



Implementation-minded policy making

Introduction

Policies often fail to achieve the intended outcomes. While much has been written about this, and how to avoid it, knowledge and insight is somewhat siloed.

We undertook 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. Here we summarise

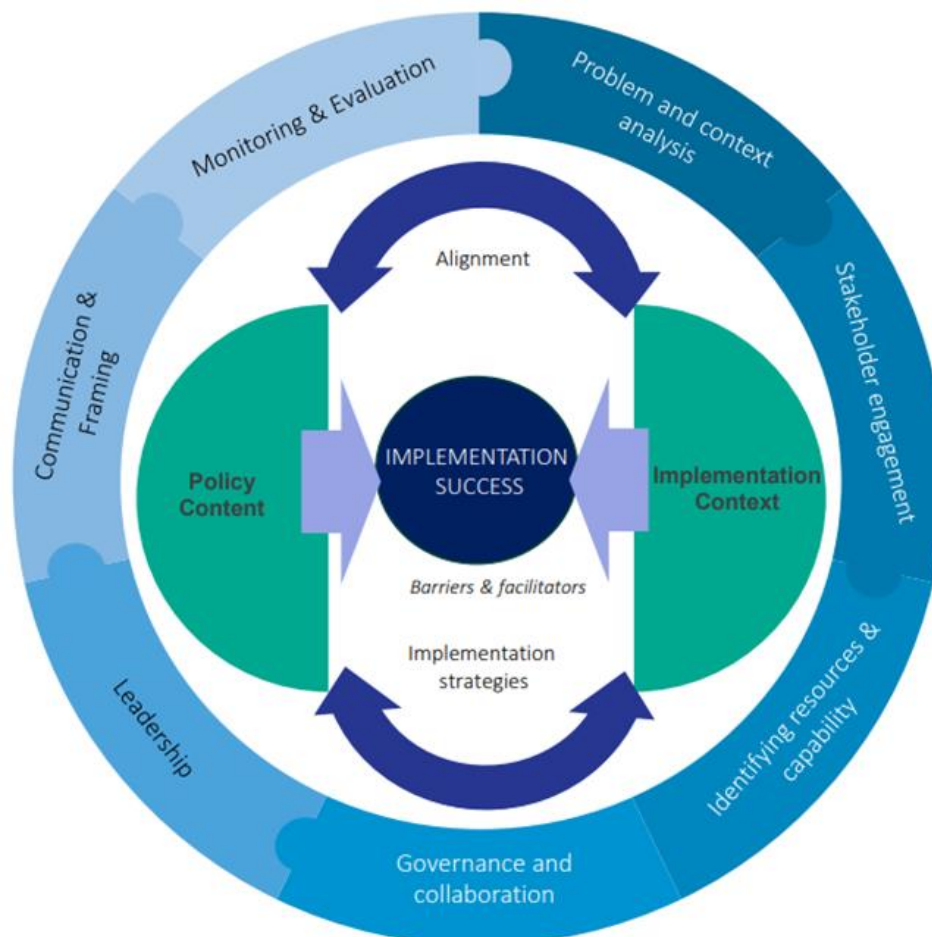
the key findings. The full report, including links to tools and resources, can be found [here](#).

Framing policy implementation

To synthesise such a diverse literature, we developed a framework that draws on and adapts a number of existing models from the literature reviewed.

Under our framework, 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)

This interaction is mediated by:

- implementation strategies – the specific measures that seek to embed or deliver the policy, often part of policy content but further elaborated as part of its delivery (e.g. training, funding, guidance etc.); and
- implementation support approaches – the activities that we have identified through our review that can help:
 - o ensure alignment of the policy content with the implementation context;
 - o mitigate potential or actual barriers that may arise from a lack of alignment; and
 - o leverage potential facilitators of implementation.

We used this model as the organising structure of our analysis; the key findings of which are presented below.

Policy ambiguity and misalignment with implementation context

Policy failure 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 undermine the policy).

Little can be done about 'bad luck' but to avoid failure, our review points to the need to be explicit about the ambiguity of policy content and the alignment with the implementation context. And use this to develop and deploy implementation support approaches that seek to address this.

Reducing ambiguity

Three types of ambiguity 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

Alignment of policy intent and content with the implementation context is of central importance to implementation. 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.
- 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 of policy content with the implementation context is of central importance

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.

