How to Succeed
in the Senior Civil Service

Part 5 - How to Design a Successful Policy

5.1 Introduction

Research and experience teaches that there are good and bad (effective and ineffective) ways of developing policies in central government. This part of *How to Succeed ...* describes the six key strands that are typically found within the policy design process - and discusses how they might best be deployed by policy teams.

It is based on the recently completed research – ['Mind the Gap: Social Policymaking in the UK in theory and practice'](#) by Dr Laura Hilger (citation at the end of this part) – which offered a new, two-part model of how social policy design happens in practice in Whitehall, with corresponding case studies to illustrate the model in practice.

The full research showed six common 'strands' of activity – best seen as building blocks – each with its own unique purpose, activities and outcomes. These building blocks manifest and combine together in unique ways to suit each design process and its needs. While there is a preferred, and ideal, order that these strands can happen, in practice, the way they play out is incredibly varied and unique to each situation, its needs and constraints.

This part of *How to Succeed* showcases the key learnings of the research in terms of how to design successful policy, taking readers through the model from an applied perspective.

- It first discusses why following a flexible but defined process matters for success.
- Then it presents the six strands of activity – seen as building blocks – that make up the typical design process.

- This is followed by a look at the ways in which these manifest in practice and the factors that determine or shape this, followed by a small set of case studies which showcase this model in practice and how effective process shapes success.
- It concludes by offering advice on how to utilise this model in practice and the value could offer those who do (based on feedback by civil servants).

5.2 Why following a process matters for success

Research showed consistent patterns in the traits of processes that are more vs less successful. Processes that contained all six strands of activity in a rational order were most likely to be successful, whilst those which skipped steps or condensed them too significantly were more prone to failure.

That does not mean there is a single, set process that achieves success, but that successful processes often follow a similar order and are more comprehensive than less successful processes. Some (ahem, most) processes are naturally constrained by time and resources, but doing the best you can with these building blocks within those constraints is important in the pursuit of good outcomes.

(A quick clarification: success, in this context, can be a successful process and/or outcome. The main goal of policymaking is, of course, a successful policy outcome. However, research found that successful process is most likely to lead to successful outcomes, so getting process right matters to ultimate outcomes.)

5.3 Strands of activity that most often make up the design process

So what are the building blocks? There are six common strands of activity that policy design entails, each with its own purpose, activities and outcomes:

1. Establish,
2. Diagnose,
3. Understand,
4. Identify,
5. Refine
6. Agree.

The six strands are summarised below, but can also be found as a one-page, printable reference on page 173 of the original research and in the Annex to this article.

1. Establish & Governance

An initial step in any process, once a decision has been taken to take action, is to establish or confirm the team that will be responsible for the policy design process (the policy design team), any necessary oversight groups (like advisors, a board or task group) and agree the governance process. This reflects a point of initial set-up, but in reality, this activity will run in parallel across the entire design process, with ongoing governance and oversight activity, and changes to the team as needed.

- Key questions: Who will be involved in the design process and who is ultimately responsible? What governance process(es) will be used throughout?
- Activities that *could* be involved (like a menu, not a requirement): confirming the design team (which may be a new team or confirming a standing team to take responsibility) and responsible owner; identifying and establishing any oversight bodies; and agreeing the governance process.
- Outcomes: By the end of this strand of activity, there will be a confirmed, initial team, any advisory group, and an agreed governance process.
- Key people: This stage should be led by the person responsible for the design process, with oversight or support from a more senior civil servant, where needed.

2. Diagnose & Scope:

A crucial early step in any design process needs to be identifying the goal: namely, diagnosing the problem and specifying a desired outcome.

Many people diagnose a problem, but fail to establish a clear goal or outcome and fail to more precisely locate the problem within the wider system, which often leads to poorer process and outcomes due to a lack of focus and poor understanding of factors that will influence outcomes and challenge success. Defining both problem *and* outcome (the overarching goal, what you want to achieve as a result), as well as its place within the wider system, will go a long way to helping the process remained focussed and efficient.

Once this is established, there is then need to clarify what the scope of the design process is, i.e. setting out a plan of attack to take through the design process, including awareness of potentially budget (or lack thereof) and process that will need to be followed.

- Key questions: What problem are you trying to solve? How does this fit within the wider system and who all is responsible for resolving it (noting many problems fall across the remit of multiple departments)? What does success look like? How will you go about tackling this design problem, what steps and with who involved?
- Activities: This strand of activity is often very discussion-based, talking within the Policy Design Team and with other relevant stakeholders to establish the problem, its position and challenges, and intended outcome. These conversations will involve the Policy Design Team, but may involve stakeholders from other departments, the Treasury, the minister, and potential wider stakeholders who will have an opinion on the problem, its challenges and the goal. Best practice should include early inclusion of key stakeholders outside the minister and immediate team, taking into account delivery teams, external stakeholders, etc., whilst also taking early consideration of any relevant duties. Where a legislative solution is expected, a key activity at this stage is also to bid for legislative time.
- Outcomes: At this point, an internal working paper outlining the problem, goals and plan is often useful to get buy-in and approval from e.g. the minister, board, etc. At this point, it is ideal to have established the likely funding source and, where a legislative solution is needed, a key outcome would be having legislative time booked.
- Key people: The Policy Design Team are the key players at this point, but should be involving other stakeholders, as broadly as possible, to get as many perspectives on the problem at possible to accurately diagnose the problem, challenges and goals. In addition to the Policy Design Team, involvement should include the minister(s) and advisors, other teams (such as operations, digital, legal, communications, commercial, or service

delivery, etc. as relevant), other departments (where relevant), and relevant external stakeholders who can provide an alternate perspective. Many of these people are often excluded at this early point, but this often comes at the detriment of later solutions; early involvement is key to good policymaking.

