

The Policy Project

Responsive today,
shaping tomorrow



**Te Kāwanatanga
o Aotearoa**

New Zealand Government

Start Right Guide

Guidance on how to get policy
projects off to a great start

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Purpose of this document

This document outlines how to apply the Start Right approach to initiating a policy project, so it’s set up for quality and success.

Start Right is designed to be applied early in the life of every policy development project – by the manager commissioning the work and the policy practitioner doing the work.

Both appendices, *Prompts for policy Commissioning Conversations* (page 16) and *Green Light Framework* (page 18) are electronically editable.

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The 'Start Right' approach to starting a policy project – key steps

1. Commissioning Conversations

Capture the key details of the request for policy advice and kick-off.

2. Exploration

Spend time exploring possible approaches. Check in with others and refine your approach based on what you hear.

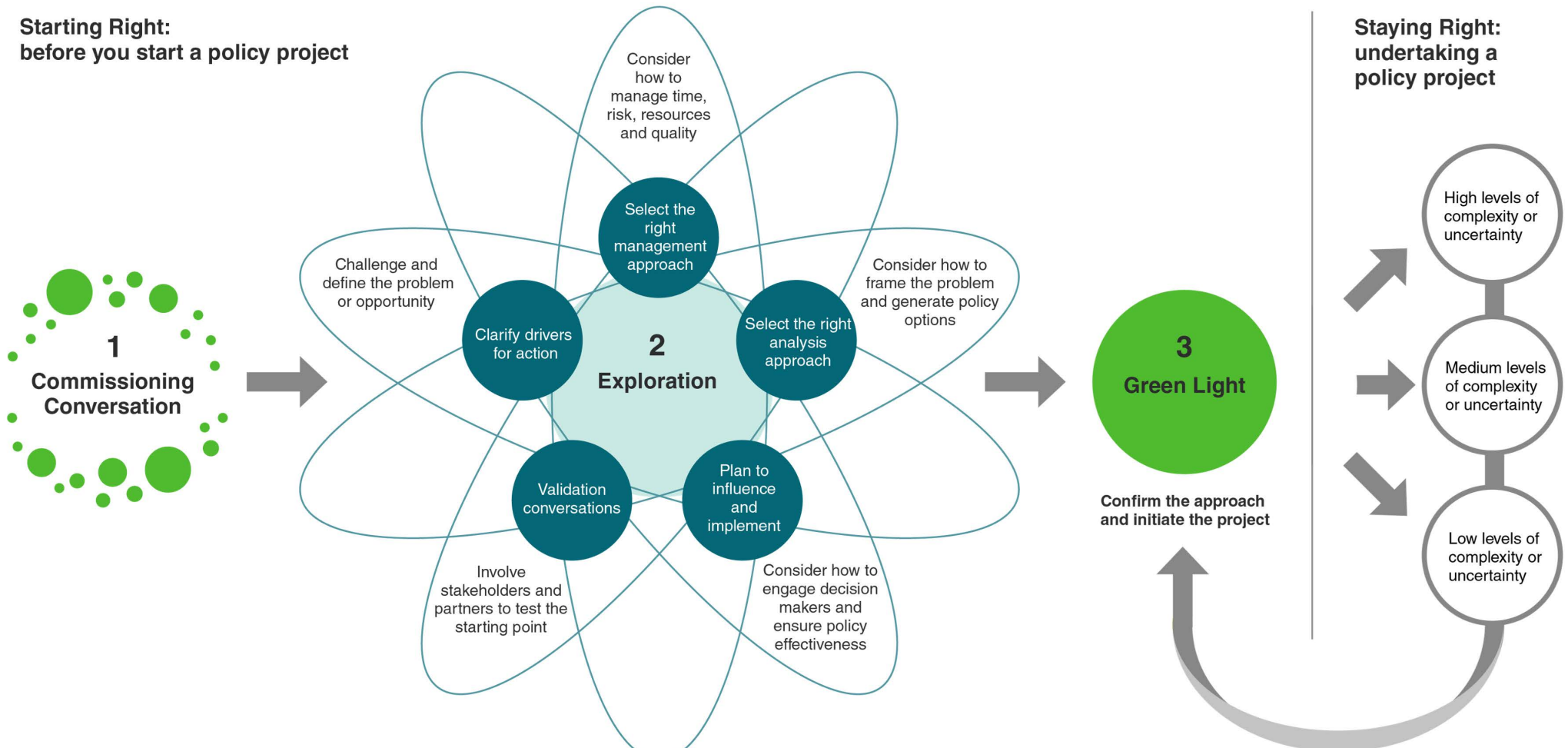
3. Get the Green Light

Communicate your thinking and agree it with your authorisers. Move forward knowing you're off to a good start.