Implementation support approaches

Our review emphasised the need to develop and tailor implementation support approaches that respond to the degree and the nature of ambiguity and misalignment.

These are different from the specific implementation strategies – guidance documents, funding, training etc. – which are the mechanisms through which the policy is operationalised.

By contrast, ‘implementation support approaches’ provide a means of diagnosing and / or addressing ambiguity and misalignment; and therefore understanding whether the strategies are sufficient to achieve successful implementation.

We identified seven implementation support approaches:

Problem and context analysis

During the formulation of policy, problem and context analysis can reduce ambiguity of purpose (the ‘why’ and ‘what’) and help to assess the degree of alignment. This approach supports the use of existing evidence on the problem, the range of potential interventions, and the landscape the policy is seeking to affect to develop an optimal policy solution.

Problem and context analysis can also be used alongside stakeholder engagement to increase alignment, by identifying where support and resistance are likely to come from – or are coming from - and the strengths and assets in systems.

Stakeholder engagement

Stakeholder engagement can be used to gather intelligence on the degree of alignment (e.g. Do people agree with what is being done? Do they have the time and resources needed to deliver?), or to reduce ambiguity (e.g. helping to answer ‘what’ needs to be done to address a problem, and ‘how’ this can be done).

It might also be an essential part of the implementation process by supporting alignment with the priorities and motivations of those involved; or by helping to identify where misalignment with existing policies is creating friction or inconsistency.

Identifying resources and capability

A common misstep in the development of policy is a lack of focus on the detail of delivery. Implementation planning involves purposeful, inclusive and comprehensive work to develop an implementation plan – work which might be led by government or by intermediary bodies. How loosely or tightly the implementation plan is defined and held centrally will vary depending on both the policy and the implementation context.

Governance and collaboration

Implementation requires coordinated work at multiple levels – it is a team sport – and, therefore, the approach to governance needs to be modulated to reflect ambiguity and alignment, and the complexity of the issue / policy at hand. 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.

Leadership

The types and forms of leadership needed for successful implementation will depend on the ambiguity of the policy, and its alignment with the implementation context. Context analysis and stakeholder engagement will help to identify the need for formal and informal, or central and distributed, leadership.

Communication and framing

Communication and framing are often needed after initial policy design. Framing strategies 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 and evaluation

The extent to which different types of ambiguity can be resolved will vary. For example, it may not be possible, or useful, to set out specific approaches to implementation (the 'how') in areas where the way forward cannot yet be specified and where it is necessary to leave more space for local variation or innovation. 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.

Implementation support approaches: reinforcing and compensatory

Our analysis suggests that implementation support approaches 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 approaches that were not employed, or not used sufficiently, at earlier stages.

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Implementation support approaches are mutually reinforcing in the sense that strategies 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 strategies and approaches may be addressed by subsequent deployment of the right implementation support approaches. 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 implementation support approaches 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.

Conclusion and recommendations

Implementation-minded policy making involves using evidence, intelligence and insight to build a picture of the 'problem in context'. This then allows for the deployment of implementation strategies and support approaches that reflect and respond to the anticipated interaction between the policy and the context it is seeking to influence or change.

Effective implementation involves addressing ambiguity in the 'what', 'why' and 'how' of policy and assessing and improving the degree of alignment between policy and multi-level implementing contexts.

Those involved in policy development and delivery need to consider the different types of evidence required for successful implementation of a policy. The nature of the problem, the range of potential solutions, and the beliefs, values and capacity of individuals and organisations involved or affected are all relevant, and can help to determine which of the implementation support approaches will best enable effective delivery.

Implementation thinking is relevant at all stages. It can inform policy development to identify the appropriate mechanisms for change; to specify when stakeholder engagement is needed, and the purpose it serves (e.g. to learn or test ideas versus addressing misunderstanding and building consensus); and role and type of leadership, governance, accountability and oversight needed.

And this work can (and in some cases will have to) be done in the roll-out and delivery of a policy, to reduce policy ambiguity and increase

alignment within multi-level implementing contexts.

What is crucial is that policy makers engage with what is required for effective implementation,

that they establish and support others in creating the conditions and infrastructure for effective implementation.

Find out more

For the full report see: <https://www.wcpp.org.uk/publication/is-your-policy-going-to-fail-heres-how-you-can-tell-and-what-you-can-do-about-it/>

About the Wales Centre for Public Policy

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