3. Understand & Inform:

A crucial, also relatively early, step is to understand the evidence base for the problem and potential solutions. This strand is about utilising the available evidence to help define the problem and better understand who it affects, how, the incidence and any current issues. This evidence can be used to further define and refine the problem, whilst also making the case for change and identifying relevant evidence of solutions, such as from other countries, previous policy, etc. This could be new or existing evidence, including evaluations, and should include consideration of current or past policy that may be relevant. This can also serve to further highlight and reinforce the problem's place within the wider system and the influencing factors.

- Key questions: What is already known about the problem and is it robust? What gaps existing in the knowledge and how can these be filled? What can be learned from past research, policy and/or evaluation? What do stakeholders (internal or external) say about the problem?
- Activities: This is predominantly an information gathering phase. How the Policy Design Team goes about this depends entirely on the resources available to them. Activities that are common and should be considered include reviews of existing evidence (such as compiling evidence packs), reviewing any past or present policies and their evaluations, engaging other departments for their evidence and insights, and stakeholder and/or user engagement exercises. Other activities to consider including commissioning new evidence and/or completing a Call for Evidence, to solicit as much evidence as possible and fill any gaps in the existing evidence.
- Outcomes: The outcome of this stage is typically another (or expanded) internal paper which sets out the evidence of the problem and case for change, which is used to get ministerial and advisor input and approval. A crucial part of this should be the inclusion of a systems map, which demonstrates where the problem fits within the wider system and the key influences on the problem (positive and negative); this would not include any intended solutions. At this point, the team should have a clear understanding of the problem, why change is needed, what change should look like and the key levers and barriers to change. In some cases, it may be relevant to start early thinking or planning for any expected Green or White paper.
- Key people: This is again primarily led by the Policy Design Team with approval from any advisors and the minister(ial team). This may (and should) also include input from other departments, other internal stakeholders and relevant external stakeholders and users.

4. Identify Options:

This strand is about identifying the possible options for solutions. It starts with a long list of all possible solutions (or as many as possible) which are then shortened into a short-list of the strongest possibilities using agreed assessment criteria and modelling. It is also important at this point to review this list based on the understanding of the problem within the wider system,

taking into account factors that may inhibit the success of some solutions, support others, and identify potential unintended consequences of different solutions.

It is also important at this point – which is often not done – to consider policy evaluation and duties. It is vital that you now establish evaluation criteria (such as outcome measures) so as to make sure that you are designing something that can feasibly be evaluated. You do not want to design something that cannot be evaluated, or choose success measures that cannot be evaluated within the time/budget available, or at all. Similarly, there is need to consider any relevant duties at this stage to design with these in mind, rather than retroactively forcing them.

- Key questions: What criteria will be used to judge and refine the potential solutions, including consideration of the wider system influence? What are all / as many as possible solutions to the problem and are they innovative enough? Based on the agreed criteria, which of these are the strongest, most promising options? Which might be some unintended consequences of each (positive or negative)?
- Activities: This strand should establish assessment criteria and modelling approaches, with consideration for the system influences, duties and evaluation criteria; discussions to work up long list of options; assessment of these options using criteria, modelling and necessary scoping conversations for feasibility; use assessment process to reduce to short list to take forward. In some cases, this may include early efforts of legislation drafting to help map out different options legislatively to assess their viability.
- Outcomes: The final product at this point is an internal options paper which can be shown to the minister(ial team) and any advisors for input and approval. This paper will present the final short list of options (usually a small number, such as different investment levels or different solutions) and make the case for each. Some solutions may fall away at this point but, unless earlier engagement was not done properly, no new options should be added by those reviewing (their preferences and ideas having already been solicited at an earlier stage).
- Key people: Alongside the Policy Development Team and ministers/advisors, there may also be value in engaging various other internal stakeholders at this stage to support idea generation and assessment, for example operations, digital, legal, communications, commercial, or service delivery teams whose expertise is vital to this process. Where a legislation solution is needed, early input from relevant parliamentary committees could also be valuable for their early input.

5. Refine, Negotiate & Iterate:

This strand is the stage in which the shortlisted options go through (usually multiple rounds of) testing and iterating to reach the final solution or proposed solution options. This typically involves engagement with internal and external stakeholders in order to achieve necessary internal support for the options before they are finalised.

- Key questions: What do stakeholders and delivery partners think of options and their viability? What adjustments need to be made to ensure internal approval?
- Activities: This strand is predominantly oriented towards discussions with internal stakeholders so as to gather feedback on options and negotiate these options to get their buy-in, including involvement of the minister(s) and relevant advisors; testing with external stakeholders and/or users; and further modelling of options. Depending on the situation, this may also involve further legislation drafting and/or pre-legislative scrutiny,

work on a policy statement and/or Green/White Paper, and budget negotiations and business cases.

- Outcomes: By the end of this phase, there should be an option paper laying out the recommended option(s) for the minister(s) to make a final decision. If needed, there may also be a draft White Paper and/or business case for parallel approval.
- Key people: Alongside the Policy Design Team, ministers and advisors, this strand should include as many people as is necessary and viable in the time available, cutting across relevant internal stakeholders and engagement of any external stakeholders or users, to test ideas and refine ideas with all relevant parties.

6. Agree, Plan & Approve:

This final strand is about making and actioning the final decisions, including gathering any necessary approvals. Senior decision-makers select and approve the preferred option, with wider sign-off from other relevant stakeholders as needed (write round). In parallel, policymakers might also prepare for delivery by developing delivery plans, drafting key materials and obtaining final funding approval as needed.

