

Paper 73

Policy under pressure: delivering policy advice in an election year

Policy workloads already look big

This has been the case throughout this government so far, as there is much in their work plans.

We already know that there is a heavy legislative programme planned for this year – and that takes considerable policy resources (developing operational policy and regulations, advising select committees and Ministers, stakeholder engagement, etc.).

The other major factor is the fiscal situation. The HYEPU¹ update just before Christmas clearly indicated that tight fiscal management is still on the cards – despite the election and some signs of economic recovery. This makes it more difficult to develop and implement new policies and ideas, as they also require funding.

Of course, there will also be the need to respond to emerging events. Currently, on top of this agenda is responding to various moves by the US, natural disasters, and the economy.

And there will be disruptions...

Due to:

- Already signalled organisation restructuring, e.g. the establishment of MCERT²
- Ongoing savings programmes within agencies
- Implementation of policy changes.

Election-year dynamics can add pressure

Leading into an election, the focus of the government is on:

- Putting in place policy and legislation that's been promised and is already in the pipeline
- Looking to identify and promote the results of policies already put in place during their term of government.

There are usually more quick response requests too – to deal with issues as they arise.

The year will have different focuses at different times

With election day now announced for 7 November, the first two-thirds of the year will be focused on the matters outlined above. This is the case until Parliament is dissolved, and politicians head out on the hustings (when there is usually a slight interregnum in terms of demand from Ministers for major pieces of work). But that depends a bit on how the polls are looking at that point. If the incumbent government is looking like a clear winner – work programmes often continue through the pre-election period.

Then following government formation – there is work to do on the traditional first 100 days programmes; and on building relationships with any new Ministers.

¹ <https://www.beehive.govt.nz/release/hyefu-2025-economic-and-fiscal-repair-job-continues>

² <https://www.beehive.govt.nz/release/new-ministry-deliver-better-housing-transport-and-environmental-outcomes>

This means it won't be an easy year – yet again

But, we don't want to start the year on a downer.

There are plenty of people we talk to who are working on important and interesting pieces of work – and enjoying those challenges.

There are also techniques that can be put in place to help manage work pressures.

Recent UK research describes a similar situation and offers some advice to manage the dynamics

Published just before Christmas, from the UK Institute of Government, is a research report on ***Rapid policy making: how civil servants can make effective policies under pressure.***³ It's worth a read in full as it contains plenty of practical advice.

It describes a situation for policy advisors in the UK civil service that sounds remarkably similar to the pressures policy advisors face in New Zealand. These include:

- Increasing demand for fast turnaround advice
- Relatively poor commissioning – i.e. lack of understanding of the problem and the solutions
- Limited time (or interest) in stakeholder engagement
- A constrained range of options is being considered.

However, the fiscal situation in the UK is considerably worse than here, and the international environment pressures are arguably stronger, as they are closer to home.

This research also provides some hints on how to manage these pressures more effectively

There's a helpful graphic on page 28⁴ of the report which goes through the key stages in a policy process, outlines the challenges, and makes some suggestions. This is worth focusing on.

We've considered the factors outlined in the research in the New Zealand environment – and, to us, most of them seem to apply.

We've summarised their suggestions for improving policy responses in the diagram below.

Figure 1 Delivering policy at pace



Source: NZIER

³ Rapid policymaking
<https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/2025-12/rapid-policy-making.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/2025-12/rapid-policy-making.pdf#page=28>

<https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2025-12/apo-nid333176.pdf>

Strengthen commissioning processes and adapt them for pace – commissioning often falls down in policy processes under pressure. The brief from Ministers (or senior officials) can be less than clear or change several times. This is very frustrating for those doing the work.

The Policy Project Start Right⁵ tools are designed to provide a more systematic approach. NZIER has developed a Quick Start approach based on this to further streamline the process for quick turnaround pieces of advice. This is referenced below.

Improve capabilities and confidence in responding at pace – is dealing with pace a key competency for policy analysts and their managers? This is a question asked in the research report.

Of course, some people thrive on pressure. A useful resource when a quick turnaround paper is needed. But those people can be overused.

This doesn't seem to be a capability explicitly covered in the Policy Skills Framework. Perhaps it needs more thought?

Take a 'test and learn' approach – this recognises that solutions may not be optimal in a rushed process. It proposes implementing a real-time monitoring and evaluation approach and adjusting policies and programmes in response to those results.

This approach could also involve pilot projects or rolling out in some areas before extending it more widely. This approach involves some risk, as failures will occur, and it is therefore not always popular.

It also needs to be backed by robust monitoring strategies and processes, and potentially evaluation. Unfortunately, New Zealand doesn't seem to have a particularly robust approach to monitoring and evaluation. But there are new requirements in the updated Policy Quality Framework⁶ in the Action standard, and in section 14 of the Regulatory Impact Statement template⁷ (although we understand this will be updated). There is also plenty of material on the Policy Project website on evaluation⁸ (less so on monitoring). This was developed by the former SuPERU. We'd expect to hear more from the Social Investment Agency on this over time.

Use available tools and techniques – there are two parts to this. Firstly, falling back on standard policy processes can help. They are familiar to us and play an important role. By this, we mean things like peer review and QA, as well as standard policy techniques like systematic options analysis. Of course, they might need to be streamlined.

Secondly, there are some particular techniques for working at pace. Some people on your team have the skills and experience to deliver under pressure. They'll have a kete of well-practised tools and techniques. These are worth building on.

We've also developed a range of tools to support policy development under tight timeframes. These are outlined below.

⁵ <https://www.dpmc.govt.nz/our-programmes/policy-project/policy-tools/start-right>

⁶ <https://www.dpmc.govt.nz/sites/default/files/2025-09/policy-quality-framework-sept2025.pdf>

⁷ <https://www.regulation.govt.nz/support-for-regulators/resources-for-regulators/regulatory-impact-statement-template/>

⁸ <https://www.dpmc.govt.nz/our-programmes/policy-project/policy-advice-themes/evidence-and-evaluation>

NZIER resources that can help

Many of these were developed in the early years of the COVID pandemic, when tight turnaround times were required.

These are:

- Masterclass 31 on **Quick turnaround papers: responding to urgent requests**⁹ (2020)

- Masterclass 32 **Turbo peer review: doing peer review when time is short**¹⁰ (2020)
- Masterclass 64 **Quick start: Commissioning quick turnaround papers**¹¹ (2024)

We've also got another one in production, triaging requests for advice – something that can help with quick commissioning and quick responses.

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<https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Central%20Government/Brief%2031%20Fast%20papers%20-%202022.pdf>

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<https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Ce>

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<https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Central%20Government/Brief%2032%20Turbo%20Peer%20Review%20-%202022.pdf>

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