
Address to the International Year of Evaluation 2015 Launch,
Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment
Andrew Kibblewhite - Head of the Policy Profession
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Good evening,

One of the key challenges of DPMC is to work with other departments and Ministers to lift the policy game across government. This has always been implicit in the job description for the CE of DPMC, but recently became a more explicit requirement when the State Services Commissioner asked me to take on the additional role of Head of the Policy Profession.

It is a grand title, an exciting opportunity and something I am very enthusiastic about. The risk with grand titles though is they can quickly become just that – particularly if left to a busy CE to pursue on his or her own. Happily this is not a journey I walk alone. I am supported in my role by a small and dedicated team drawn from a range of agencies.

The programme is imaginatively called the Policy Project and is led by Sally Washington. We're working alongside the policy community to identify and share good practice, so that together we can improve our capability to provide great policy advice, today and for the future.

It goes without saying that great policy advice supports good decision-making. Evaluation is important because it builds the evidence base for great policy advice. Evaluation done well will improve decision making, help government deliver better outcomes for citizens and support a culture of learning, innovation and improvement across government.

It should be a no-brainer that evaluation – or at least an appreciation of evaluation - would be a key tool in every policy advisor's tool-kit. We should be able to cast our eye across the policy sector and be pervasively reassured by examples of good evaluation practice supporting excellent policy advice.

The good news is I can see some. Standing tall above the crowd is the investment approach to managing the welfare liability: quantifying the long term liability to the Crown arising from the beneficiary population; applying policies, measuring their effect and adapting practice to manage the liability down. In my view it is no exaggeration to say this is one of the most innovative pieces of public policy anywhere in the world over the last 5 years.

Also on the positive side of the ledger are the *Better Public Services* results, the 10 key areas of performance that the Government has set targets for and that CEs and Ministers feel a specific accountability for delivering on. I hasten to note that the simple act of specifying a target does not in itself mean evaluation will happen. But it prompts the questions – *what will it take to get the result? Are current policies and interventions working?*

I understand evaluations of the *Early Start* and *Incredible Years* programmes provided valuable insights into the best policy mix. And I know, for example, that Corrections have a long history of systematically evaluating the effectiveness of their rehabilitation programmes at preventing reoffending.

On the other hand I would be gilding the lily if I conveyed the impression that effective use of evaluation was the norm in the policy process. Far too often policy professionals will avoid building evaluation into the project plan, either because they think they don't have the time, they are sceptical of the value evaluation will add, or frankly because they are not nearly clear enough on what the policy is really designed to achieve.

And evaluation done poorly can simply clog up decision making and introduce delays, to the undoubted frustration of Ministers and citizens alike.

In the past, we have been fairly criticised for our lack of systematic policy evaluation in New Zealand. When we do find the time and resource to do it, our evaluation activities are often backwards looking, expensive and disconnected from policy processes. We can and must do better.

I would argue that in today's world, characterised by digitisation, changing demographics and ever increasing complexity, evaluation is more important than ever. We need to strive to understand what works and why, to build a better evidence base and to deploy fit-for-purpose evaluation methods in strategic, agile ways to inform decision making now and in the future.

So what do I mean by 'fit for purpose' evaluation?

- Evaluation that is planned for from the start and embedded in business-as-usual policy design and delivery
- Evaluation that asks the right questions and is timed to provide useful insights at key decision points

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- Evaluation that draws on a wide variety of data and methods to inform not just ex post judgements (Did initiative X achieve its objectives?) but also to provide insights relevant to the development and adaptation of policy as it is implemented (What seems to be working? How should we adapt?).

In many cases, fit for purpose evaluation is done ‘under the radar’ without the fanfare and expense of traditional ‘big bang’ evaluation exercises.

To make the most of evaluation in policy we need to bust some pervasive myths that are holding us back:

Myth 1: *Evaluation can only be done by experts* – I say that evaluative thinking should be seen as a core skill of the policy professional. Evaluation experts should be drawn on to add analytical rigor, provide an independent perspective and technical support – but all policy advisors should understand the basic requirements.

Myth 2: *Evaluation can only be done after the fact* – traditional evaluation clearly has its place. But evaluation will often have the biggest impact when it is used to capture real time feedback to improve policy design and delivery.

Myth 3: *Evaluation is expensive and means producing a long report [that no one will read]* – fit for purpose evaluation is strategic and provides the right level of useful information to inform policy.

Myth 4: *Evaluation is an optional extra* –The job of policy professionals is to scrutinise the impacts of policies, ask the difficult questions, challenge assumptions and seek out new evidence. We need to rise to the challenge that Minister English has set us: *“tell Ministers what they need to hear not what you think they want to hear”*.

As Head of the Policy Profession I expect policy professionals to rise to this challenge. This does not mean that I expect everyone to be evaluation experts. Rather, I expect policy professionals to:

- Understand the basics - how to plan for and commission evaluation, ask the right questions
- Know how to use the right tool for the right job – when to use different approaches and methods, seek different sources of evidence

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- Know where to find evaluation expertise when they need it – internal experts within agencies, online resources, expert practitioners (e.g. Superu in the social sector)
 - Be brave enough to act on the evaluation’s results. In other words stopping (or changing and then re-evaluate) programmes that aren’t effective
 - Take a more sophisticated approach to evidence.

This last point is very important. In fast moving policy environments it is often tempting to avoid evaluation because it is ‘too early to tell’ or because of ‘poor data quality’. This approach is not defensible in the modern policy context.

In complex environments, policy design will never be right the first time around; nor can we expect that policy will remain ‘fit for purpose’ over time.

We need ‘end to end policy’, which links policy design to delivery and back again. This implies iteration, adaptation and learning underpinned by systematic evaluation. The full range of evaluation approaches should be used to observe and capture feedback, understand the process of change, find out what works and use this information to improve policy design and delivery as we go.

The most useful sources of evidence will change over time as policies and programmes are implemented. We need to be comfortable with using and generating a wider variety of evidence (e.g. qualitative research as a complement to quantitative measures, proxy measures when direct measurement is not feasible, use of ethnography, co-design or data analytics methods to generate new insights).

Finally policy leaders have an important role to play. The State Sector Act (s.32) charges chief executives with stewardship of departmental capability and *“the capacity to offer free and frank advice to successive governments”*.

For policy managers and leaders, this implies investing in the generation of evidence and taking a longer term approach to building the capabilities of policy analysts and policy teams. Policy leaders can do this by:

- Investing in evaluation capability – supporting policy analysts to develop their skills is not just an agency investment, but a broader contribution to the system.

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- Enabling a culture of learning about what works, sharing what we are learning and being open to understanding where we can do better – this requires long-term commitment and a clear strategy to embed evaluation as ‘business as usual’.
 - Ensuring that all policies, programmes and regulatory regimes are subject to ongoing, fit for purpose evaluation – the policies, programmes and regulatory regimes of government are key assets. As stewards of these assets we need to ensure that they are achieving their objectives and justifying the investment. Policy leaders should establish clear expectations that all policies will be scrutinised, with evaluation planning incorporated right from the start.

Thank you.