is an essential ingredient of effective implementation. All of our case studies involved implementing over a period of many years and these long time-spans introduce significant risk to achieving policy goals. Excessive turnover of officials is a well-known dysfunction of the Civil Service, with civil servants expecting to move roles regularly to progress in their careers. This can be dampened but not eliminated by the use of incentives, such as promoting senior responsible owners (SROs) in post over the course of a major project. The creation of arm's-length bodies also appears to promote greater stability in some instances. This provided stability, in the form of PADA in the case of automatic pension enrolment, and similarly promoted stability in the organisations involved in delivering the London 2012 Olympic Games.

There are fewer direct levers that can be deployed to keep ministers in post although, when approaching a reshuffle, Number 10 might consider the impact on delivery of moving ministers – especially junior ones. For both ministers and officials however, personal interest and commitment to see the policy through has tended to keep them involved. This is something we also saw in our research on delivering the London 2012 Olympics. This highlights the importance of developing policies with a clear sense of purpose which others buy into.

Beyond key personnel though, changes of government are an obvious source of disruption for implementation. Any incoming government inherits policies that are mid-delivery and there have been cases of new ministers hastily scrapping previous initiatives only to resurrect them at a later point. In the meantime, capability can be lost and costs rise due to the uncertainty for implementers. Cross-party engagement runs counter to many ministers' political instincts, but our research suggests that identifying where there is even minimal

agreement can make a difference to the officials and others who have to plan around the politics. In the case of automatic enrolment, we were told that discussions between the then opposition and the Labour government helped the policy successfully weather the transition.

The long-term commitment of automatic enrolment's top team

Automatic enrolment has been relatively unusual among major government projects in the stability of its leadership team. From 2005 until 2012 the project was led by one director in DWP, Caroline Rookes. And Tim Jones – recruited in 2007 to lead the interim delivery body PADA, and subsequently NEST, the public pension provider – is still in post today. This was a result of an explicit commitment to each other made by the key as well as a clear preference expressed by the permanent secretary. Nevertheless, the high turnover recently – the project has seen two changes of SRO since 2012 – shows that there are no systemic drivers to encourage senior leaders to stay in post long enough to ensure successful delivery.

Lesson 11: Be prepared to rethink if the context changes dramatically

It was a fantastically optimistic strategy that was never updated, so there's stuff in it which says 'if prices really do go up by something like 15%, we'll have to have another look at this' – and nobody actually did!

Former director of policy in a national charity

However well executed, in the end policy success also depends on a favourable context for implementation. Ministers should be wary of changing course or adjusting the scope of policy, as we have set out in previous research.²² But the world does not stand still and policy problems themselves change as a result of external events. For example, when a financial crisis hits – as it did in 2008 – a range of assumptions on which policies may rely, from house prices to public debt, are suddenly out of date. Even in the case of London 2012, a project which famously stuck to its scope, some key decisions had to be changed in light of the crash.

This becomes more significant as the time horizon for the policy becomes longer. Changes in the nature of the problem itself put particular pressure on the judgments made by policymakers. If the scale of the policy challenge is rising faster than the resources being made available to it – as was the case with fuel poverty from 2005 – participants in our research argued that decision makers should question whether broad but shallow assistance still make sense, or whether adapting the policy to focus on acute assistance for the hardest hit would be better. This is where clarity on objectives is particularly important as we set out in our first lesson, as it makes it easier to decide if the policy model still makes sense when other variables have changed.

As demonstrated in the example below, policymakers should also set about implementation with a sense of what could change, and have clear contingencies for when their forecasts turn out to be wrong. Our research suggests these should include an assessment of the

²² Norris, E., Rutter, J., & Medland, J., *Making the Games*, Institute for Government, 2013, retrieved 8 July 2014 from <http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publications/making-games>

'trigger points' at which a more fundamental appraisal should be considered. The ability to rethink and adjust early, rather than further down the road, can significantly reduce problems.

Fuel Poverty Strategy and surging energy prices

The 2001 Fuel Poverty Strategy placed most of its policy emphasis on improving energy efficiency in vulnerable households, but recognised that incomes and energy prices were also drivers of the problem. The strategy set out policies in the context of certain Department for Trade and Industry forecasts about the numbers of fuel poor. These included assumptions about how energy prices would change that turned out to be drastically optimistic.

Although the 2001 Strategy acknowledged the approach would need to be revisited if the wider context changed significantly, after 2004-05 as prices rose and the number of fuel poor began to increase, the only response was to push more money into a few main programmes. But this could not keep pace with the price rises and the unwillingness to revisit the original strategy meant that changes to the default approach, such as more regulatory intervention or cleverer targeting of the existing resources, were not deployed.

Conclusion

Tony Blair remarked that the difference between opposition and government is that in opposition you 'say' whereas in government you 'do'.²³ How well governments 'do' is crucial not only to the impact of individual policies but to people's faith in government more generally. The policies we have studied all made real differences to the way people live their lives, and poor implementation would remove that opportunity from them.

But as we have seen in our research, the translation of policy intent into action is highly complex, involving many people inside and outside government and requiring activity across many fronts. Policymakers often have their eyes on a moving target and their actions can be thrown off course by external events or by the limits of central government control.

There is no way of guaranteeing implementation success. But our case studies demonstrate that there are some factors all policymakers need to consider, including how to: clarify goals and measure progress; create appropriate decision making structures and feedback loops; ensure there are the right skills and expertise to deliver; frame issues to get people onside; use the existing assets in the system – including ministerial time and attention and make long implementation programmes resilient to the political cycle, personnel churn and external events.

²³ Davis, J., *In full: Transcript of Q&A with Tony Blair at Mile End Group, London*, The Independent, 28 October 2013, retrieved 2 July 2014 from: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/in-full-transcript-of-qa-with-tony-blair-at-mile-end-group-london-8909386.html>

As we said at the start of the report, there is a lot of literature on failed implementation which identifies, with hindsight, many of the reasons why policy expectations failed to convert into the desired change. That literature is long on diagnosis, but sometimes short on advice about how to foresee and deal with the potential pitfalls in the policy development phase that go on to disrupt implementation.

In this report we have examined how policymakers have gone about addressing many of those challenges. In the next phase of our implementation work we are keen to work with those engaged both in policy development and in translating it into results on the ground to develop a framework to improve the chances of successful implementation.