- Key questions: Is there approval from key stakeholders? Which option is the agreed solution? What is the delivery plan for this option?
- Activities: This strand follows its own process to get to the final approval and sign off, namely: creation of final policy pack and duties paperwork; policy pack sent to decision-makers for their final selection before obtaining other approvals, if needed; completing the write round process to obtain necessary internal sign-off before ministerial sign off, from e.g. other departments or input from Parliamentary business managers; and the policy pack (with internal approvals) returns to decision-makers for final sign-off and, if needed, direction. Depending on the situation, this stage might also include final draft legislation, final funding paperwork and drafting any relevant policy or programme documentation, such as a programme prospectus.
- Outcomes: The result of this strand involved a final policy decision being made and formally signed off (including funding approval and associated paperwork), and ready to be implemented or taken into the Parliamentary process (where it, notably, will undergo further revisions and its own approval process).
- Key people: The strand should involve the Policy Design Team and relevant departmental ministers, whilst also engage colleagues in other departments for their approval. For parliamentary solutions, it could – for example – include Parliamentary Counsel to draft a bill, business managers to approve legislation from a Parliamentary perspective, or the Attorney General for more complex legal issues.

In Short ...

These strands are intentionally presented in their ideal and most intuitive order. Dr Hilger's research identified the preferred order of events when ministers, time and other resources allow and the one that was most successful in what it produced. However, in reality, the design process rarely happens in such an ordered and clean way.

5.4 Ways to combine the strands in practice

In reality, the design process rarely happens in such an ordered and clean way, and success does come in many forms; there are other ways design process can manifest and still be successful. The most important thing in any process is that each of these strands of activity is done at broadly the right time and to a certain degree of thoroughness.

When it comes to order, generally the first three strands (*Establish, Diagnose and Understand*) should happen first, and the last three after that (*Identify, Refine and Agree*). This is because these first three are vital to establish the design process purpose, practice and evidence base, before moving into solution and testing. This means there is a solid foundation for the process established before further design work commences, ensuring a more efficient and focussed process and – typically – ones most likely to be successful. *Agree* will always be the final step, where the policy gets final approval, but good policy prevents not getting agreement and having to backtrack in the process to get it right.

Even with that flexibility, there is often not time to run each of these strands sequentially – even where there is desire to do so. Indeed, often there is even an argument against doing so. This leads to huge, necessary and acceptable variations in order that, rather than creating failure, can be supportive to success.

The most common variations are strands merging, running in parallel or being staggered. This is most common for strands two and three, three and four, and/or four and five. For example, you could run strands two and three together in parallel when activities from strand three (*Understand & Inform*) are needed to first refine the problem definition in strand two (*Diagnose & Scope*), and then used to make the case for change (the main purpose of strand three).

Alternately, combining strands three and four (*Identify Options*), allows you to use evidence to think through and shortlist potential solutions in parallel, or strands four and five (*Refine, Negotiate & Iterate*), where idea generation and testing happened more iteratively and simultaneously. These types of adjustments often lead to a more iterative and agile style of policymaking.

One tool employed by some designers was intentional strand repetition, namely designing each element of a policy or programme in order, finishing one before moving on to the next. This meant all or most strands were intentionally repeated at each step. This was a way to develop e.g. a new programme at pace and was used to launch the foundations of a new programme whilst still developing the latter elements: a clever way to adjust the process to do it well when time was tight.

Really, almost anything goes in terms of order, the most important factors for success is that each of these strands of activity happen at broadly the right time (earlier vs later) and happening to at least a minimum degree. That means it's important to watch out for two common design process decisions that are most indicative of less successful or fully failing outcomes: curtailed strands and lost strands.

Strands are curtailed strands when it is processed so minimally or superficially as to not provide the necessary value; it is completed too quickly. Curtailing a strand too much means it core purpose and contribution is not realised, leading to issues further in the process. This can happen to any strand, each with unique consequences:

- Curtailing strand two (*Diagnose & Scope*) means the problem and intended outcome will not be properly or thoroughly defined, which may affect the success of the final design (or result of needing to redo the process, in some cases);
- Curtailing strand three (*Understand & Inform*) may lead to poorly informed designs, due to lack of sufficient information;
- Curtailing strand four (*Identify Options*) can lead to a rushed list of options or rushed shortlisting process, which affects the quality of the proposed solutions; and
- Curtailing strand five (*Refine, Negotiate & Iterate*) can mean incomplete testing and subsequent impacts on design success (where internal and/or external stakeholders were not allowed to properly input on designs and their prospective feasibility or impact) and/or difficulties in approvals (where internal stakeholders were not properly consulted and negotiated with).

The same applies for lost strands, namely when strands go completely missing and are not done in any form. This tends to happen when process is particularly rushed, and is most likely to lead to unsuccessful process and outcome.

Poor process may also result in unintended repetition of strands. This often happens after all or most of the design process is complete. The team then has to go back to an earlier step (if not the beginning) to fix errors. Such situations are often the result of an overly rushed or curtailed process:

- Where e.g. the problem was not correctly or precisely designed, leading to solutions that would not deliver the on the correct objective;
- Where e.g. the evidence was not robustly leveraged and understanding of past policy, evaluation and evidence was missed, resulting in incomplete, incorrect or unviable options; or
- Where e.g. ministers or other internal stakeholders were not consulted during the processes, resulting in solutions that are not viable or will not receive approval during write round.

All such situations mean policymakers must backtrack and fix the errors in order to get to a final, approved design that is fit for purpose.

