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**Effective Policy Making**

**Workbook Two:**  
**Developing and Analysing the Evidence**  
**Base**

## INTRODUCTION

This workbook is the second in a series of five which seeks to provide a practical overview of the key steps in the policy development process as outlined below:

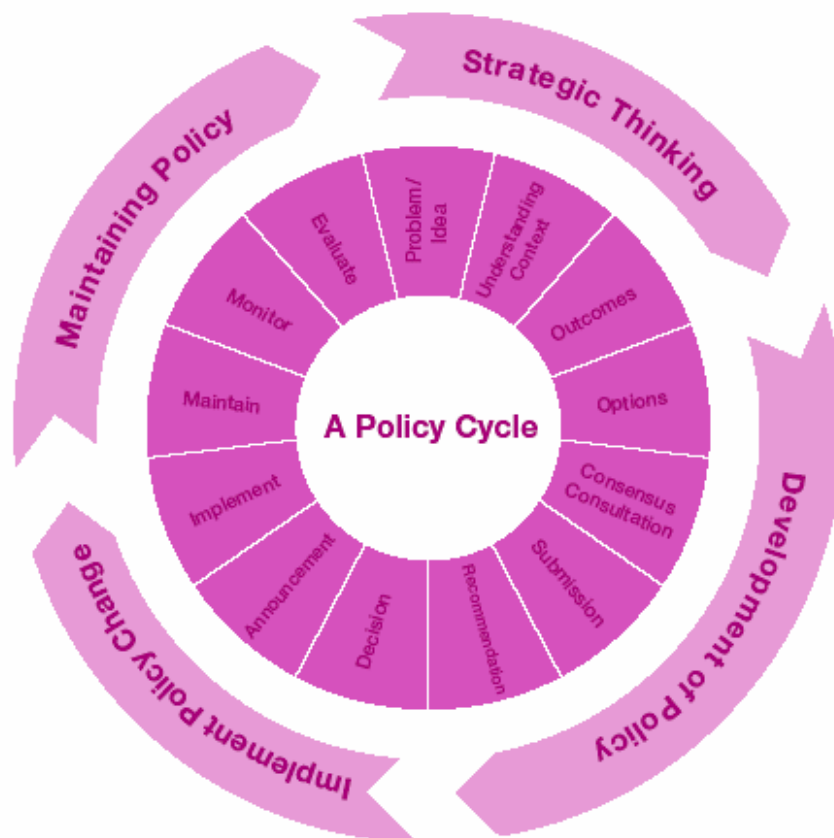
<b>Workbook:</b>	<b>Key Areas Addressed:</b>
<b>1. Justification and Set-Up</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Establishing the Need for Policy Intervention</li> <li>Planning Your Approach and Engaging Stakeholders</li> </ul>
<b>2. Developing and Analysing the Evidence Base</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Gathering the Evidence</li> <li>Analysing the Evidence</li> <li>Presenting the Analytical Report</li> <li>Agreeing the Aims and Objectives</li> </ul>
<b>3. Identifying and appraising Policy Options</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identifying Policy Options</li> <li>Costs, Benefits and Risks</li> <li>Appraising the Options</li> </ul>
<b>4. A Practical Guide to Impact Assessments</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Defining the Aims</li> <li>Screening the Policy</li> <li>Assessing the Impacts</li> <li>Consultation</li> <li>Prioritising the Impacts</li> <li>Agreeing Recommendations and Implementation</li> <li>Decision and Publication of Report on Results of Impact Assessments</li> <li>Monitoring and Evaluation</li> </ul>
<b>5. From Consultation to Announcement</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Formal Consultation Exercise</li> <li>The Submission</li> </ul>

Announcing the Decision

Each workbook seeks to provide practical guidance and draws on existing guidance material and best practice, in particular [A Practical Guide to Policy Making in Northern Ireland](#). The workbooks are intended as an introduction and a reference point for more detailed guidance. They are structured around the key stages of the policy process to enable policy makers to dip into the guidance as appropriate.

In using the workbooks it is important to acknowledge that the policy process is cyclical and continuous as demonstrated in Figure 1 below. Policy makers rarely if ever start with a clean sheet and as we work through the process it is often necessary to consider the other stages. Therefore, it is advisable that before using the workbooks you familiarise yourself with the contents and the key messages of the Practical Guide.

**Figure 1: The Policy Cycle**



### **What is Policy Making?**

Policy making is the process by which the administration translates its vision into actions to achieve desired outcomes. Good policy making is therefore essential if government is to achieve its aims and deliver real change and benefits.