4. Check in as you iterate

Expect things to change as new information is discovered. Match governance and communication to the level of complexity and certainty.

Starting Right:
before you start a policy project

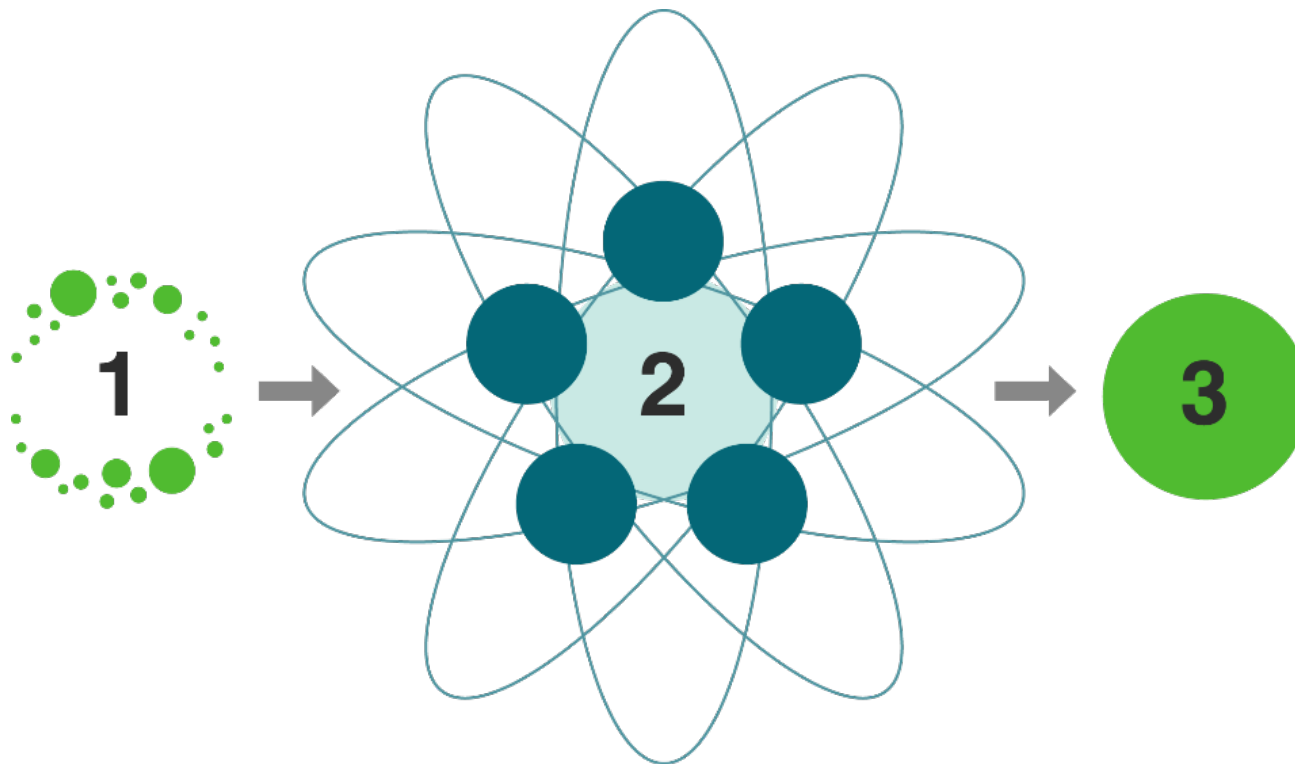


The Start Right approach is applied early in every policy initiative

Applying Start Right during the early stages of a policy initiative sets the project up for quality and success.

Experience shows that early and small interventions can drive bigger improvements in policy quality.

Start Right applied at an early stage in the policy process translates a Commissioning Conversation into a Green Light for progress through Exploration.



