

2025 ‘Delivering significant substantive change’: what it means for the policy advisor

The focus in the second year of a new government is always on delivery and results

Traditionally, the second year of a three-year term is all about delivery – so there are results to show in an election year.

This government has been talking up ‘delivery’ right from the beginning – so we’d expect even more focus than usual. And not just getting things done – but seeing the results.

We’ve seen:

- Government targets¹ and regular reporting on them.²
- The ongoing work of the Delivery Unit within DPMC.
- The initial focus was on 100-day plans and the system of holding individual Ministers accountable for the delivery of government plans.
- The PM’s State of the Nation speech in mid-January also focused on action and delivery³ as well as economic growth.

So, it’s no surprise then that the focus will be on getting things done in 2025.

This Masterclass focuses on what the impacts might be for policy advisors.

Many Ministers are still learning the ropes

Very few in the Cabinet had experience as Ministers before they were appointed in late 2023. Those people have now had just over a year on the job. For example, they have all only been through one Budget cycle. Their experience of Cabinet/Parliamentary processes as a Minister is mixed – some have taken a number of Bills through the Cabinet and Parliament – and others haven’t yet gone through the whole process from development to implementation. All of them have only had one round of Select Committee scrutiny on their plans and the performance of their agencies.

This still means that they will still be learning about the best ways of getting decisions made and things done. Thus, any policy advice will need to include advice on processes as well as policy content.

The Cabinet reshuffle has had a re-set effect in some areas

There are now Ministers in portfolios with little subject knowledge. And senior officials will have to build new working relationships with the new Minister. There’s even a brand-new Minister.

It’s worth going back to our framework to think about how to best advise and support Ministers. A summary of this is attached in the appendix.

¹ <https://www.beehive.govt.nz/release/prime-minister-launches-government-targets>

² <https://www.dPMC.govt.nz/our-programmes/government-targets>

³ <https://www.beehive.govt.nz/speech/state-nation-2025>

Some reminders:

- Ministers will all be moving out of the 'complete newbie' box as they build knowledge of systems and processes and their portfolios. Or, at the very least, moving towards the centre of the matrix. But advice on process (and sometimes sector background) will still be needed. They aren't in the 'old-hand' box yet. You'll need to be aware of what they've been through, how confident they are with it, and what they haven't yet experienced and craft advice accordingly.
- Ministers with new portfolio responsibilities that they know little about will have a lot to do to get up to speed and will be reliant on officials. So, in terms of the framework, they might not be old dogs learning new tricks (like Hon Judith Collins taking on the Public Service portfolio). But they will be more than puppies (as most have had a bit over a year of being a Minister) while still having to learn plenty of new tricks in their roles.

Ministers new to the portfolio need more explanation in the advice provided to them

Briefings to a new Minister (beyond the initial formal briefings for incoming Ministers) will need to be constructed differently from ongoing briefings to existing Ministers.

First, there will no doubt need to be a reconsideration of the policy agenda and the relative priorities of different projects/programmes of work. In other words, the first stage of the policy cycle⁴ will need to be confirmed. Of course, change is more likely to be subtle – as agendas have been set according to overall government priorities.

⁴ <https://www.online.auckland.ac.nz/2022/04/11/perspectives-in-public-policy-the-policy-cycle/>

⁵ Masterclass no. 37 Background <https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Central%20Government/Brief%2037%20Background%20-%202022.pdf>

Secondly, more background will be needed, including:

- Explanations of technical terminology – a glossary will be helpful.
- More focus on plain language is needed as everyday concepts in the portfolio will need an explanation.
- Outlines of previous decisions and the rationale for them. This not only helps new Ministers to understand where you are up to and why, but it also gives them the opportunity to re-visit decisions if needed. One good trick for this is an annotated timeline. We covered this topic briefing in our masterclass on getting the background section just right.⁵

The challenge is doing all this – yet keeping papers succinct.

With the focus on implementation, there may be a different mix of types of policy advice required

Our masterclass on different types of policy advice papers discusses and outlines three types.⁶

- Strategic policy – more likely to be in the early phases of a policy development process and in agenda setting and prioritisation. All things that are done early in any government's term.
- Operational policy – this is putting the detail into effect – it may be detailed legislative or regulatory provisions or internal policy, for example. But it's focused on the nitty-gritty.

⁶ Masterclass no. 48 Different types of papers <https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Central%20Government/Brief%2048%20Types%20of%20papers.pdf>

- Responsive policy – which responds to issues arising. Some of these issues will be new and might be more similar to strategic policy. But mostly, it's about things not going as well as they could in implementation or delivery. It typically peaks when new policies come into effect.