There is no single uniform approach to policy making which can be applied to all areas and all departments. The range of factors and the environment within which policy makers operate can vary considerably. The policy maker may be addressing a regional, local or even international issue. They may need to consider any number of social, economic or environmental factors. There may also be considerable variation in the resource consequences of the policy and the number of groups or individuals which the policy may impact upon. However, there are a number of broad steps or stages which can be applied to most policy areas and these are outlined in this series of workbooks. The key is to tailor the policy process to needs.

**CONTENTS****2.1 GATHERING THE EVIDENCE****2.2 ANALYSING THE EVIDENCE****2.3 PRESENTING THE ANALYTICAL REPORT****2.4 AGREEING THE AIMS AND OBJECTIVES**

## 2.1 Gathering the Evidence

If policy outcomes and public services are to be improved, it is crucial that policy decisions should be based on sound evidence. Evidence is needed, not only to demonstrate the need for intervention, but also to inform the development of options and the identification of a preferred solution.

### **The Role of Departmental Specialists**

To be of value, evidence must be seen to be credible, reliable and objective. In identifying and considering evidence, policy makers should consult with colleagues in analytical services or relevant professional groups within the Northern Ireland Civil Service, for example, statisticians, economists, medical officers, inspectors, scientists, and social researchers. These professionals should know what relevant published statistics are available and be in touch with the latest research evidence and best practice internationally in the relevant policy areas. They can also advise on commissioning new research and generally point policy makers in the right direction. To get effective guidance, policy makers should involve professional colleagues at the start of the policy development process.

### **Sources of Evidence**

Good quality policy making depends on high quality information, derived from a variety of sources: expert knowledge; existing local, national and international research; existing statistics; evaluation of previous policies; and secondary sources, including the internet. On occasion it may be necessary to commission new research, though not before we have identified existing data.

Policy makers also need to take account of the fact that some of the most relevant and valuable information available will come from the front line of service delivery, for example, from customer surveys or from delivery partners highlighting what works. Therefore, stakeholder consultation and engagement of delivery bodies is an essential part of the evidence gathering process.

The key issues the policy maker needs to consider in gathering evidence are:

- (i) What relevant information/research is available on this issue?
- (ii) How has the issue been addressed elsewhere, what works, and what does not?
- (iii) What are the key trends and potential future developments which could impact on this issue?
- (iv) What are the delivery capabilities?

The latter point is very important. Policies which cannot be implemented are of no benefit. It is, therefore, very important at the outset to gain a clear understanding of the delivery capability. In particular it is important to consider the resources and competencies of delivery bodies, the constraints to delivery and the culture and capacity for change within the organisation. Once again, this points to the need to engage with delivery bodies at the earliest stage in the policy process.

## 2.2 Analysing the Evidence

Evidence gathering for its own sake is of little value. Simple statements of data or expert opinion offer little insight if the policy team fails to consider them in the context of the policy. The role of analysis is to add value. Analysis is not about gathering and collating relevant evidence, rather it asks the question ‘what does this mean – what is it telling us?’

There are numerous tools or approaches which can be utilized in analysing evidence, and once again professional advisers or relevant experts can provide direction and assistance. In analysing the evidence there are three key areas to consider, these are:

- (i) the current position and baseline;
- (ii) the relative position; and
- (iii) possible futures.

### **Current Position**

Here the analysis should focus on explaining where we are and how we have come to this position. This stage of the analysis should also consider delivery capabilities with particular reference to available resources and competencies and explain why there is a need for change, for example, developments in technology may allow more innovative and effective solutions.

Information on the current position can also be used to establish a baseline against which we can eventually monitor and evaluate the impact of the policy. However, if the baseline is to be relevant it needs to be up-to-date, as far as possible, at the point we begin implementation. Therefore, it is important that the baseline information is revisited and updated periodically.

**Relative Position**

It is very important to place the issue in a wider context, looking at how it has developed and been addressed elsewhere. By using international comparisons or benchmarking we gain a better understanding of our own performance, for example, how do our rates of disease, educational attainment or economic activity compare with others? We can also learn lessons from other countries or policy areas; how have they addressed the issue, consider what has worked and why, and thereby set expectations for what can be achieved.

**Possible Futures**

Finally, we need to consider how the issue is likely to develop in the future. This is absolutely crucial if the policy is to continue to be relevant in the long-term. There are many techniques such as forecasting and scenario development which can be used to build an objective view of possible futures. Essentially these processes look at the current position and trends and how these may develop. The analysis here should look at a range of possible outcomes and seek to identify potential risks, shocks or uncertainties that may impact on the trends and anticipated future outcomes. This will ensure that the team has the best possible chance of developing a policy or strategy that will not only address current issues, but also remain effective into the future.

