SECTION 7: IMPROVING POLICY-MAKING

7.1 Enhancing policy analysis

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7.3 Improving policy presentation

7.1 Enhancing policy analysis

Policy analysis, evaluation and appraisal are closely inter-linked. Policy evaluation is the process of examining a policy while it is in operation or after it has come to an end. It follows naturally from the policy appraisal which is the term normally used for an analysis done before a policy is launched. The techniques are similar. Appraisal helps to improve decision-making by considering whether a proposed policy is likely to be worthwhile and by comparing in advance the different options for putting it into practice. Evaluation enables the decisions taken as a result of the appraisal to be reviewed afterwards with the same rigour in the light of what has actually happened and with the knowledge of any changes in the external environment which may have occurred in the meantime. It is important that policies should be properly analysed and evaluated to ensure that they are achieving their purpose and giving value for money.

Evaluation helps policy managers to achieve their objectives. It can be seen as part of a policy-making cycle which begins with appraisal; leads on through identification of options to decisions; and is then followed by implementation, monitoring and evaluation, back to reappraisal. To the extent that evaluation considers what might have happened if other policies had been adopted, it is merging into reappraisal. Evaluation is to be distinguished from monitoring, that is routine checking of progress against plan, although monitoring will often contribute much useful information and is itself an essential part of the process. Evaluation requires a critical and detached look both at the objectives and how they are being met.

The context for change

Policy evaluation and analysis are not new, but are being given greater emphasis and more systematic attention within the U.K. Government as part of the Financial Management Initiative and the drive to improve Civil Service management and accountability generally. They form one aspect of a broad stream of management changes introduced in recent years.

Implementing change

There are differences in practice among departments concerning responsibility for commissioning and undertaking evaluations – the line manager, a central unit, or some combination of the two, with or without help from outside experts such as consultants. HM Treasury take the lead in co-ordinating the general approach to policy analysis and have issued a detailed Guide for Managers which sets out the basic essentials.

Various strategies have been employed to improve management across government. One approach has been a formal requirement to deliver certain services or activities to a specified standard, e.g. accounts directives from the Treasury or the Cabinet paper rules on policy evaluation). Considerable pressure to improve management has been brought about through the Public Expenditure Survey, and through various central initiatives under the "Financial Management" umbrella. The emphasis on the development of output and performance measurements; and the shift to greater delegation to departments in areas such as financial systems and control, pay and personnel matters are examples of this trend.

Cabinet Office instructions on papers for submission to Cabinet say that all proposed policy changes should "make clear what is to be achieved, by when, and at what cost, and how this achievement is to be measured". Departments are also required, where there are public expenditure implications, to clear these with the Treasury before submitting to Cabinet.

There is little available information about how successfully departments have been applying those instructions or guidance, but the picture seems rather patchy. There are examples of errors in the approach between the policy development and appraisal (e.g. too few options examined, unjustified optimism in determining key assumptions, or failure to take account of behavioural effects).

Some departments have developed extensive systems of policy evaluation but others have made less progress since the guidance was launched five years ago, and the returns in the most recent survey were somewhat disappointing. Evaluation has been very difficult where the appraisal stage was poorly prepared, and clear objectives for policies and profiles of costs and outcome were not constructed at the outset.

There is no requirement for departments to report to a central body such as the Treasury or Cabinet Office, or to Parliament on the evaluation of their policies. Departments may use their departmental reports as a vehicle, but in practice few have chosen to do so.

Recent developments reinforce the importance of policy evaluation work:

- the top-down approach in the Public Expenditure Survey;
- the more strategic relationship between Treasury and departments;
- fundamental reviews of programme expenditure.

The "Top-Down" Survey: In recent years the approach adopted in the Public Expenditure Survey has been to establish an overall base line within which individual programmes are constrained. Against this background, Ministers have to make balanced choices between programmes both at inter-departmental and intra-departmental level. These choices should be informed by thorough analysis of the effectiveness of existing programmes.

The speed with which the centre moves to a more ***strategic relationship*** with departments will to some extent depend on how successful departments are in delivering their policy aims and objectives. This is turn needs the support of a wide range of project and policy appraisals/evaluations, fully covering each department's business.

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury has launched a comprehensive series of ***fundamental reviews*** of programme expenditure. This year they are being undertaken in four departments and, although these are at the strategic level, they will need to be underpinned by relevant project/policy appraisals and evaluations.

In view of the increasing importance of policy analysis, it is clear that further development of techniques and identification of obstacles is desirable if progress is to be made.

Supporting material

(i) "Policy Evaluation – A Guide for Managers", HM Treasury, HMSO 1988, ISBN 0-11-560015-9, £3.50

(ii) "Economic Appraisal in Central Government: A Technical Guide for Government Departments", HM Treasury, HMSO 1991 ISBN 0-11-560034-5, £7.50

7.2 Enhancing policy co-ordination

This entry is based on the functions of the U.K. Cabinet Office, which is not a policy department, but which is instrumental in co-ordinating policy across government through the Cabinet Committee system.

The Cabinet Office serves both Cabinet and the network of Cabinet Committees which jointly consider and endorse government policies. It is a long established system designed to ensure that all policies are carefully examined for possible cross-departmental implications (including public expenditure indications). Committee membership is drawn from a wide range of departments, including all those with a direct interest in the area of policy in question.

