Wales Centre for Public Policy
Canolfan Polisi Cyhoeddus Cymru

Policy Briefing
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Implementation minded policy making

Introduction

Policies often fail to achieve the intended outcomes. This can be a result of bad policy (policy not capable of achieving desired outcomes), bad execution (policy not implemented well), or bad luck (factors outside policy makers' control that undermine the policy). While much has been written about policy failure, and how to avoid it, knowledge and insight is somewhat siloed.

We teamed up with the Centre for Evidence and Implementation to conduct a review to understand the latest thinking on the policy-implementation gap and identify how insights from implementation science can be integrated into policy work.

We looked at the academic and grey literature, including existing resources that offer guidance for integrating an implementation focus into policy making and delivery, and drew on existing implementation models. Here we summarise the key findings. The full report, including links to tools and resources, can be found here.

Implementation success

Successful implementation depends on the interaction between:

- The content or 'logic' of the policy: the 'why' (problem definition), 'what' (objectives) and 'how' of the policy (policy instruments and direction for implementation); and
- The implementation context: the social, cultural, political, economic, infrastructural and institutional context at different levels (e.g., implementation setting, regional, national)

Findings from the review showed that policies are more likely to fail when there is **misalignment** between the policy and the implementation context or when there is **ambiguity** in the policy.

Our review points to the need to be explicit about the nature and degree of ambiguity in the policy content, and the extent of (mis)alignment with the implementation context. Better understanding of ambiguity and misalignment can inform the development and deployment of **elements of an implementation strategy**.

Reducing ambiguity

The review identified three types of ambiguity that can undermine effective implementation:

- **Ambiguity in the 'why' of policy content**: the problem or perceived need that the policy responds to.
- **Ambiguity about the 'what' of policy content**: the aims of the policy and the change intended to be brought about.
- **Ambiguity about the 'how' of implementation**: the implementation strategies and activities that are required to turn the policy into change on the ground, and who, at different levels in the system, needs to do what to support and enact this

> **Ambiguity about the 'why', 'what' and 'how' of policy can undermine effective implementation**



All policies will have some degree of ambiguity, either intentional (e.g. to allow for variation in local delivery) or unintended (e.g. policies that seek to 'solve' multiple or complex issues). To support effective implementation, this needs to be made explicit and efforts made to reduce ambiguity or manage its implications.

Increasing alignment

Implementation is harder when a policy is not aligned with the implementation context. The features of implementation contexts around which alignment is likely to be most crucial, are the:

- **Policy context**: the existing landscape of policies and how this creates areas of inconsistency, complementarity and scope for mutual reinforcement.
- **Needs and priorities**, goals and motivations of organisations and individuals that are implementation actors, or otherwise part of the implementation landscape, and the social norms, cultures and preferences.
- **Implementation infrastructure**: financial and human resources, and the infrastructure available in the system to support implementation.

> **Alignment between policy content, policy context, needs and priorities, and implementation infrastructure is crucial**

Some misalignment is inevitable and may even be intentional or necessary to achieve the desired change, but where this is the case the approach to implementation needs to reflect this.

Elements of an implementation strategy

Our review emphasised the need to develop and tailor an implementation strategy that responds to the degree and the nature of ambiguity and misalignment. Elements of an implementation strategy can be used by anyone at any time and in any part of the system who is involved in developing and implementing a policy.

We identified seven elements of an implementation strategy (see Table 1). The first two, problem and context analysis and stakeholder engagement, are diagnostic. These help to identify whether the ambiguity is in the why, what or how of policy – or a combination of all three – and where misalignment with implementation context might occur. These are evidence gathering activities but may also operate as interventions that facilitate implementation.

The remaining five elements – resources and capabilities, governance and collaboration mechanisms, types of leadership, approaches to communication and framing, and types of monitoring and evaluation - need to be selected and delivered depending on what was learnt during problem and context analysis.

Elements of an implementation strategy: reinforcing and compensatory

Our analysis suggests that the elements of an implementation strategy can be both mutually reinforcing and compensatory, over time, and that there are direct and indirect interactions between them. This implies that it is possible to make up ground or compensate later for elements that were not employed, or not used sufficiently, at earlier stages.

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Elements of an implementation strategy are mutually reinforcing in the sense that they may reinforce and add value to each other. For example, problem and context analysis may inform who needs to be involved in stakeholder engagement; stakeholder engagement may create supportive conditions that make distributed leadership and governance more effective.

They are compensatory in that gaps in the earlier use of elements may be addressed by their subsequent deployment. For example, the absence of stakeholder engagement in early policy formulation may be compensated for by building it in later implementation planning.

The implication is that the elements of an implementation strategy need to be selected, reviewed and adjusted based on what has come before, and how well it has worked. All actors in the implementation process can deploy them and, through this, compensate for any gaps in early policy making activity.