### 2.3 Presenting the Analytical Report

The output from this phase should be a document that sets out the findings of the team's research and analysis. The paper should clearly set out what evidence has been considered and what conclusions have been drawn from the analysis. Publishing an evidence base or data set in this way, helps to create a common understanding of the issue and a shared platform among stakeholders for moving forward. The interim analytical report will provide a basis upon which to develop and subsequently evaluate options, it can also help to consolidate thinking on how you may wish to structure any subsequent report or consultation document. Therefore, it is beneficial to invest sufficient time in this stage of the process and to factor that time into the overall project plan.

#### Output

The interim analytical report should also draw on the output from Workbook One and is a useful way of setting out the results of the analysis and the emerging conclusions within an initial story line. For example:

- (i) what is the situation?
- (ii) what are the problems?
- (iii) what is the relative significance or impact of the different problems?
- (iv) what is causing the problems?
- (v) how do we currently tackle the problems?
- (vi) is this working?
- (vii) what can we learn from elsewhere?
- (viii) how is the situation likely to change in the future?

## 2.4 Agreeing the Aims and Objectives

Objectives must be stated so that it is clear what the proposals are intended to achieve. The objectives should be consistent with government policy, departmental or agency objectives, departmental Public Service Agreements (PSAs), and wider macro-economic policy.

In defining the objectives it is also useful to outline associated inputs and indicators to measure progress. Objectives and their associated indicators can be specified on a number of levels as outlined below.

### **Primary Aim(s):**

These are the overall aims of the provision and are usually expressed in quite broad terms. Their purpose is to define the general direction of the policy area and to answer in direct and simple terms the question: *What is it for?* This is essentially the rationale for the policy (see Workbook One) and should include a clear expression of need.

### **Intermediate Objectives:**

These are derived from the Primary Aim(s) and refer to the specific activities of the policy implementation and often have **intermediated** or **activity** indicators attached, such as *'to have sensible drinking guidelines widely accepted'*.

### **Outcomes:**

These refer to the longer-term **impacts** and are usually harder to measure. These are the eventual benefits to society that proposals are intended to achieve. They are also extremely important and attempts should always be made to measure them.

*Example: improvements in health or education.*

**Outputs:**

Sometimes outcomes cannot be directly measured, in which case it will often be appropriate to specify outputs, as intermediate steps along the way. Outputs are the results of activities that can be clearly stated or measured and which relate in some way to the outcomes desired.

*Example: number of patients treated, number of pupils achieving exam results.*

**Targets:**

For each objective moreover, it should be possible to identify a number of targets. Targets can be used to help measure progress in terms of producing outputs, delivering outcomes, and meeting objectives.

*Example: the number of extra treatments or pupil places provided by a certain date.*

Objectives should initially be stated broadly enough so that a wide range of options to meet them can be identified. However, as you work through the policy process they must be developed in more specific detail, including targets that are "**SMART**":

- **S**pecific
- **M**easurable
- **A**chievable
- **R**elevant
- **T**ime-dependent

It is particularly important that objectives are measurable, otherwise it will not be possible to gauge whether or how well they have been achieved. Objectives should not normally be expressed in terms of inputs; however, targets for the process of project implementation should be stated, including for example, milestones for achievement of various stages.

Where there are numerous objectives, or there is a potential conflict between objectives, it is helpful to indicate their relative priority, both to inform option assessment and to assist in post project evaluation.

### **Constraints**

Important constraints upon the proposals should be explained. These may be technical, legal, financial or political in nature, or they may have to do with timing or location.

Sometimes an existing policy commitment may be regarded reasonably as a constraint, but this should not always be taken for granted. Policies may deserve to be reviewed, particularly when a significant time has elapsed since they were decided. This can apply equally to other apparent constraints – they may be reasonable in some cases but should not always be taken at face value.

Objective setting should normally precede option appraisal. However, if circumstances change, or as appraisal reveals more about the options, it may be appropriate to revisit initial objectives and revise them during the course of an appraisal.

## Output

The output for this stage should be an agreement as to the aims and objectives.

The following questions may help to set suitable objectives and targets:

- What are we trying to achieve? What are our objectives? What would constitute a successful outcome or set of outcomes?
- Have similar objectives been set in other contexts that could be adapted?
- Are our objectives consistent with strategic aims and objectives as set out, for example, in the department's PSAs?
- Are our objectives consistent with government's commitment to sustainable development at the local, regional, national and international level?
- Are our objectives defined to reflect outcomes (e.g. improved health, crime reduction or enhanced sustainable economic growth) rather than the outputs (e.g. operations, prosecutions or job placements), which will be the focus of particular projects?
- How might our objectives and outcomes be measured?
- Are our objectives defined in such a way that progress towards meeting them can be monitored?
- What factors are critical to success?
- What SMART targets can we then set? What targets do we need to meet?