



Using targets



Set targets and monitor precisely,
with no wiggle room.



Lord Heseltine
Deputy prime minister
(1995–97)

What can targets do?

Targets have been used extensively by central government policy makers over recent decades, across a range of policy areas from the NHS to net zero. Setting a target can be a useful signal of your political priorities – it is a clear way to communicate your aims to those responsible for delivery. Targets can also increase accountability between government, front-line staff and the public.

However, it is important to use targets carefully and strategically. Poorly designed targets may lead to an excessive bureaucratic burden to report progress. Front-line staff might prioritise 'easy wins' rather than deeper improvements, or be discouraged from exercising their professional judgment. There are some key things you can do to set and monitor targets effectively.

1. Be clear on what you're trying to achieve – and if setting targets is the best way to do that

Well-designed targets are clear about the problem they seek to address, and about what a successful outcome looks like. Achieving this for a particular public service, for example, will involve asking your officials to brief you about trends in demand, the factors that affect the service's performance and the experiences of service users. You should be

realistic about what targets can accomplish: the evidence suggests that while they can be a powerful tool for raising minimum standards, they are not effective at driving excellence.

It also involves considering possible knock-on effects elsewhere – progress against targets only gives a partial picture of how a service may be performing. For instance, former care and support minister Norman Lamb suggested that targets around physical health meant “discussion in the [Department of Health] was dominated by that and no real thought or time was given to mental health”. As a minister, you can bring together policy teams from across your department – and teams from other relevant departments – to try to better understand the potential implications of what your target might mean for other policy areas.

It may well be that these wider effects counteract the performance improvements in the area subject to targets. Ask your officials what alternative tools can be used to achieve your goals – such as building relationships with delivery organisations to ensure your priorities are aligned, or helping share best practice between service providers.



I think you have to be very clear on your goals. I think you have to be able to set out what your focus is going to be and what success is going to look like. You need to be able to track progress.



Chloe Smith

Secretary of state for work and pensions (2022)

2. Work with those who will be responsible for meeting targets

A pressure to meet targets, especially if they are unrealistic, can damage front-line workers' morale and service performance. Former health minister Steve Brine reflected that a good target should be ambitious, but also achievable – otherwise “you're immediately losing before you've started”. Working with those engaged in delivery will also allow you to better understand the mechanism by which targets may work and unintended consequences they may have. This includes finding out what resources might be needed to make your targets a reality – such as investing in IT systems to enable data recording, or improving analytical capacity to interpret the information collected.

Equally, engaging with front-line delivery teams can help to understand what staff's expectations are of their service. These might differ from your expectations, or those of the public. Identifying a mismatch between your priorities and those of service providers allows you to work out the root of an issue and explore how a target might address this incongruity.

3. Don't be afraid to amend – or scrap – targets if needed

While it's possible to predict some of the perverse incentives that can be caused by targets, public services are complex systems. It can be difficult to anticipate how a target might change front-line workers' behaviour. Be prepared to work with all relevant teams, including your private office, and policy and analysis officials, to review the progress towards your targets and how the broader system has changed.

In some cases, it may be appropriate to drop a target entirely. In others, it may be possible to redesign a target to address 'gaming' of the system. Former education minister David Laws noted how the 'Progress 8' GCSE benchmark was developed because previous targets had unintentionally led to schools focusing on certain pupils more than others.

4. Give your targets enough attention

Targets are ultimately political signals – but signals can fade over time if they are not regularly maintained. Setting several targets can allow you to drive change in a range of areas, though it can also limit the attention you are able to give to each.

Be clear with your private office about the importance of your targets – they can communicate this to the rest of your department and ensure that your briefings and meetings reflect your priorities. Publishing performance against targets is also a useful way to keep up momentum: ask officials working on the relevant policy area to regularly explain how delivery is going.

“ We had progress charts on the wall, I went to see [officials working on prison capacity] twice a day, I had meetings with them regularly. And that sent a signal to the department that this was really important, that ministers were taking it seriously. ”

Sam Gyimah
Parliamentary under-secretary of state for
childcare and education (2014–16)

Questions to ask yourself

- What outcome do you want from a target?
- What knock-on effects might a potential target have?
- What alternatives are there to using targets? Are these more appropriate for achieving your objectives?
- How often do you want to be updated on progress towards targets?

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

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