Building the Policy Ecosystem

Andrew Kibblewhite, Head of the Policy Profession, speech to IPANZ and VUW School of Government, Auckland, 23 February 2016.

Thank you to IPANZ for the invitation to speak today. And thank you to Victoria University's School of Government for hosting this event at your new Auckland facility. I want to congratulate the School for having the foresight to set up shop in Auckland.

The public service has had the same idea. We are enhancing our presence in Auckland. We know that for New Zealand to prosper, Auckland, as our one city of scale, needs to play its role economically, social and culturally.

There is a huge challenge and imperative for government here. Auckland's good functioning is reliant on good government policy - in health, education, law and order, social welfare, transport, and the list goes on.

But Auckland's distinctiveness, its rapid growth and the fact that public service leadership, as well as most of its policy and strategic capacity, is largely based in Wellington, means we have to work really hard to design and implement policies that are "fit for purpose" in our major city.

If we can't get policy that works for Auckland, we won't get policy that works for New Zealand as a whole. If we fail here, by definition we've failed for New Zealand.

Today I'd like to talk about what great policy advice looks like. I want to tell you about what we are doing across government to improve the quality of policy advice. And I'd like to reflect on where we might work together - in particular academics and public service policy professionals, whether they work in central or local government.

I understand we have time for discussion later, and I look forward to hearing your views, and fielding some questions – feel free to challenge.

I'm here today in my guise as Head of the Policy Profession, a role I was asked to take on by the State Services Commissioner in 2014, to systemically look at how we can improve the quality of advice we are providing as a public service.

My role as Head of the Policy Profession is one of a number of new, system wide roles that have been established as part of the Better Public Services reforms. It is

complementary to the core role of DPMC, which is to advise the Prime Minister and to support the effective functioning of executive government.

Supporting me in my HoPP role is a small team in DPMC – The Policy Project – focused on the challenge of lifting the policy game across government. But the policy project is a collective effort by the whole policy community.

I'm pleased to say that the Policy Leaders Network – the group of Deputy Secretaries with policy responsibilities from across the Public Service - are working together to shape what is essentially a change programme. I want to acknowledge that effort.

So firstly, what is great policy advice? In my mind, good policy advice hits the sweet spot between what is desirable (what is going to meet citizens' needs), what is feasible (what we are able to do using the tools government has at its disposal, including of course legislative change) and what is viable (financially sensible and sustainable).

Hugely dependent on context, great policy advice is backed by evidence, and understands and acknowledges the trade-offs involved. Great policy advice should be clear and accessible, and it should focus on the outcomes that matter to citizens. It should be free and frank.

Ultimately, great policy advice helps Ministers make good decisions – decisions that should improve the lives of New Zealanders.

As Professor Peter Shergold outlines in his recent report on a significant policy failure in Australia[i]: "*Good government is founded on good policy, and good policy depends on good advice.*"

As policy professionals we have a responsibility to understand citizens' lives and how they experience public services. New tools allow us to engage with the public more frequently, informally, and cheaply.

We also have access to more and better data. The integrated data infrastructure (IDI) programme run by Statistics enables us to see where, and to whom, services and support are needed. Other qualitative methods, including observing people in their daily lives as they interact with those services, can generate deep insights which in turn can inform future policy.

The Co-design Lab based here in Auckland is using those user-centred design methods to co-create local solutions to local problems. Desktop analysis is no longer

enough (if it ever was). We need to make use of all the available evidence and insights to inform policy advice.

I've talked before about the Auckland City Mission's Family 100 Research Project, which showed the power of design and ethnography to produce insights into the daily experience of families living in poverty. In particular, the project showed how challenging it could be for those families to navigate the very government services that were meant to help them.

And last week the Salvation Army challenged government policy by using public data that has been made accessible and transparent. That challenge is good for us - we should expect, embrace and invite involvement in policy development from citizens, community organisations, businesses, and the academic community. As policy professionals we need to up our game.

So let me take this opportunity to tell you a little bit about the work of the Policy Project and what we are doing to support government agencies improve the quality of policy advice.

The foundation of the Project is catalysing debate and discussion throughout the policy community and offering opportunities for departments and policy professionals to learn from each other. We want to build on and leverage existing good practice. We want to change things up.

If you aren't familiar with the Policy Project website, I'd encourage you to have a look. Building off the insights from policy professionals – from Tier 2 policy leaders to new policy analysts – we're in the process of developing three key frameworks: focused on policy quality, on policy skills, and on the overall capability of policy shops.

First up: the **Policy Quality Framework.** The Policy Quality Framework sets a common standard for the quality of policy advice. Unlike existing frameworks it considers the quality of policy processes as well as the technical quality of policy papers. The intention is the framework will support the review and assessment of policy papers as well as policy processes in order to inform improvement strategies.

We are designing it to work as both an assessment tool, to be used at the end of a policy process, but more importantly as a planning tool to be used at the outset (to set a trajectory) and throughout the process as a self-reflection tool.