Though sometimes it can't be avoided, be mindful of the need to carry out each process as thoroughly as possible in the time available. Time is understandably tight in many situations, but reflect on what can be done in the time available and how the process can be adjusted (e.g. by staggering activities or running them in parallel) to create more time and enable greater space to be complete. As one person in the research commented, try to avoid doing a stage 'in five minutes in [your] head'. Avoiding these pitfalls or curtailing and exclusion means you are more likely to be successful, regardless of how topsy-turvy you process may look from the outside.
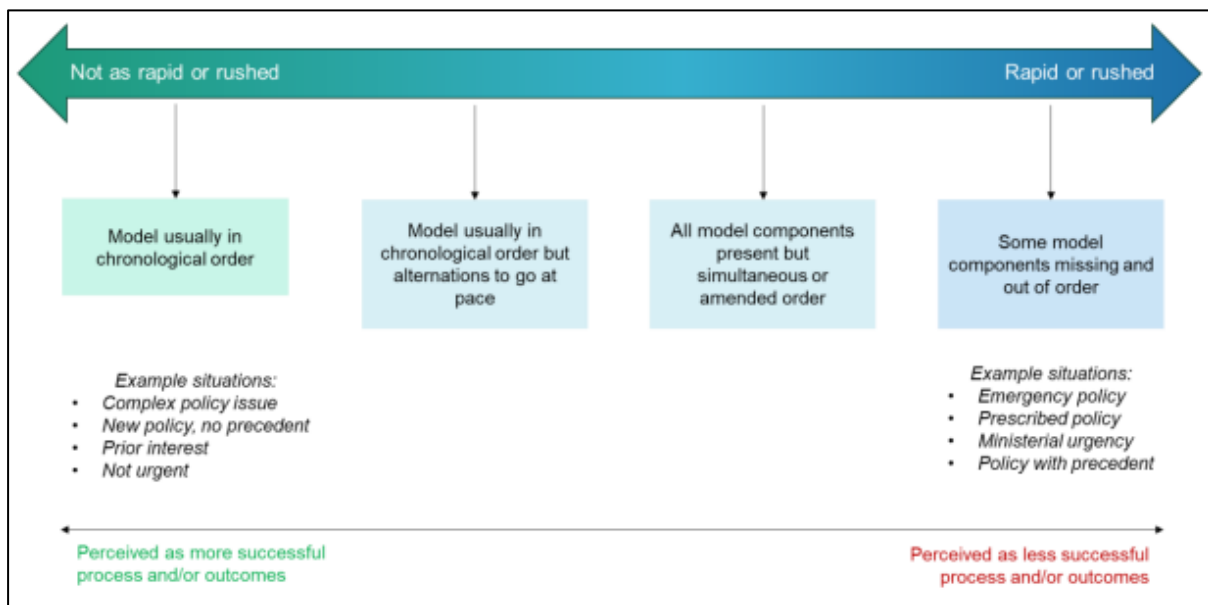

5.5 Factors that will influence the order of play and, ultimately, success or failure

So what influences this process and how it plays out? There are a variety of factors, but the biggest influence on the process is going to be the level of urgency, which is based on a range of factors. These are:

- If something is a genuine emergency

- Working towards a specific deadline, e.g. a ministerial speech
- Whether something is a manifesto commitment or a political imperative
- Whether something needs to be developed from scratch vs redeveloped at scale vs minimally adjusted
- Linked to this, the likely complexity of the design and design process
- Ministerial style

Altogether these produce a 'spectrum of urgency' that all design process exist within. This degree of overall urgency plays a influence on how these strands play out in practice and, from this, their degree of success of failure. The spectrum shown below shows a range from most to least rapid processes, and shows – as it progresses – how the process changes as a result.

The least rapid processes, on the left, are those which are able to take more time to complete the process and, as a result, often complete all six strands to a minimal level of quality. In contrast, the most rapid processes, at the right, resulted from a range of possible scenarios and were most likely to be heavily curtailed in their process, with strands shortened, overlapping, or missing to work at pace.

However, this was not black and white: there were degrees of rapidity, with associated adjustments to the process as a result. Some moderately rapid processes still completed all six strands, just in an adjusted order – with elements often overlapping to complete the process at pace. Thus, policy processes were truly a product of circumstance. How policy was designed was the result of the conditions it was being designed in and, from this, the overall pace required.

Pathways through design have a direct correlation with the degree of perceived success in policymaking. Those on the left of the spectrum, which are more prone to following ideal process and completed all the strands, are often the most successful examples or seen as being the most effective processes (as perceived by policymakers). Where not all strands are present or rushed, such as those on the right of the spectrum, policymakers often perceive them as being less successful or unsuccessful, in either process and/or outcome.

Overall, while the most successful processes tend to proceed chronologically through the ideal process, most processes that contained all six strands to a reasonable standard were perceived as being successful to a least a minimal degree. However, it is not black and white: there are degrees of rapidity and adjustments to the process that still enable success. Some moderately rapid processes still completed all six strands, just in an adjusted order – with elements often overlapping to complete the process at pace – and were seen as being successful.

This is not to say that urgency cannot produce good outcomes or does not have benefits of its own – there are plenty of examples of this, some of them included below – but that urgency often produces design process that is so wonky and/or curtailed that is will often miss key steps that are vital to success. That is why ensuring that the process is complete, even when urgent, is a vital consideration when developing policy.

5.6 A Note about Ministers

The elephant in the room here is, of course, the role ministers play in defining this process – for better and worse. It is crucial to recognise that ministers have their own style, knowledge and preferences around policy design process and that this plays a significant role in how process plays out.

One aspect of this is that ministers are often not experienced in policymaking process and do not understand how policy gets made – leaving them with unrealistic expectations of the process, its needs and the time required. A key consequence of this is false urgency: while some situations are genuinely urgent or have a real reason to be rushed, in many cases impatient ministers ask for policies to be done more quickly than genuinely necessary, creating a false sense of urgency, with a rapid and/or curtailed process as a result.

