Why policy failure is so common in the UK

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It has always been the case that the likelihood of policy failure is at least as high as policy success. But the currency of modern politics seems to be squarely that of failure – indeed major failure. The most prominent current British examples are Brexit, closely followed by Universal Credit, and now a new NHS Ten Year Planthat disavows the extensive reforms to the service introduced only six years previously. Many more cases could be added to the list – in their popular exploration of 'policy blunders', Anthony King and Ivor Crewe identified twelve government policies that were said to have failed in their objectives, wasted large amounts of public money, 'wrecked the lives of ordinary people', and were foreseeable.

It is understandable that governments – national and local – should want to downplay policy failure and trumpet apparent success, but to do so risks losing an understanding of why failure is so common and how it might be eradicated or at least minimised. We can identify four broad factors contributing to policy failure:

Overly optimistic expectations: 'Over-optimism' was the title given to an influential review of failure in major government projects in the UK by the National Audit Office. The report noted this to be: '*A long-standing problem widely recognised that too frequently results in the underestimation of the time, costs and risks to delivery and the overestimation of the benefits. It undermines value for money at best and, in the worst cases, leads to unviable projects.*'

Dispersed governance: Policies that are formulated at national level will need some degree of consistent delivery at sub-national level; this can be difficult where the latter has some separate degree of political authority. Even in a country as centralised as

Britain, general rules and guidelines will be reinterpreted to fit into local contexts and front-line practices in ways that can undermine legislative intention. The central state has rarely taken notice of the literature on 'bottom-up' implementation.

Inadequate collaboration: Anything other than the most simple of measures will require continuous collaboration with a host of local 'downstream' implementation actors such as end users, frontline staff, and a range of local service agencies. Policy design and policy implementation accordingly need to resemble an integrated process rather than discrete and distinct stages. It rarely happens.

Vagaries of the political cycle: Policies of significance that involve change over a long period of time raise issues of political sustainability and support. In general, there is evidence to suggest that the political will necessary to drive long-term policy-making tends to dissipate over time. Policymakers are more likely to get credit for legislation that is passed than for <u>implementation problems</u> that have been avoided – indeed the latter will tend to be seen as 'someone else's problem'.

Rather than just let policies drift into full or partial failure, it is incumbent upon policymakers to take an interest in ways in which the policy process can be strengthened and supported. This could take place at three points: preparation; tracking; and support.

Preparation

The aim at this point would be to ensure government is more alert to the practicalities of implementation by scrutinising the feasibility of policy proposals more carefully at the outset – in effect, better 'policy design'. Faulty policy design can stem from many causes – a poor understanding of the problem, insufficient knowledge of the implementation context, unclear and even contradictory goals, and absence of political backing, amongst them. In such circumstances, any degree of successful implementation is unlikely.

<u>Jennifer Gold has noted</u> that few countries have mechanisms in place to ensure more robust policy design. This is a startling omission. In the UK, the <u>Civil Service Reform Plan</u> requires permanent secretaries to warn before a political decision is taken if there are likely to be implementation concerns, but in practice the central machinery has only tended to be activated once an established policy is off track. Indeed in the case of Brexit it seems likely that such warnings have been routinely given but widely ignored.

An interesting exception in this regard is Australia, where the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet has issued <u>guidelines</u> for those policy proposals with 'significant implementation risks or challenges'. These policies are defined as fitting one or more of several criteria: addresses a top government priority; has significant budget implications; makes major or complex changes to existing policies; involves significant cross-agency issues; is particularly sensitive; requires urgent implementation; involves new or complex delivery systems; and has been developed over a very short period. In

such cases a full implementation plan has to be developed during the drafting process covering seven domains: planning, governance, stakeholder engagement, risks, monitoring, review and evaluation, resource management and management strategy. Each of these is further broken down and made available in the form of implementation 'toolkits'. There does not yet appear to be any evaluation of the effectiveness of these innovative arrangements.

Tracking

The emphasis here is to ensure a focus on successful implementation by establishing some form of 'delivery unit' to track progress. In the UK the first overt strategy unit was probably the Central Policy Review Staff created in 1971 to relate the policies of individual departments to the government's strategy as a whole. The idea was revived under Tony Blair's first Labour Government with the creation of a Performance and Innovation Unit based in the Cabinet Office in 1998, followed by the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit in 2002 and a Delivery Unit. It is unclear how effective these different bodies have been. They tend to be based upon a linear-rational model of decision-making in which unambiguous objectives are established, action upon them flows in predictable ways through established implementation structures, and outcomes are monitored against them. It is the realisation that implementation is complex, contextual and as much a bottom-up as a top-down imperative that has led to interest in an alternative approach – that of policy support.

Support

Tracking performance delivery alone is unlikely to be sufficient to avoid policy failure, especially where the policy is complex and long-term in nature. The question then arises as to whether some form of support might be better and, if so, what approach is appropriate. All such approaches require close liaison with, and understanding of, the position of the implementing agencies. In a review of the components of service improvement for the Health Foundation, Allcock et al point out that those who work on the front line know more about the challenges of delivery than national policymakers; a crucial task for policy support is therefore to tap into the perceptions and experiences of those whose behaviour will shape the implementation process. This is not so much about understanding legal obligations than about promoting the art and craft of policy implementation. It involves assessing existing capacity to deliver, knowing what is being done well, what needs improving and how best to build new capacity.

The danger here is that policy support agencies try to straddle several strands of activity, some of which are at best in tension with each other, and at worst are contradictory. Three purposes can be identified: managing and regulating; problem-solving; and capacity building. Combining all three of these functions – especially compliance and support – within one agency is problematic. The way in which offers of implementation support are couched and perceived is vital in understanding their take-up and likely effectiveness.

Acknowledging the frequency of policy failure, understanding the causes and accepting the need to put in place policy support mechanisms, would seem to be prudent steps yet they go largely unaddressed. As a useful <u>new report</u> from the Centre for Public Scrutiny points out, failure is not something to be feared but something to be embraced for the opportunity it gives to learn and, eventually, succeed. It probably also requires a degree of political humility about what is achievable that is largely absent in the current climate. It really is time to talk more about policy failure and how we can avoid it.

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Notes:

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 Bob Hudson is professor in the Centre for Health Services Studies at the University of Kent.