



# Understanding policy making



“ One of the key things about being a minister is being able to listen and to learn, to synthesise all of those different elements, and keep focused on the thing that you are delivering and the change that you’re hoping to make. ”

**Chloe Smith**

Secretary of state for work and pensions (2022)

## What actually happens during policy making?

Policy making is a complicated process involving many different influencers and implementers. Ministers play a key role in making policy decisions, but also have a useful ability to shape the advice and input that informs those decisions.

Some policy proposals will involve a long-term process of development, building an evidence base, testing ideas with stakeholders and refining policy design. This may be particularly true of projects inherited from your predecessor. In other cases, ministers may feel compelled to rapidly develop a policy to respond to a high-profile crisis. Whether policy is a long-standing aim or a reaction to an emerging problem, there are key ways you can approach the policy making process that will help you get the best advice and produce well-designed policy.

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## 1. Know what problem you want to solve

Ministers may often feel the need to take action, particularly when reacting to a crisis. But it is important to have a strong idea of the problem you want to solve and the kind of policy response you consider to be necessary. Without this it will be difficult to achieve the outcome you have in mind – former ministers have told us that the civil service works best when given a clear sense of direction.

Co-ordinating with other relevant departments may help to define an issue and think about possible policy approaches. Former social care minister Caroline Dinenage told us how she found it useful to meet often with her counterparts in MHCLG (now DLUHC) because “at various times we did have different views as to the scale of the problem and how to solve it”. This may also help to understand how a proposed policy may interact with other policies and fit with the government’s overall strategy.



**Remind yourself, what is the problem we are trying to solve here? Is it just a good idea because we like it... or could we solve that problem another way that doesn't involve legislation and is actually easier and cheaper for everyone?**



**Jim Knight**

Minister of state for employment and welfare reform (2009–10)

## 2. Encourage honest and challenging advice from officials

As a minister your political view and priorities will inevitably influence the advice that officials give to you. But former ministers have told us how they have been able to create a culture in their departments to support robust policy making, including by encouraging officials to challenge any preconceptions. One way to do this is through submissions: be clear to your private office about the kinds of evidence you want to see in favour of and against policy options. Equally, be confident in challenging officials’ advice in return, rather than receiving it passively. This might involve asking officials about the assumptions underlying their analysis.



**I think you want a system where civil servants are confident enough to bring you ideas, to challenge ministers, to be very honest with them and then ultimately to get on and accept their advice.**



**David Laws**

Minister of state for schools (2012–15)

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### 3. Talk to the right people – and ask the right questions

Ministers often find it helpful to bring a range of views, including from more junior policy or operational officials, into the policy making process. George Eustice, the former environment secretary, suggested to us that ministers should “get the officials up, all of them, from HEO and SEO ranks [more junior policy officials] right up to the deputy directors, and really talk through the detail of things and ask the right questions”. Posing challenging and probing questions in the early stages of policy development can be an effective way of preventing problems from arising later on in the process.

While officials within your department will provide useful insight, it is also possible to bring in expertise from outside the permanent civil service. Special advisers can be a valuable way of doing this, by providing expertise in a particular field relevant to your policy area. They can also offer a more political stance on a policy area, that can be useful for guiding decisions where evidence may be ambiguous.

Each policy area will also have a range of stakeholders with different perspectives. Take advantage of your convening power to bring together those interested in your policy area, including from the private and third sectors, to make the most of their input and work through any issues.



**I always liked to have the stakeholders and the specialists in because they would tell you things that were very difficult to get any other way.**



**Lord Freud**

Minister of state for welfare reform (2010–16)

### 4. Think about delivery from the start

Making a decision is just the beginning – a policy then has to be implemented. Former ministers have told us how, by asking questions about delivery early on, they have shaped the way officials think about how feasible a policy is during its development. Being realistic about the constraints on delivery can encourage civil servants to consider the trade-offs involved in a policy.

Once a decision has been made, secretaries of state may not have the time to closely follow a policy through its life cycle, but other ministers in the department may have greater capacity to do so. Stephen Timms suggested that he and other junior ministers “did the spadework”

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of engaging with stakeholders to ensure successful implementation. Many policies will involve some degree of co-ordination with organisations outside government, so junior ministers should make the most of their ability to build relationships with key delivery partners, including arm's-length bodies. This might involve discussing the barriers to successful delivery and modifying the implementation plan, or even the policy design, accordingly.



**I remember [a junior minister] saying to me once: 'Oh, I thought we just did policy.' I was like: 'No, that's the beginning of your responsibilities. We're here to change things on the ground for people.**



**Justine Greening**

Secretary of state for education (2016–18)

## Questions to ask yourself

- Are you getting enough/the right kind of advice to help you make decisions, from both inside and outside the civil service?
- What kind of evidence do you want to see for and against policy options?
- Are your officials aware of your policy priorities? Are your priorities reflected in the advice you are given?
- What stakeholders and outside expertise can you bring in during policy development?

## Find out more

If you would like to discuss any of the above in more detail, or talk about potential training we can offer on this topic, please get in touch via [ifgacademy@instituteforgovernment.org.uk](mailto:ifgacademy@instituteforgovernment.org.uk)

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