Similarly, there are many instances where this lack of knowledge in how good policy design happens translates into a poor understanding of process, where ministers expect policymakers to immediately jump to solutions without recognising the need for the preliminary work to refine the problem and understand the evidence. This disconnect creates situations of either not allowing enough time (not realising why it was needed) or pressuring policymakers to immediately have ideas (and being frustrated when they could or would not do this), both of which create tension and negatively impact design process and prospects of success.
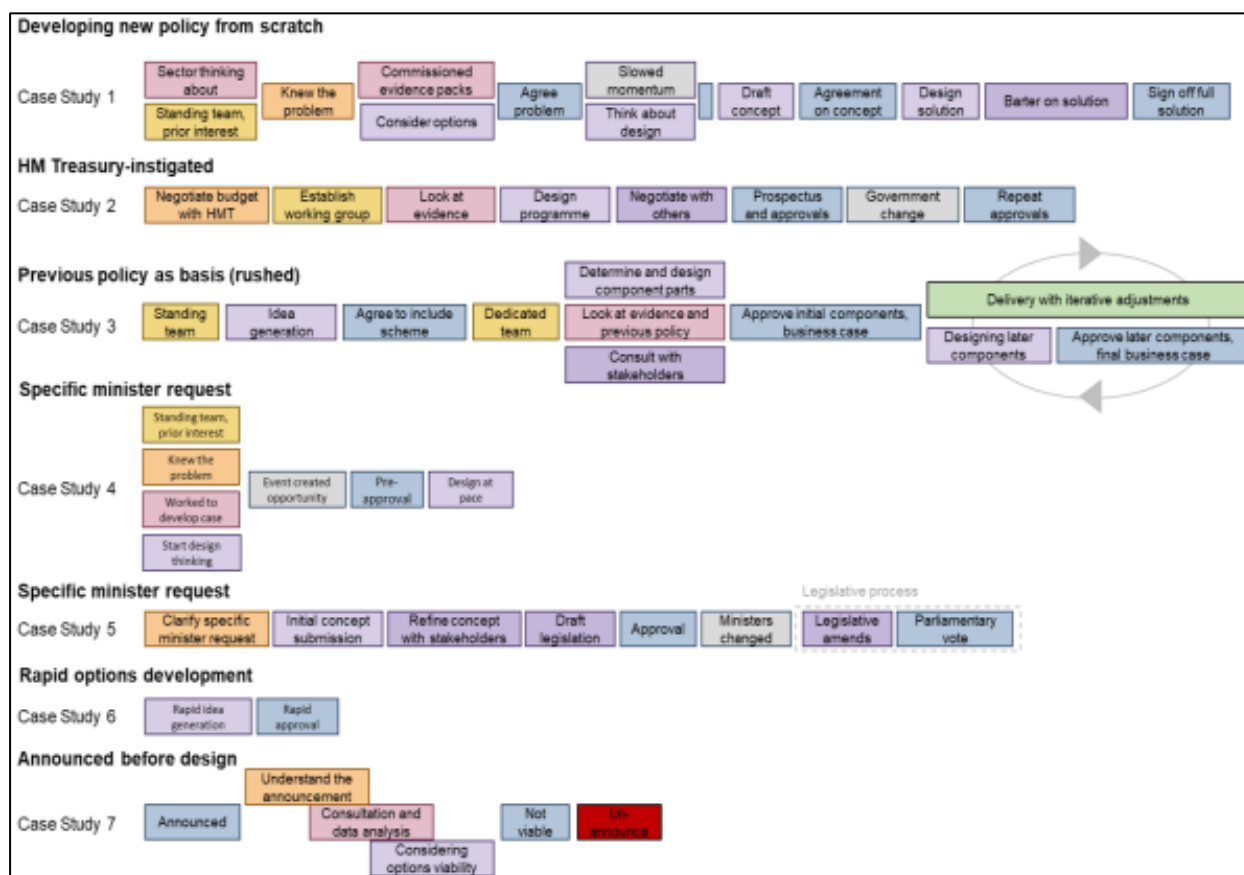
Further, and often linked to this, ministers may come with a specific idea in mind, and will not be swayed from this even where there is evidence to demonstrate it is a bad idea. They just wanted that specific thing done and policymakers, as good civil servants, are expected to see it through, regardless of their own opinions or the evidence. This is exacerbated by recent ministerial churn, where a revolving door of new ministers each want to be seen as effective, so move quickly to show progress and announce plans, often at the expense of rigorous and robust design process. Worse, is that many ministers are not open to challenge, making it harder for civil servants to steer them in a better direction, further compromising success.

However, ministerial style can also be a positive thing. There are instances of very open-minded, innovation-oriented ministers creating a positive policymaking environment, one that allows for good process, innovation and challenge. Such ministers listen to the civil servants, and are willing to be guided by their expertise to ensure a successful design. It ultimately comes down to the unique knowledge and preferences of each minister – but as one person put it, in cases with

difficult ministers, sometimes success can just be delivering what the minister wants, regardless of the outcome.

5.7 Examples of building blocks in action

So what does the reality of successful and unsuccessful process look like? Let's look at some examples of this model when applied. The below graphic shows a number of examples of recently-developed policies and how their processes worked in practice. Some are more idealised, others adapted, and others heavily curtailed – each with a unique outcome.

There is not enough space to go into each of these in detail (you can read these case studies and others in detail in the appendix to the original research), but each of these showcases a different situation, process and outcome that demonstrates how these strands of activity (as building blocks) can and should be adopted and adapted in each unique design situation.

Case Study 1 – Developing a new policy from scratch – Devolution Strategy (DLUHC)

In this case, there had been longstanding interest in devolution for some time, both within and outside of government. There was an initial push for a devolution strategy in 2020, at which time the standing team in MHCLG* already knew the problem and objective, and were able to leverage their knowledge and the existing evidence base to quickly start developing evidence packs and a White Paper, with No10 and the Policy Unit heavily involved.

After the leading minister left, interest waned. Fast forward to 2021, and plans for a Levelling Up White Paper, which would feature a section on devolution. The DLUHC* team were able to revive all their old evidence base and past preparatory work for use in the new White Paper. The steps were heavily truncated, with their chapter drafted in about two days, setting out a devolution strategy. Cabinet signed off the chapter, agreeing to develop a devolution framework and agree multiple new devolution deals over the course of 2022.