Benefits of Start Right

- **Focus** – through up-front consideration of all relevant factors, strong analysis and critical thinking.
- **Clarity** – through shared understanding of the rationale for an approach within policy teams and fewer 'lost in translation' moments.
- **Speed and timeliness** – through reducing unnecessary work and through planning and management.

Behaviours and skills underpin quality policy

Experience shows that certain behaviours – especially early in the policy project – are the key to driving high quality, timely and clear advice on policy. These are the behaviours that skilled and experienced policy commissioners and teams typically demonstrate in the early stage of policy projects.



Curiosity and openness

When you're starting out, focus on outcomes, impact and objectives, rather than jumping to solutions or policy options.

Seek out a range of voices and opinions, including on what the problem is.



Political savvy

Test your thinking with senior people or experienced and trusted advisors.

Ask "who are all the people who need to agree to this?"



Stewardship

Know the views of your minister but ask what a future or different minister might want.

Ask what the impact is on the next generation of people in New Zealand.



Agility

Ask what would change if a major assumption turned out to be incorrect.

Think about what you would do differently if you had half the time or resources. What if you had double?



Courage and honesty

Ask for more clarity, if necessary, from busy or difficult commissioners.

Admit that you don't have all the skills and resources to do the job, and seek support by partnering with others.



1. Commissioning Conversations

Commissioning Conversations are a best practice approach to policy advice requests.

These conversations openly share the scope for the policy and the desired outcomes. Quality conversations are the starting point for quality policy.

Commissioning conversations are an input, rather than a directive or mandate in themselves.

Commissioning Conversations trigger work, and provide valuable information for exploring the issue and the approach. They are an opportunity to start well by sharing vital information, and to build understanding and buy-in.

Start Right

Prompts for Policy Commissioning Conversations

Open, early Commissioning Conversations are the starting point for quality policy.

The questions listed on the next page are a guide for effective Commissioning Conversations. They can help you consider the most important elements that shape a policy project and determine the quality of its outputs.

A Commissioning Conversation kicks off the Start Right Exploration. Adopting the right behaviours and continuing to have open conversations through the exploration phase will improve the overall quality. The Start Right Guidance document (on our Policy Quality webpage) has more information on the Exploration and how to use this document.

There's no right way to document a Commissioning Conversation. These prompts should guide you to capture and share the outputs of the conversations in a way that works for your context. They provide critical inputs for the Start Right Exploration.

Policy commissioning behaviours and values

When having a Commissioning Conversation, there are certain traits that increase your chance of success.

<p>Curiosity and openness When you're starting out, focus on outcomes, impact and objectives, rather than jumping to solutions or policy options. Seek out a range of voices and opinions, including on what the problem is.</p>	<p>Political savvy Test your thinking with senior people or experienced and trusted advisors. Ask "who are all the people who need to agree to this?"</p>	<p>Stewardship Know the views of your Minister but ask what a future or different Minister might want. Ask what the impact is on the next generation of New Zealanders.</p>	<p>Agility Ask what would change if a major assumption turned out to be incorrect. Think about what you would do differently if you had half the time or resources. What if you had a doubt?</p>	<p>Courage and honesty Ask for more clarity, if necessary, from busy or difficult commissioners. Admit that you don't have the skills and resources to do the job, and seek support by partnering with others.</p>
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Conversation prompts

Policy Context and Purpose

- Why are we doing this project? Why now? How will our advice be used?
- What is success? Who will benefit and who might lose out?
- What are our starting hypothesis and assumptions?
- What has been done before? Are there previous advice or existing policy settings to consider?
- Who are our authorisers/customers (e.g. Ministers) and what are their expectations and views?
- What is the role of our policy function in delivering the outcome? Who else needs to be involved?
- Is this work supported by other agencies, ministers and external stakeholders? Is there any resistance? Are there any sensitivities we need to manage?
- What are the key risks and current issues? What will happen if we do nothing?

Policy Impact and Quality

- What is the response or decision we want from this work?
- How will we know when we have succeeded? Are we aiming for good advice or a good outcome?
- What is in scope? What is not in scope? What level of flexibility do we have?
- How will support and agreement be reached and secured? Who needs to be convinced?
- What is the right depth, accuracy, format and style for this advice?
- What have we done before this? What have others done? How does this fit in with other work?
- How will we ensure quality throughout?
- What are our key messages or communications aims? Who is our audience?