The Policy Quality Framework will provide a common foundation to enable cross-agency policy quality assurance. The prototype tool is being road tested in a few agencies so that we can ensure that it works well in practice.

The second product we hope to roll out in the next few months is the **Policy Skills Framework**, an attempt to describe the required knowledge, skills and behaviours required of the modern policy professional.

Rather than focus on competencies or role descriptions, the Policy Skills Framework will outline the mix of skills and the levels of expertise related to those skills – from developing to practicing to expert/leading.

It will enable policy professionals to describe their policy skills profile, policy managers to assess the skills make-up and gaps in their teams, and will help inform recruitment and staff development strategies.

I know that School of Government staff are interested in this and have been invited to help build the framework – which is currently in the prototype phase.

The third framework - the **Policy Capability Framework** - sits over the other two and draws on them. The Capability Framework is a tool to review and build overall capability in a policy shop. It describes the key components of capability and offers 'lines of inquiry' to enable policy leaders and their staff to reflect on current performance and to support strategies and priorities to improve that performance.

It covers four main dimensions of capability. These were identified by policy leaders as being critical to a high-performing policy shop: stewardship, people capability, policy quality systems, and engagement and customer-centricity.

We envisage the tool being used for self-review in the first instance but we hope that in time it might be used for a critical friend peer type review process – whereby policy leaders would be invited in to a colleague's policy shop to participate in a review. This would enable capability sharing as peers discuss common challenges, experience and lessons learned.

School of Government staff have shown an interest in the Policy Project from the outset. I hope that we can draw on your expertise to help us iterate and develop these frameworks.

The School of Government is important to the policy community for a number of reasons. You are a key player in developing our pipeline and building the skills of staff. I want to congratulate you for putting your hand up to deliver the APAD (Applied Policy Advisor Development) course for young analysts, initiated by the Ministry of Transport.

I have it on good advice that graduates are well prepared for policy roles after completing that course – actually I have one of the graduates working in my office.

The post-grad courses offered by the school are a way for public servants to gain knowledge, learn new skills and take time out of the immediate demands of their jobs to reflect on new thinking. I am delighted that the School is now offering classes in Auckland, and hope that those classes will reflect on the unique aspects of policy in Auckland.

One of the prominent critiques of academia is that it is too removed from reality. Actually, the same is often said about the policy profession. Maybe, we can help each other out.

A key challenge for academics is to ensure that their research is relevant, contextualised, and moves at a speed which is useful for external organisations. Sometimes government departments would like to understand an issue better and have approached a university to discuss research, but the timeframe is measured in months or years rather than weeks.

As commissioners, we need to make sure that our requests are achievable, but universities could strive to provide evidence and analysis in a timeframe that ensures it can have impact.

In any case, we can't afford to have some of our country's best thinkers locking themselves in their ivory tower. We need you, as the Deputy Prime Minister would say, to "chew on our problems".

Universities have a crucial role as a critic and conscience of society, which means they have a responsibility to discuss and comment on the issues of the day and to help facilitate public debate. Academics should be testing without bias, and questioning without fear. You should be confronting rhetoric with evidence, and favour with statistics and analysis.

Having people move between the public sector and academia would be helpful for ensuring we each understand where the other is coming from, to ensure that departments are aware of the latest academic thinking, and that academics are reminded of the real-world issues that departments are grappling with.

We have examples of where this is occurring. Sir Peter Gluckman's science advisors are helping to lift the rigour in our research and policy development.

The Ministry of Transport invited a number of academics into the ministry in a strategy role, to lead thinking on a specific piece of work, and to coach staff on the use of evidence and analysis in policy.

To me, this seems an excellent opportunity for an academic, to contribute to a Department's strategic and long-term thinking in an area in which you specialise.

And for the Ministry's part, they found that the experience left them with high quality reports underpinned by science, and ongoing connections to the academic communities working on transport related issues.

After all, while science is the pursuit of knowledge, it is the application of that science which has supported social progress.

I would like to see the policy community and the academic community collaborate more deliberately to build capabilities in research, in the generation and use of evidence, as well as ensuring we have the right skills and experience in the policy profession.

For universities, this means equipping graduates with the skills to look into the future, enabling advisors to come back mid-career for a refresher, and for us collectively to find better ways to work together to analyse and understand areas where there is great uncertainty.

If we manage to do all of this, and to work together as part of a connected and coherent policy ecosystem, we will be closer to a powerful policy culture, characterised by innovation, continuous improvement and sharing good practice.

We will be better placed to articulate, tackle and solve the big problems facing our country, and to capture the opportunities that have escaped us this far.

I'm happy to answer questions and keen to hear your comments, ideas and challenges.

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[i] Learning from Failure, why large government policy initiatives have gone so badly wrong in the past and how the chances of success in the future can be improved. An independent review of government processes for implementing large programs and project by Professor Peter Shergold AC, Commonwealth of Australia, August 2015