They then had to develop the framework, which took several months of speaking to other departments about which policies they were prepared to devolve. Using their directory of people from 2020, they were able to quickly negotiate a long list of things available for devolution. The framework was ultimately signed off by the Secretary of State, with initial sign-off of each element by the respective department's Secretary of State. They published the strategy and framework, then announced several areas to negotiate deals with, and opened negotiations to others interested.

At the time of the research, it was the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC), which has since returned to its previous name of the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG).This applies to all case study references to DLUHC.

Case Study 2 – HMT-instigated policy - Levelling Up Parks Fund (DLUHC)

The Levelling Up Parks Fund was a £9 million fund, which resulted from interest from No10 to encourage people to go outside more. DLUHC had previously run a parks-related fund, so the Treasury approached DLUHC to negotiate an amount for use for a fund.

The team first formed a cross-government working group and, from there, worked up advice for their ministers, acknowledging from evidence that the previous fund should not be replicated. They produced advice on how to build a new fund, and sought innovative alternatives in the design, resulting in some atypical design features. The junior minister referred the proposal up to the Secretary of State for approval, which it received. They then went into business case approval, to get funding signed off. This needed multiple conversations with senior stakeholders and decision-makers to persuade them on the more abnormal elements of the design.

The whole process took about four months, longer than expected for something quite simple. Once the business case was complete, they began working on the policy prospectus. Once completed, they went through the process of write round, using the proposal and prospectus. Most of those who needed to sign off had already been part of the process, which made write round much smoother. During this process, the Prime Minister resigned. They had new ministers come in who needed to agree to the fund, so had to re-do write round with the new ministers. They got through it and had the fund fully signed off in less than a year.

Case Study 3 – Rushed policy design with precedent – Employment programme (DWP)

During Covid, there was a package of employment schemes being developed. There had been a previous unemployment scheme with this particular, at-risk group, which had been well evaluated and had shown good effects for people's employment prospects. This caught the eye of the Chancellor at that time, which led to several initial meetings between the Secretary of State in the DWP and the Chancellor to agree on a package that would include funding for this

scheme. After multiple initial costings to get to an agreed scale, the scheme got sign off by the Chancellor, needing to be ready to launch within five months, once furlough was finished.

Even with a quick timeline, the team were very focussed on doing the design process properly, including proper governance processes, full business cases and pulling together a dedicated team to work through the design at pace. They first started to work out the component parts of the programme that would need design, using the previous scheme as a base. They did rapid design to adapt the approach on that basis, trying to follow the evidence base as far as possible and engaging with about 300 organisations for their input.

They then developed the business case for the scheme overall, which was agreed with the Treasury, and got Cabinet Office approval for the grant structure. Final approvals were done for each component part: they wrote a submission for each part of the scheme, then took them to DWP and Treasury ministers for discussion, asking for them to make decisions on aspects of the scheme but providing evidence-based recommendations of what they should do.

Once they had decisions on the preliminary components, they were able to start building it. They spoke to the delivery team to work out how best to turn each idea into something that would run. They launched the first parts of the programme once designed, then continued designing and launching the remainder as they went, with each part going through the same approvals process. This created a policy-delivery loop whereby they continually worked with the delivery team to deliver it, adjusting elements as needed to refine and finesse the design in real-time, i.e. when things were not working as planned.

Case Study 4 – Ministerial request (non-legislative) – Park Tennis Court Programme (DCMS)

A standing team in DCMS already knew there was a problem: up to 45% of tennis courts in parks were not fit for purpose and it was impacting people's participation rates and their ability to participate in sport. The team had been working with the Lawn Tennis Association (LTA) for multiple years on the issue. They had a map of where the problem courts were and a strong evidence base as to why intervening in those courts would be a valuable piece of the Levelling Up agenda, but there were challenges around funding and limited support for programmes like these from a government perspective.

Then Emma Raducanu won the US Open! This created a significant political opportunity, as ministers, the media and others were interested in showing support for tennis and particularly inclusivity and diversity in tennis. This supportive environment led to an agreement from No10 and the Treasury to invest £21 million in renovating and improving park tennis courts.

Once funding was agreed they went through the process to get the initiative designed and operational. They first needed to identify with who and how they were going to deliver the initiative. It was a UK-wide initiative, so they also had to work through devolution arrangements. The LTA was a GB-wide organisation with the remit of being the tennis authority across England, Scotland, and Wales; they quickly identified them as a delivery partner and worked with them to get the process built and delivered. They then had to work on the commercial-finance side of the initiative to understand the risks associated with the policy and its delivery. This tied into decisions on assurance and governance process for the initiative, and LTA as the delivery partner. This meant developing a monitoring and evaluation process to report back on the

impact of the initiative. They got the final plans agreed and, at the time of interview, were just getting the money 'out the door' and had plans to get 'spades in the ground' imminently

Case Study 5 – Ministerial request (legislative) – Service reconfiguration policy (confidential department)

A department had to change the process for service reconfiguration. Through a series of meetings, it became apparent the Secretary of State did not like the process, as he was consulted too late. Having listened to him, the lead clarified how he thought the Secretary of State wanted it to work, which the Secretary confirmed and asked them to action. He essentially wanted to be able to intervene in the process as early as possible.

They then had to start thinking about it in legislative terms, as it would need a legislative solution. They initially wrote a broad submission, done in close partnership with ministers and lawyers. They then worked with their delivery partner colleagues to explain what he wanted done and registered their concerns. They ran a parallel process with think tanks and representative organisations, to gather their views. There was absolutely no support for the proposed change, but as it had been proposed by the Secretary of State, they had to work together to find the best solution.

They ended up with a solution whereby the minister would have the power to intervene earlier if they chose, but not making it a formal requirement of the process; thus, being flexible to the needs and preferences of each minister. At this point, there was a change in government and they got completely new ministers. They needed the new ministers to decide whether to proceed, which they ultimately did. It was then taken for approvals. At the time of writing, the legislation had been drafted, but the Parliamentary process had not commenced.