Policy Approach and Collaboration

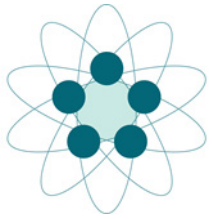
- What are the timeframes and key milestones? What level of flexibility do we have?
- Who is in the chain of authorisation and what do we need to do to prepare them for our advice?
- From whose perspective are we viewing this issue? What data or evidence should inform our advice?
- Which collaborators across our agency/other agencies/external partners should be involved?
- What is the priority of this policy initiative? What resources and costs are appropriate?
- What have we learned from previous projects or quality processes that should shape our approach?

Questions to consider

- What is the context and purpose? Why this, why now? Who wants it and what for?
- Who will benefit or lose out?
- What is the appetite for risk and change?
- What is the decision maker's intent and desired impact?
- Are there any sensitivities we need to manage?
- What are the parameters you know of so far?

Resources for your commissioning

- [Prompts for policy Commissioning Conversations \(page 16\)](#)
- [Commissioning worksheet for policy papers](#)



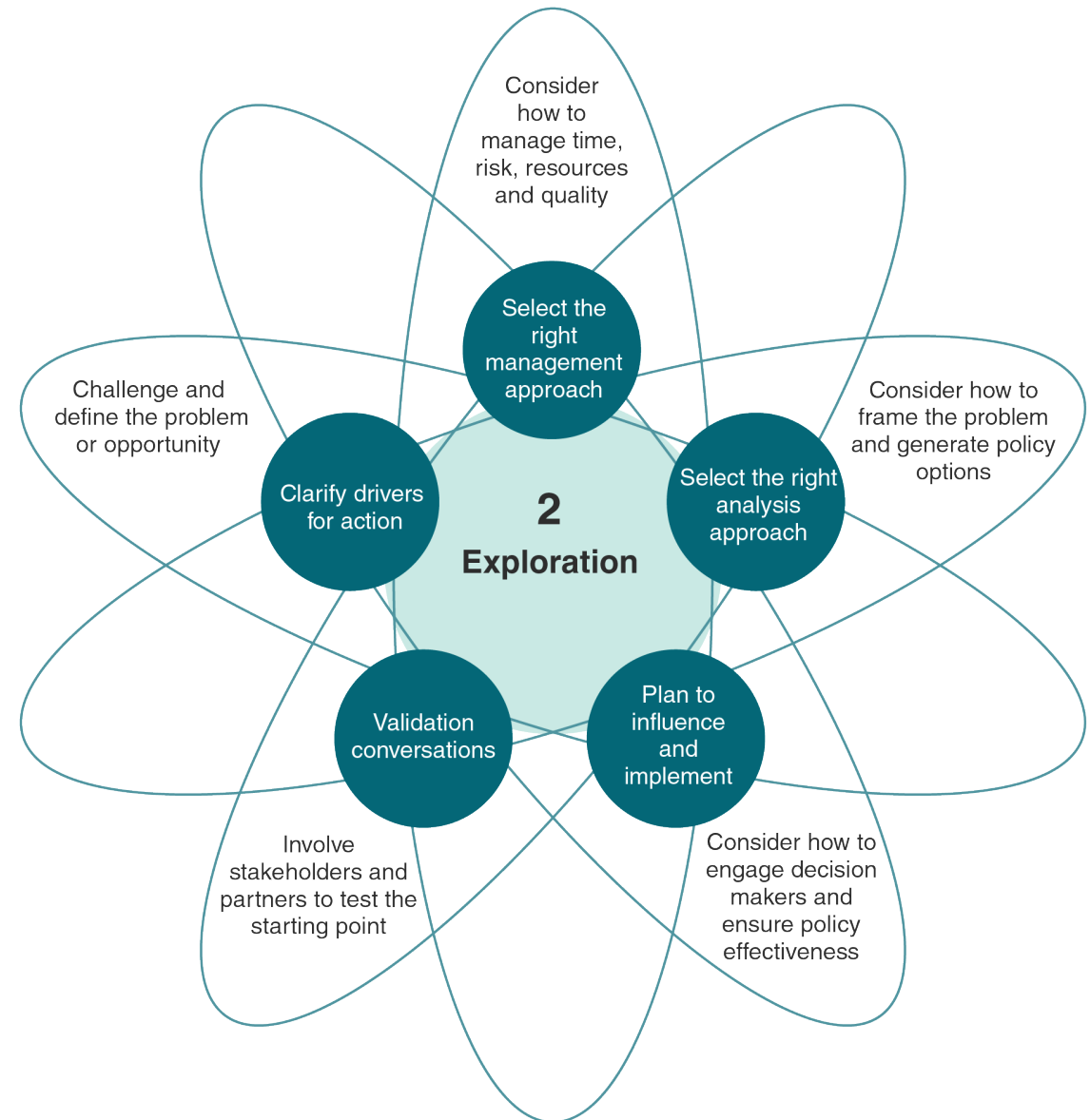
2. Exploration

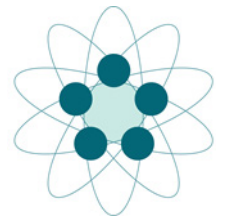
An Exploration allows you to pause for consideration rather than moving directly from commission to commencement.

Exploration can make the difference between success and failure, or between getting it right first time and repeated rework.

Exploration involves:

- considering the key dimensions of a policy project
- improving understanding within the policy team and amongst key stakeholders
- iteration and refinement (rather than a linear process).





2.1 Exploration – tailoring for the purpose

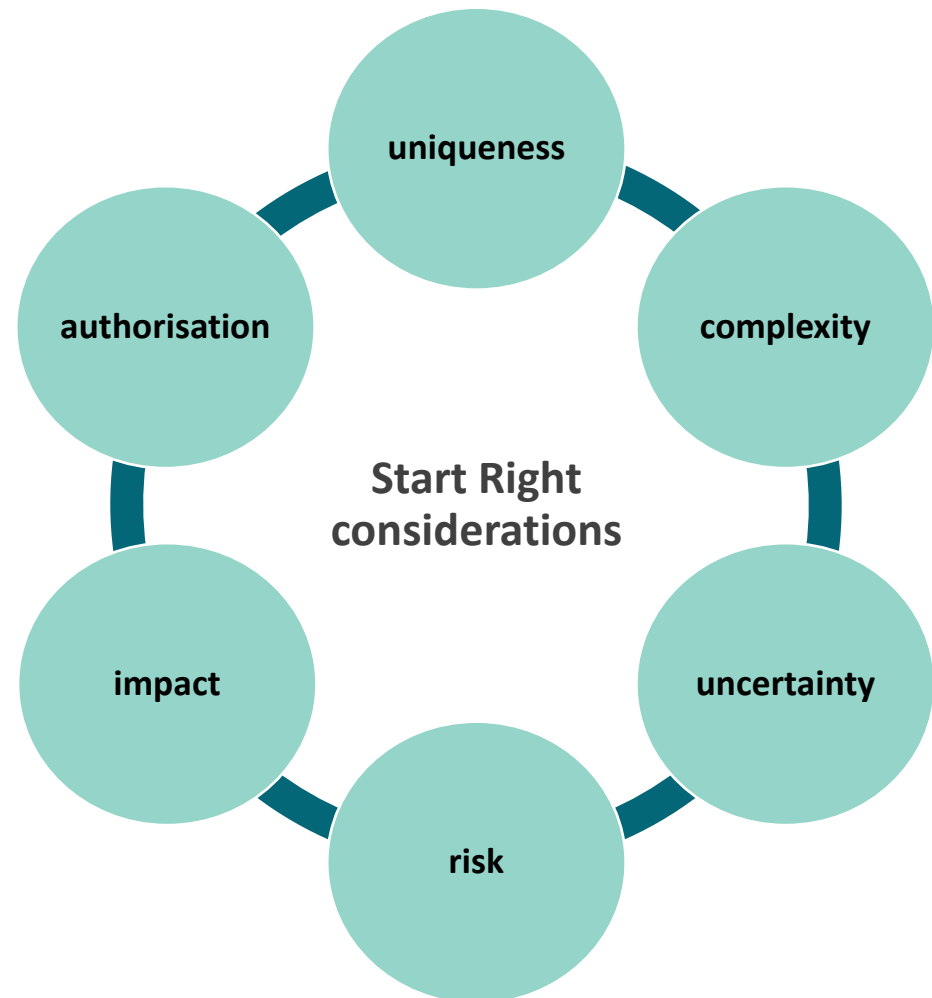
Scale and scope your Exploration to fit your policy project.