We'd expect to see more emphasis on operational and responsive policy in this phase of the Government's cycle.

This might require different skills and capabilities in policy teams. In particular, a greater understanding of implementation and delivery matters.

Progress reports will be more common

They are always part of the policy landscape – but become more important when implementation and delivery have increased focus.

There's an art to doing a great one.

We covered the key requirements of these types of reports in our masterclass on the 11 key papers – it's number 3 in that line-up.⁷

The most critical things are to:

- Report on progress against targets/plans – make it numeric, not just descriptive.
- Focus on exception reporting – in particular on how to resolve any emerging problems. Free and frank advice should be to the fore here. It's much worse to have things go off track and be accused of covering it up – than it is to acknowledge any problems early and suggest ways of addressing them.
- Report on results – not just actions. Too often, we see descriptive reports focusing

on the actions that have been taken, e.g. stakeholder meetings, contracts let, funding provided, etc. But not on the achievements or results. It may be too early for high-level outcomes – but you might have interim results or indicators of progress/change that you can report on.

While these are bread and butter reports once established, they take a great deal of thought to set them up in the first place. It's worth investing time and energy to get it right and streamline the reporting, so it's not a huge task in developing each report.

Of course, report templates can be further refined during the project.

The mismatch between policy development and implementation is an oft-cited problem, which will need attention

This not only occurs in the current political debate but also in the academic literature.⁸

Last year, we re-developed our masterclass on considering implementation and delivery issues when developing policy advice. This is now up on our website.⁹

It includes a checklist of implementation issues to cover while developing policy advice – that is, considering how things will be implemented early in the policy process. This was designed to help avoid issues down the track. But can equally be applied to consider how things are going during the implementation process and whether there are any roadblocks which need to be sorted – before they impact on results.

⁷ Masterclass no.10 Thinking through the 11 key papers https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Central%20Government/brief_10_masterclass_thinking_through_the_11_key_papers.pdf

⁸ See Mazey and Richardson *Is the Aotearoa New Zealand policy process fit for purpose?* in *Policy Quarterly – Volume 18, Issue 2 – May 2022*. For a local critique. Or Hudson, Hudson and Peckham *Policy Failure and the policy-*

implementation gap: can policy support programmes help? In *Policy Design and Practice* 2019.

⁹ Masterclass no. 60 Implementation matters even more so now <https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Central%20Government/Brief%2060%20Implementation%20matters%20UPDATED%202024.pdf>

Different expertise might well be required of policy advisors

Great working relationships with those in your organisations responsible for implementation and delivery will be needed to provide solid advice to your Minister.

Policy advisors will have to be able to get to grips with the sorts of issues that operational staff are dealing with and translate that into advice for Ministers.

This might well need some personal capability development, too.

The Policy Skills Framework¹⁰ concepts include 'Design for Implementation' as a core capability for policy advisors.

Another tough year ahead

We seem to say this every year...

However, this year is likely to bring more and different demands on policy advisors. That, alongside financial pressures, won't make things easy.

But some investment in thinking about new ways of doing things, and building skills and understanding of implementation and delivery will help.

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¹⁰ <https://www.dpmc.govt.nz/sites/default/files/2023-07/policy-skills-framework-2023.pdf>

Appendix A A framework for advising Ministers

Figure 1 Defining new Ministers' needs

Background and experience are key



Source: NZIER

What does it imply?

Old dog, new tricks

Needs subject knowledge. Focus on issues, background and stakeholders. Limited process advice, except where there are portfolio-specific processes, e.g. those required under the legislation you administer, as they may well be a bit different to those your Minister is used to.

Complete newbie

Needs it all. Focus on issues in context, with plenty of process advice. What and how.

Lower ranking new Ministers are also very conscious about how their advice will play with senior Ministers.

After all, they want to be seen to do well and get promoted eventually. Your job as policy advisor includes providing tactical advice to support your Minister. For example,

information on the likely perspectives of senior Ministers (and their departments) and strong sets of talking points to guide your Minister in formal and informal discussions with colleagues.

Old-hand

Only needs standard briefings tailored to specific preferences and manifesto/coalition agreements as these emerge. Limited process advice.

Sector expert

Needs process advice. Focus on making things happen and being clear about what the Minister has to do themselves. While perhaps needing limited subject matter advice – remember the new Minister may have a different perspective. So, don't forget to adjust your language to what they are comfortable with and back up arguments with data and evidence.