Case Study 6 – Rapid options development – Confidential policy (Home Office)

A standing team got a request from No10 to respond to a report that was going to come out. No10 wanted to be able to respond to the report by announcing policy responses quite quickly, within a few days. By the time the team received the request, they had two days to deliver options. Considering the time needed for reviews and approvals, that gave them one afternoon to write something and start the clearance process. They 'scrambled around' talking to other teams and asking if they had anything on their books that could be used for this, things they wanted to do but had not gotten around to. This produced a few options, including one that their boss come up with five minutes before submitting the documents. This meant they were putting advice up to the Secretary of State that they didn't know were good ideas or not. In the advice, they explicitly stated they did not know if these were good ideas or not, just that they were things they could do. The ideas did not go into the final proposal and announcement, as the Home Secretary instead proposed to do a programme of work to consider the problem and options once this report had come out, which No10 accepted.

Case Study 7 – Policy announced before design – Confidential policy (DLUHC)

A policy statement was published and a team identified to work on it. What was announced was high level, so the team's job was to do the detailed policy work on how to deliver the headline policy that was announced. The first step was making sure they understood what had been announced and what led to that position, basically getting up to speed on the policy. They then moved into planning. They did an initial consultation with local authorities, other departments and on-the-ground stakeholders, used to identify what information they would able to get. They analysed the results of the consultation and realised the stakeholders had misunderstood what was announced, so had to have conversations to clarify the policy intention and get everyone on the same page.

In parallel, there was a data analysis workstream, looking at the data to see how what would apply, and modelling impacts and various options. Following this, they began to gather all the information and identify options. They started by looking at some of the ways the policy might work. They also engaged regulators and stakeholders who hold their own data that could support the process. Together this began to raise key issues about what they would be needed to deliver the policy, demonstrating what the issues were and showing that all options came with high risk. They ultimately spoke to their senior decision-makers and made the decision to un-announce what had been announced.

In Short ...

Together, these examples – and numerous others – offer an example of the high degree of flexibility inherent in the design process and this model.

5.8 The Key Lesson

While there are common and vital components, **flexibility** is key to adapting each process to its unique needs.

While consideration of these six strands, what you do with them and when they happen is vital to success, do not feel constrained by the 'ideal' if and where it does not work for you. Ultimately, this is about doing the best you can, and being as considered and thorough as possible, within the unique constraints of each process. Considering your process, how it will play out and how will you ensure you are as comprehensive as possible with the time and other resources you have is the most important factor for your success. While the order matters, completing all the strands of activity well and engaging key stakeholders early for their input are the most important factors for success.

5.9 Conclusion

The approach outlined here is evidence-based and offers a tangible path to designing successful policies, based on real examples from Whitehall civil servants. It enables civil servants involved in these processes to adjust the building blocks to suit their needs and, so long as the process is complete, will still have a strong chance at success.

When asked for feedback on the above approach, civil servants recommended the preparation of a 'strands on a page' checklist for practical use. This was thought to ensure as complete a process as possible and, where elements are eliminated, this is done consciously and with purpose, rather

than without consideration or thought. It also offers a useful resource for those in positions of authority to specify how they intended to work and why, clarifying this process where needed and offering an evidence-based approach. This checklist is attached, below, or can be downloaded as Table 9 on of the original research.

As a final note, this is a working model, meaning that it can be updated as policies and practice change. Please email Dr Hilger (laura@policybridge.co.uk) to let her have feedback on this model and the resources referenced - and to share with her any practical applications and examples of success. These will help her further develop this model.

Dr Hilger is also happy to discuss this approach further with anyone interested and to present the concept to interested departmental teams and organisations. Please do not hesitate to contact Dr Hilger for these purposes by email to laura@policybridge.co.uk .

Citation: Hilger, Laura (2024) 'Mind the Gap: social policymaking in the UK in theory and practice'. Bath: University of Bath.