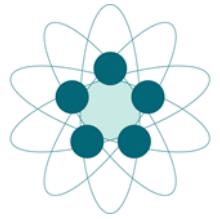
Policy projects come in all shapes and sizes. The depth and focus of your Exploration should fit your policy project.

Tailor your Exploration depending on whether the project is about small or transformational change. Be mindful of each consideration to ensure that there is shared understanding and agreement on the way forward.

How much time to invest in the Start Right process is a judgement call based on:

- **risk** – what could go wrong?
- **impact** – what is the size and scale of the change, positive and negative?
- **uncertainty** – what don't we know?
- **complexity** – how much do we know about how the system will respond?
- **uniqueness** – what can we learn from elsewhere or previous change?
- **authorisation** – who needs to agree, formally and informally, to ensure success?





2.2 Exploration – clarify drivers for action

Clarifying the drivers for action before starting analysis ensures you're solving the right problem.

Constructively challenging the problem or opportunity early in the process leads to higher quality advice, less wasted effort and fewer requests for rework. It also helps to aim policy at the root cause, rather than the symptoms.

Clarify the drivers for action by considering:

- previous policy advice and settings
- domain knowledge and customer data
- the views of partners, stakeholders and users
- operational staff and data.

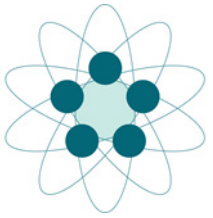
Questions to consider



- What does success look like?
- Why is this being considered now? What is the trigger?
- What is the rationale for government action and what is the intent?
- Do we know what the real problem or opportunity is? How do we know?
- What are people experiencing? Who is being affected, and what is the scale and distribution of impact, where? How is it changing over time?
- Why is this happening? What are the root causes?
- What is the evidence or insights driving us? What are the gaps in our knowledge? How might we fill those gaps?
- What prior advice and decisions should I know about? What has been done before and what was the impact?

Resources for your Exploration

- The Treasury: [Regulation](#) | [Investment Logic Mapping](#) | [Better Business Case guidance](#)
- UK Government: [Understanding Policy Problems](#)



2.3 Exploration – select the right approach

The analysis approach you choose will impact the way you understand the problem.

You can get off to a better start by scoping what you need to know and how you'll collect and analyse information.

The start of the project is a good opportunity to consider your analysis approach to test early thinking about:

- the lines of inquiry you'll pursue
- the analytical frameworks you'll use to make sense of available information.

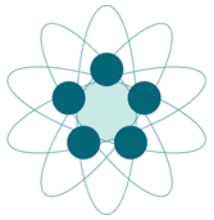
Questions to consider



- What information, evidence and insights do we need and how will we gather them?
- What is our role and the role of other actors in the system – inside and outside of government?
- What are the decision-makers' appetites for risk, change and innovation?
- What are the policy levers that could make the right impact?
- What analytical frameworks will we use to understand the problem or opportunity and to assess options?
- Are there mandatory approaches that apply in this circumstance? (e.g. Regulatory Impact Analysis, CBAX etc?)
- What are the implications for the approach to the policy project and required skills, resources and timeframes?

Resources for your Exploration

- Superu: [Making sense of evidence](#)
- UK Government: [Discovery](#) | [The Aqua Book](#)



2.4 Exploration – validation concerns

Early testing of our assumptions can lead to an agreed direction of travel and set the basis for successful collaboration and stakeholder engagement.

Test and verify your early thinking about the problem or opportunity with:

- other parts of your organisation
- other agencies
- trusted stakeholders and user groups.

This can help you deliver innovative, customer-centred perspectives for policy analysis and options.

Early collaboration and engagement builds trust. It can also help bring out diverse perspectives that could disrupt the process later if not considered beforehand.

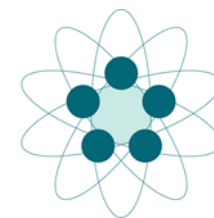
Questions to consider



- Who should we test our thinking with? Are there any sensitivities to early engagement?
- What are the views of partner agencies, affected stakeholders and interested parties?
- Do we understand the whole delivery or value chain?
- How do different views influence the choice of analysis approach?
- What is the right way to validate and test? How can we leverage our relationships?