Departments with significant policy initiatives are required to clear them through the appropriate Committee. In most cases, this can be done through correspondence. The Minister concerned writes to the Chairman of the appropriate Committee with copies to members and the Cabinet Secretariat. Members respond, giving their views. When all members have either commented or indicated that they are content, the Chairman writes to the originating Minister and signifies the approval of the Committee to the policy, subject to the points made.

Where a subject is of major importance it may be considered at a meeting of the Committee. In this case, the Minister seeking approval circulates a Memorandum to the Committee which is then discussed. The Chairman sums up the discussion, and either signifies the Committee's approval or suggests further work which needs to be done. Subjects of very great importance may need to be decided by Cabinet itself. In all cases, the Secretariat support is provided by the Cabinet Office. There is also a network of official Committees serviced by the Cabinet Office, dealing with the day-to-day cross-departmental co-ordination of policy.

Once policies have been approved, their translation into legislation is also subject to a procedure involving two special Cabinet Committees (the Ministerial Committees on Legislation (LG) and on the Queen's Speeches and Future Legislation (FLG)). Bids for Bills are sought annually from departments and a Legislative Programme is recommended to Cabinet by FLG Committee. Once approval has been given to a Bill, it is drafted and examined by LG Committee before it is introduced into Parliament. LG is not a policy Committee, but ensures that all the necessary policy approvals have been given to the provisions of the Bill as drafted, before agreeing to its introduction.

7.3 Improving policy presentation

Putting over the message of government policy falls primarily into two categories:

- paid publicity (e.g. through advertising campaigns);
- press and information service (responding to the media and supplying them with news and information).

Each department has its own objectives but generally those of its information division will be:

- to create and maintain an informed opinion about the subjects with which each department deals;
- to use all the methods of publicity where suitable to help the department achieve its purpose;
- to help and advise in all matters bearing on relations between the department and its public; and
- to advise the department of the public's reaction to the policies or actions of the department.

Governments have a duty to inform the public concerning the introduction of new legislation, its impact, and what their duties and responsibilities are.

Government decisions fall broadly into two categories – those that require legislation and those that do not. In both instances, a department's information staff have a role to play in the presentation of information. Sometimes, simply reporting and building on newsworthy policy introductions will achieve the desired result but on other occasions paid publicity is necessary to reinforce and get home the message.

Experience in the U.K. Civil Service suggests that it is essential for the information staff to be consulted from the first moment that the policy begins to take shape. They will then be able to comment on the draft announcement, advise on methods of presentation and likely public reaction. It will be important for them to plan well ahead with advertising budgets, selection of media, media availability etc. in good time.

The method of presentation is decided upon once the policy is clear. Depending on the significance of the announcement, this can include a mix of:

- press notice;
- press briefing;
- press conference;
- ministerial interviews;
- ministerial articles;
- photo call;
- press facility to inspect new installation/equipment/project;
- paid publicity campaign (press/radio/TV advertisements, publicity leaflets, point of sale material, exhibitions, videos, advertising gifts and handouts etc.).

Experience suggests that the first presentation of government policy is vital, but in the weeks following the launch of a policy, ill-informed criticism can often begin to affect public attitudes. The information officer must be prepared to suggest follow-up action. This can take many forms. It may be that a journalist can be persuaded to write a well-informed article dealing with the criticism, perhaps after a briefing by the Minister. It might be necessary to issue a correction or the Minister may wish to give a TV or radio news interview to answer critics and to put the record straight. Letters to newspapers are not usually the best method of answering criticism, since they usually provoke further criticism. Articles by Ministers can be a useful way of informing the public, particularly if an article can be published to coincide with the launch of the policy, but it should be used sparingly.

Training for Press Officers or publicity teams is available from the Central Office of Information, whose courses are open to officers from other countries.

Press Officers seek to build good relationships with the media to generate an atmosphere of trust and co-operation, whilst understanding that this is not always possible. Regional outlets are cultivated, as well as national ones.

The Press Office provides an intelligence service to Ministers and the department on what is in the newspapers and broadcast media, and an early warning system of which stories may be forthcoming.

A broad checklist for assessing the strength of a departmental Press Office facility is as follows:

- professional information staff (essential skills – rapport, political finesse, reasoning, ability to work under pressure, creativity);
- accommodation should comprise a studio, where interviews can be recorded, and a separate room for press conferences;
- good, open internal communication channels;
- close proximity to Ministers;
- ready access to departmental information, the administrators and Ministers;
- staff need quickly to develop familiarity with all the national and major regional media outlets (broadcast and press);
- staff need to establish good working relationships with the media, administrators and Ministers;
- comprehensive distribution lists should be established for the national and regional media and the technical press for the issue of press notices;
- staff should provide a 24-hour press office service (normally an allocated press officer would be on call at home overnight and at weekends);
- systems to monitor news output (both broadcast and press) should be established;
- the Press Office should become firmly locked into the workings of the department (e.g. copied in on all policy documents produced by officials and invited to all policy-making meetings);
- clerical staff support team;
- communication system – adequate telephone system, word processing, photocopier, fax machine, stocks of headed note-paper for press releases, facility to receive output from news agency (e.g. Reuters or Associated Press etc.), TV, radio, daily receipt of all national newspapers and, ideally, the means of issuing press notices electronically.