Table 9 Template prescriptive checklist for effective policy design practice

	1) Establish & Governance	2) Diagnose & Scope	3) Understand & Inform	4) Identify options	5) Refine, Negotiate & Iterate	6) Agree, Plan & Approve
Phase Purpose	Confirm initial policy design team (PDT) - including policy, as well as analysts, other departments, digital/ delivery, etc. Confirm advisors, board, taskforce. Agree governance process.	Aim to diagnose problem: clearly define problem & objective, as well as intended outcome(s). Based on this, decide if solution legislation or will need budget (potential amount & source), then scope design requirement / work plan.	Use new / existing evidence & policy to better understand the, e.g. who it affects, incidence, current issues, etc. Use process to identify gaps in evidence, and fill where possible. Evidence is used to build case for policy change & in some cases, further refine problem definition.	Develop long list of possible solutions, then use agreed assessment criteria to refine this to a short list or initial concept to test further (in next phase).	Engage stakeholders to test options (e.g. with users, sector bodies, delivery teams) & negotiation design (e.g. with other departments). Use this to refine & iterate option(s) to get final recommendation(s).	Agree preferred option & get final signed off from relevant stakeholders. Simultaneously, prepare for delivery by developing delivery plan, drafting key materials & obtaining funding approval as needed.
Key questions	❑ Who will be involved? ❑ Who is ultimately responsible? ❑ What is the governance process?	❑ What problem trying to solve? Is there demand for it? What is within dept remit? ❑ How fits within wider system & strategy? ❑ What is known about problem? What do key partners think? Which outcome(s) intending to achieve? What will be success metrics? ❑ What does success look like? What is reasonable in timeframe? ❑ What money is available? Where from? ❑ Will legislation be needed? What type?	❑ What known about problem? How does this fit within wider system? ❑ What evidence exists? Is evidence robust? What can learn from previous policy & evaluation? ❑ What do stakeholders and users say about problem? What ideas do they have?	❑ What are the assessment criteria to assess options against goal? ❑ What are all the possible ways to address problem? Have you been innovative enough in thinking? ❑ Of these, which are the most promising options? ❑ What assumptions are being made about context? ❑ What unintended consequences?	❑ What do stakeholders & delivery partners think of options & their viability? ❑ What adjustments need to be made to ensure internal approval?	❑ Which option is the agreed solution? ❑ Is there approval from key stakeholders? ❑ What is the delivery plan for this option?
Menu of activities / actions	Should involve : ❑ Confirm initial design team (PDT) members - *Note: could be new or existing team, and may revisit this as process progresses to address needs or churn* ❑ Identify (special) advisors & establish board or task force, if/as needed ❑ Agree governance plan	Should involve: ❑ Discussions to define problem (incl. issue tree) & identify challenges ❑ Discussion with minister ❑ Discussions with other relevant individuals e.g. other departments, stakeholders, Cabinet Office, Treasury ❑ Early consideration of Duties e.g. PSED ❑ Early engagement of stakeholders, delivery team & users (build co-creation relationships or collaborating community) ❑ (If leg) Bid for legislative time Could also involve (as relevant): ❑ List initial solutions ideas ❑ Initial, light review of policy or evidence Ongoing governance activity	Should involve: ❑ Review existing evidence & available data, incl. evaluations for lessons ❑ Engagement of other departments for evidence - data, research & evaluation ❑ Review existing/past policy ❑ Stakeholder engagement and/or user research (including hypothetical) ❑ Creation of a systems map or TOC Could also involve (as relevant): ❑ Review international solutions ❑ Consult with public, call for evidence ❑ Commission new evidence or research ❑ Root & branch review Ongoing governance activity	Should involve: ❑ Establish assessment criteria ❑ Discussion and use of evidence to work up long list ❑ Testing to refine to short list (modelling, options appraisal e.g. cost/benefit analysis, policy tests) ❑ Consideration of Duties, e. PSED ❑ Consideration of M&E for short list, including TOCs & logic models ❑ (If leg) Initial legislation drafting Could also involve (as relevant): ❑ Ministerial input & preferences ❑ Further evidence review Ongoing governance activity	Should involve: ❑ Internal discussions to gather feedback on options, incl. delivery ❑ Stakeholder & user testing, public consultation ❑ Consideration of Duties, e.g. PSED ❑ Consider policy tests, question work ❑ Plan for M&E for final options, including TOCs & logic models ❑ (If leg) Pre-legislative scrutiny ❑ (If leg) Finalise draft legislation ❑ (If funding) Negotiation budget Could also involve (as relevant): ❑ Further options testing ❑ Ministerial input & preferences Ongoing governance activity	Should involve: ❑ Write round to necessary departments for their approval, incl. HMT & No.10 if needed ❑ (If leg) Finalise draft legislation ❑ Completion of PSED ❑ Policy pack to ministerial / other senior stakeholders for final selection, direction & sign off ❑ Assess & finalise delivery plans Would also involve (as relevant): ❑ Draft funding paperwork ❑ Drafting of key delivery documents Ongoing governance activity
Outcomes	❑ Established team &, if needed, advisors/board/ task force ❑ Have agreed governance plan	❑ Internal paper clarifying problem for ministerial / advisor input & approval, and workplan ❑ Have planned funding source; (if HMT led) Confirmed budget & conditions ❑ (Where relevant) Have legislative time	❑ Internal paper summarising issue & evidence for ministerial / advisor input & approval, including any initial ideas ❑ (few) Systems map ❑ (if needed) early thinking on Green or White Paper	❑ Internal options paper for minister / advisor input & approval ❑ (for funding) Strategic Outline Case ❑ (if needed) draft Green or White Paper, or Policy Statement ❑ (if needed) Legislative instructions	❑ Finalise options paper for approval process ❑ (for funding) Outline Business Case ❑ (if needed) draft Green or White Paper, or Policy Statement ❑ (if needed) Legislative instructions	❑ Minister approval or direction Where relevant: ❑ Full Business Case ❑ Policy Prospectus ❑ Finalise Green/White Paper(s) ❑ Start legislative process (after)
Key People & Example Resources	Policy lead, potentially support from (Deputy) Director	• Core: PDT, ministers/advisors • Key to involve: operations, digital, legal, commercial, comms or service delivery, other departments • Potential others: external stakeholders	• Core: PDT, ministers/advisors • Key to involve: ops/delivery, digital, legal, commercial &/or comms, other depts, internal / external stakeholders & users • Potential others: external researchers	• Core: PDT, ministers/ advisors • Key to involve: operations, digital, legal, commercial, comms or service delivery, other depts • Potential others: PBL committee, parliamentary counsel	• Core: PDT, ministers/ advisors • Key to involve: operations, digital, legal, commercial, comms or service delivery, other departments, stakeholders & users • Potential others: draft bill committee, PBL committee, parliamentary counsel	• Core: PDT, ministers/ advisors • Key to involve: other depts, operations, digital, legal, commercial or service delivery, other departments, HMT, No10 • Potential others: PBL committee
		Systems Thinking Toolkit; Complexity Toolkit; Futures Toolkit; Open Policymaking Toolkit	*Systems Thinking Toolkit; Complexity Toolkit; Futures Toolkit; Open Policymaking Toolkit*	*Green Book, Magenta Book; Policy tests; Business case & HMT approvals guidance; Guide to Legislation; Futures Toolkit; Open Policymaking Toolkit*	*Green Book, Magenta Book; Policy tests; Business case & HMT approvals guidance; Guide to Legislation; Futures Toolkit; Open Policymaking Toolkit*	*Business case & HMT approvals guidance; Guide to Legislation*