Resources for your Exploration

- Test your thinking with partners, stakeholders or 'critical friends' (e.g. the Treasury, delivery organisations, other agencies)



2.5 Exploration – plan to influence and implement

Policy advice is more likely to translate into long term impact if it is politically and socially acceptable, the proposals can be implemented and it includes considerations for the future.

Policy teams must give sufficient time and resources to building legitimacy and support for how a policy issue is defined, and the decisions on how best to address it – with stakeholders, the public, decision makers and other authorisers.

Operational and implementation considerations should never be an afterthought. Thinking about this early is crucial for success.

High quality policy advice answers ‘how will we know this is working?’ It involves building in feedback loops that support timely adjustment, data on performance, and ways to measure impact.

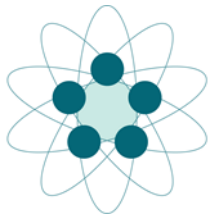
Resources for your Exploration

- Public Value: [Understanding Public Value](#)
- UK Government: [The Magenta Book](#)

Questions to consider



- What are the views of decision-makers and key influencers about the policy issue and policy options?
- If the direction of change is clear at the outset, which stakeholders or groups need to support or agree to the change? How will they be involved, informed or convinced?
- Once policy options are developed, how will we identify the operational impacts, wider ramifications? How will operational or delivery staff be involved in the process?
- What are the possible long-term implications of policy choices (if these can be identified at this stage)?
- How will indicators be developed to show performance and impact? How will this information be used to adjust and refine policy later on?
- How will evidence, monitoring and evaluation inform this policy and future policies?



2.6 Exploration – select the right management approach

The right management approach depends on your policy circumstances

Agreeing the right governance and management approach to reflect your project’s context is a key component of getting a Green Light.

There’s no single best approach to project management – it won’t always be Agile or Prince2. You might need a lot of formal oversight even for small projects if they are high risk. Building in time for all the right steps is a key part of success.

Early on is the best time to build in time for maintaining policy quality, including feedback from previous policy quality assurance processes.

Resources for your Exploration

- Your agency’s project management tools and systems
- [Agile Project Management and Public Policy Development Projects](#)
- Public Sector Intranet: [Project Templates](#)
[Programme Templates](#)

Questions to consider



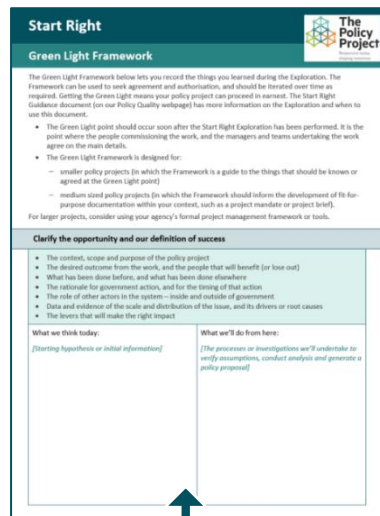
- What is the scope of the policy project, the resources required to implement it and the responsibility of all contributing parties?
- How will the project be governed and how will decisions be made? Is multi-agency governance necessary, and if so how will it work?
- What are key milestones and timeframes? What mandatory processes need to be built in?
- Do we have the skills and capabilities we need to deliver? How will we partner for success?
- What is the best approach to ensure quality throughout? Who will act as a quality coach?
- How will acceptance and implementation be managed?
- What are the main risks to the success of the project? How will risk and change be managed?
- How will we incorporate lessons from previous policy projects?

3. Policy Project Green Light



Getting a Green Light to proceed is the end product of the Start Right process, and the start of a successful policy project.

By agreeing the outputs of analysis in the Exploration with the people who commissioned the advice, policy managers and teams will have clarity and a mandate to deliver high quality advice.



A Green Light should be formalised in proportion to the policy project size or risk, and may make use of existing agency practices (e.g. Project Mandate or Plan, or Project Initiation Document signed off by Project Sponsor). The Green Light or its equivalent should be revisited regularly and updated appropriately when circumstances change.

