Pathways to quality

Insights on agency policy quality assurance systems and transition to the Policy Quality Framework

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Message from the Head of the Policy Profession

In August last year the Prime Minister and I launched 3 policy improvement frameworks. At that time I wrote to my chief executive colleagues and the Tier 2 Policy Leaders group asking them to promote the frameworks and to use them as part of their agencies’ policy improvement strategies. I asked the Policy Project to support agencies to that end. I also asked the Policy Project to monitor the use of the frameworks, including to identify where any improvements are in order or where there is demand for new supporting tools.

This report examines policy quality assurance systems including uptake of the Policy Quality Framework. It reflects analysis of agencies’ policy quality assurance systems and recommends areas for improvement. It identifies actions for senior policy leaders and work I have asked the Policy Project to undertake. I am hoping to see the PQF progressively used as the common standard across the Public Service.

Improving policy quality and capability across the Public Service requires an ongoing commitment to innovation and continuous improvement. I will be looking to recognise and commend policy leaders who demonstrate this commitment especially through their uptake of the Policy Project frameworks and their participation in collective efforts to lift our overall policy game.

- Andrew Kibblewhite, Head of the Policy Profession
Review of agency policy quality assurance systems

Background and method

The Policy Project analysed the strengths and weaknesses of current policy quality assurance systems based on:

• A survey of agencies on their current quality assurance processes, including adoption of the Policy Quality Framework (PQF).

• Insights from agencies’ ex-post reviews of policy papers shared with us (against the PQF quality characteristics).

• Findings from an independent review of RIS assessments commissioned by Treasury.

• Lessons from central agencies (SSC, DPMC & TSY) experience with using the PQF-based assessment tool for ex-post assessments of their policy papers.

• Results from Treasury’s Policy Measurement Exercise (covering the 12 agencies required by Cabinet to complete the exercise).

Method: 21 agencies responded to the Policy project survey on quality assessment systems. 16 agencies provided the PP team with summary reports from their ex-post policy paper quality assessments for 2015/16. Treasury provided 50 individual RIS assessments carried out independently by the Sapere research group in 2015.

In addition to analysing survey results, we mapped all strengths and areas for improvement identified in summary reports and in individual RIS assessments, against the Policy Quality Framework. Categorizing the qualitative assessments in this way enabled Tableau (a data analytics tool) surface system-level findings.
What we found – current practice

The survey revealed a range of diverse policy quality tools, templates and guidance. There is very little consistency across the 21 agencies who responded to the Policy project survey, and even across teams in the same agency. This is particularly true in the *ex-ante* space - that is, processes for developing advice and for planning and managing policy work.

We found:

- 13 of 21 agencies have guidance on developing policy advice.
- 9 of 21 responding agencies have an agency-wide commissioning tool.
- 12 have an agency wide briefing template, 14 have an aide memoire template and nine have templates for presentations.
- 11 agencies use planning and management tools (such as project management) for significant/substantial pieces of work.
- 11 of 21 agencies have a process for moderating/regulating their work programme.
- Only ten of 21 respondents have agency-wide tools or guidance for reviewers.

Where agencies run internal quality panels they tend to concentrate on review before sign out of Cabinet papers and RIS. Only a few agencies use panels for *ex-ante* planning for quality, and real time feedback to colleagues, managers and teams.

Ex-post assessments tend to be a compliance exercise, often a once-a-year exercise to enable reporting of a quality score; less than half of the responding agencies reported that the findings of ex-post assessment led to agency or team level improvement initiatives.

“Peer review practices are variable across teams and can depend on workload, turnaround time, and other external pressures. Some teams consistently practice robust, challenging peer review throughout a stream of advice, while others peer review advice at the last minute in short timeframes. All Cabinet papers must go through our [assurance panel].” Agency quality lead
Agency uptake of the PQF

19 policy agencies responded to this question of the survey. Of those, 15 were adopters or likely adopters of the PQF, although six of these said they needed support to adopt. Two agencies are unwilling to adopt, citing loyalty to their current agency bespoke frameworks and/or existing assessment regimes. Two agencies were ‘undecided’ at the time.