Table 1. Elements of an implementation strategy

	What it involves	Why use it
Problem & context analysis	Gathering and using evidence to understand the problem, the range of potential interventions, and the landscape the policy is seeking to affect.	To highlight and address ambiguity about the 'why', 'what' and 'how' of a policy. And to build a picture of the implementation context: to what degree is the policy aligned with existing policies, and with the values, beliefs and priorities of key stakeholders?
Stakeholder engagement	Using structured interactions with stakeholders to: Support problem and context analysis (i.e. gather information on the problem and / or the potential solution; and on the implementation context) Build support / address opposition to the proposed change	Stakeholder analysis can be used both to diagnose where misalignment and ambiguity will impact implementation, and to address these by working with stakeholders to overcome the causes of this misalignment and ambiguity.
Identifying resources & capability	Careful consideration of who needs to do what in order to achieve implementation, and using this to assess whether those actors have the resources, capacity and capability to undertake the work needed.	Early consideration of required capabilities and skills to undertake implementation, in both government and implementing agencies is key. How loosely or tightly the delivery plan is defined and held centrally will vary depending on both the policy and the implementation context.
Governance & collaboration	Based on an assessment of the implementation context, designing or leveraging the mechanisms needed to ensure oversight and accountability, and facilitate collaboration where this is needed.	Robust governance arrangements are vital for successful implementation. Where ambiguity and misalignment are 'low', governance and oversight can be less intensive. Where one or both are 'high', or where the policy requires collaborative or 'joined-up' delivery, governance needs to be carefully designed to support implementation and to address the challenges that will be faced.

	What it involves	Why use it
Leadership	Using context analysis and stakeholder engagement to identify the type of leadership required – e.g. formal or informal, central or distributed.	Leadership is a determinant of implementation success. The type and form of leadership required for successful implementation depends on the ambiguity of the policy, and its alignment with the implementation context.
Communication & framing	Packaging and presenting information about the policy, such as the policy's problem statement, objectives, underlying theories and causal mechanisms, supporting evidence, strategies for delivery and implementation, and implementation requirements and responsibilities.	Communication and framing are important enabling factors in policy implementation and may be needed to address ambiguity about 'why' and 'what', to convey a clear rationale and supporting evidence for the policy solution. Effective communication can mitigate negative perceptions of a policy, and lack of buy-in, acceptance and support for policy implementation.
Monitoring & evaluation	Determining what data is needed to support learning and accountability, and ensuring that there is capacity and capability to support data collection and analysis.	Monitoring, review and evaluation processes are recommended as a strategy to support, strengthen, and drive policy implementation. Where the 'how' of policy cannot be or has not been established, or something 'new' or complex is being introduced, monitoring and evaluation should be directed to supporting iterative experimentation, learning and adaptation, and not just to monitoring the progress of implementation.

Wellbeing of Future Generations Act

The Well-being of Future Generations Act (Wales) 2015 defines five ways of working that help to deliver on the aims of the legislation – long term, prevention, integration, collaboration and involvement.

The findings of this review align with these ways of working, and the elements of an effective strategy can support their enactment:

- Thinking long term, in an integrated way, and seeking to identify and address the underlying causes of the issues being address (i.e. prevention), are all a part of how the problem is understood and framed (i.e. problem and context analysis).
- The centrality of stakeholder engagement to effective implementation echoes the focus on collaboration (i.e. working across organisational boundaries) and involvement of people and communities.
- The degree to which a policy is aligned or misaligned with its implementation context can be framed as an articulation of the degree to which the design of a policy reflects an integrated approach.

In short, implementation minded policy making can complement and support the ways of working that underpin the aims of the Well-being of Future Generations Act.

Conclusion and recommendations

Effective implementation involves being 'implementation-minded' throughout all stages of policy design and delivery. It can inform policy development and it can (and in some cases will have to) be done in the roll-out and delivery of a policy.

Being 'implementation-minded' involves using evidence, intelligence and insight to identify ambiguity in the 'what', 'why' and 'how' of policy, and misalignment with the policy context, needs and priorities, and implementation infrastructure. This then allows for the deployment of an implementation strategy that reflects and responds to the anticipated interaction between the policy and the context it is seeking to influence or change.

'Implementation-minded' policy making and delivery can help to address 'bad policy' and 'bad execution' - and may even help to anticipate and mitigate 'bad luck'.

Find out more

For the full report see: Baan, AM *et al.* (2023). ***Implementation-minded policy making***

About the Wales Centre for Public Policy

Here at the Centre, we collaborate with leading policy experts to provide ministers, the civil service and Welsh public services with high quality evidence and independent advice that helps them to improve policy decisions and outcomes.

Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, Welsh Government, and Cardiff University, the Centre is based at Cardiff University and a member of the UK's What Works Network.

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