Strengths and weaknesses of policy advice

Mapping assessments (policy quality and RIS) against the PQF criteria showed:

- Collectively we are relatively strong in identifying stakeholders, their stake and their views, but relatively weak in exploring the more detailed implications of what is proposed for affected parties.

- There is a high degree of inconsistency in writing/presentational quality (how well the paper is written). (Reporting ‘average scores’ masks the highs and lows and mitigates learning from those outliers.)

- We are not strong on articulating the evidence and insights on which advice is based, and there are particular weaknesses in accurately identifying problems and/or opportunities.

- There are weaknesses in scoping a range of options, articulating how short listed options can be delivered, and assessing options using criteria that are transparent and focused on results, implementability & impact.
Ex-post assessment of stand alone policy papers has limitations. It tends to concentrate on the quality of the paper itself rather than the quality of the underpinning analysis (unless that is spelt out in the paper, which it often is not).

- Meta analysis of ex-post assessments of papers shows many comments on ‘engages the decision maker and tells the full story’ and much fewer on the three other PQF quality characteristics.
- In comparison the commentary on strengths and weaknesses of RIS are spread across all four characteristics. RIS assessments are stronger on assessing options analysis, implementation thinking etc (which is required in RIS guidance).

Critiquing analysis as part of ex-ante quality assurance, (and on occasion looking at the sum of advice ex-post), as well as looking at capability to provide advice would provide more insight for learning and lifting policy quality than does a reliance on ex-post assessment of individual papers.

Based on these insights, we recommend these Actions...
1. Take the lead in your agency to champion use of the PQF, taking account of the sector/system benefits as well as the impact on your agency. Note that common frameworks and tools are intended to build greater consistency across the Public Service.

2. Ensure managers of policy staff communicate the PQF and available tools to their teams (we know that 70% of agencies communicated the Policy Project frameworks to staff in some form following the launch so there is a good foundation for diving deeper into how the PQF can be used in day-to-day work).

3. Catalyse reflection on the QA practices and processes used in your Agency (ex-ante and ex-post), and where things could be improved as part of building overall policy capability.

4. Sponsor improvements in your agency’s ex-post assessment processes to leverage learning opportunities e.g. –
   - consider staggering assessments of policy advice throughout the year (by an internal panel) rather than a one-off exercise at the end of the year (Note: there is no central agency requirement for ex-post assessments of quality to be done at a particular time of the year or for them to be undertaken by external/independent assessors) and use the feedback for providing constructive critique and driving performance across teams.
   - When reporting quality scores (in Annual reports etc.) consider reporting a distribution rather than an ‘average’ and set targets for improvement (e.g. 70% of papers scoring 7 or more out of 10 and less than 10% scoring 4 or less).

5. Support collective capability building across the Public Service. Encourage staff to make the Policy Project a ‘first port of call’ when developing or improving products, so that lessons and any new products can be shared with other agencies or distributed across the Public Service (to avoid ‘reinventing the wheel’).
1. **Work with policy agencies to develop and share good practices and tools** that support the development of quality advice *ex ante*; focusing on boosting the quality of underpinning analysis and more timely quality assurance practices.

2. **Broker cross-agency policy quality initiatives**, giving special attention to responding to requests or brokering support for agencies with limited capacity for capability building.

3. **Support agency transition to the Policy Quality Framework (PQF)** by making it ‘easy to use and hard to avoid’:
   - Provide ‘useful and usable’ tools that can help apply the PQF.
   - Cross reference PQF and content in other central agency guidance (e.g. the Cabinet Guide, RIS Handbook, PIF reviewers reference guidance).

4. **Lightly refresh the PQF criteria** (reflecting lessons from the early adopters of the PQF-based ex-post assessments) to:
   - Fix ambiguities and re-order some of the detailed criteria (characteristics of quality) and add criteria on ‘how will we know this is working?”, and exposing ‘uncertainty’. Changes will be approved and endorsed by the Tier 2 Policy Leaders.
   - Simplify the PQF-based ex post assessment tool, provide easy-to-use guidance on scoring and interpreting results, and share lessons from agency experience about the effective use of internal quality panels.