Resources for your Exploration

- Start Right Green Light Framework (page 18)
- Use your agency’s project management tools and systems
- Public Sector Intranet: [Project Templates](#)
[Programme Templates](#)

Questions to consider



- Have we clarified and agreed the key factors under each Exploration dimension?
- Have we gained agreement across all authorisers and appropriate stakeholders?
- How will we iterate and refine as the project goes on?
- What levels of complexity and uncertainty remain? What does this mean for the level of communication and iteration as we work?

After the Green Light

Getting the Green Light is the end of Start Right, and the start of 'getting on with it'.

The way a policy project proceeds will depend on the context, but there are common things that experienced professionals know about how to get on with it, and stay on track.

As you develop your policy project, the world changes, so the process must involve learning and refinement. For projects of any length, regularly reconfirming your Green Light is best practice.

Continue at pace, but be agile and adjust your response to new views, information or changing circumstances.

Continuing to check in with authorisers is the key to ensuring the Green Light remains valid. Make time to periodically reconfirm your direction.



Resources for your Exploration

- Your agency's project management tools and systems
- Public Sector Intranet: [Project Templates](#)
[Programme Templates](#)



Questions to consider



- How will we reconfirm our Green Light throughout the policy process?
- How will we remain aware of changes in the wider environment that affect the process?
- How will we manage variation in scope and focus when responding to change?
- How can we document lessons from this process that can inform future projects?

Prompts for policy Commissioning Conversations

Open, early Commissioning Conversations are the starting point for quality policy

The questions listed on the next page are a guide for effective Commissioning Conversations. They can help you consider the most important elements that shape a policy project and determine the quality of its outputs.

A Commissioning Conversation kicks off the Start Right Exploration phase. Adopting the right behaviours and continuing to have open conversations through the exploration phase will improve the overall quality of the thinking.

There's no right way to document a Commissioning Conversation. These prompts should guide you to capture and share the outputs of the conversations in a way that works for your context. They provide critical inputs for the Start Right Exploration phase.

Policy commissioning behaviours and values

When having a Commissioning Conversation, there are certain traits that increase your chance of success.



Curiosity and openness

When you're starting out, focus on outcomes, impact and objectives, rather than jumping to solutions or policy options.

Seek out a range of voices and opinions, including on what the problem is.



Political savvy

Test your thinking with senior people or experienced and trusted advisors.

Ask "who are all the people who need to agree to this?"



Stewardship

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Ask what the impact is on the next generation of people in New Zealand.



Agility

Ask what would change if a major assumption turned out to be incorrect.

Think about what you would do differently if you had half the time or resources. What if you had double?



Courage and honesty

Ask for more clarity, if necessary, from busy or difficult commissioners.

Admit that you don't have all the skills and resources to do the job, and seek support by partnering with others.

Conversation prompts

Policy context and purpose

- Why are we doing this project? Why now? How will our advice be used?
- What is success? Who will benefit and who might lose out?
- What are our starting assumptions?
- What has been done before? Are there previous advice or existing policy settings to consider?
- Who are our authorisers/customers (e.g. ministers) and what are their expectations and views?
- What is the role of our policy function in delivering the outcome? Who else needs to be involved?
- Is this work supported by other agencies, ministers and external stakeholders? Is there any resistance? Are there any sensitivities we need to manage?
- What are the key risks and current issues? What will happen if we do nothing?

Policy impact and quality

- What is the response or decision we want from this work?
- How will we know when we have succeeded? Are we aiming for good advice or a good outcome?
- What is in scope? What is not in scope? What level of flexibility do we have?
- How will support and agreement be reached and secured? Who needs to be convinced?
- What is the right depth, accuracy, format and style for this advice?
- What have we done before this? What have others done? How does this fit in with other work?
- How will we ensure quality throughout?
- What are our key messages or communications aims? Who is our audience?

Policy approach and collaboration

- What are the timeframes and key milestones? What level of flexibility do we have?
- Who is in the chain of authorisation and what do we need to do to prepare them for our advice?
- From whose perspective are we viewing this issue? What data or evidence should inform our advice?
- Which collaborators across our agency/other agencies/external partners should be involved?
- What is the priority of this policy initiative? What resources and costs are appropriate?
- What have we learned from previous projects or quality processes that should shape our approach?

Green Light Framework

The Green Light Framework below lets you record the things you learned during the Exploration phase. The Framework can be used to seek agreement and authorisation, and should be iterated over time as required. Getting the Green Light means your policy project can proceed in earnest.

The Green Light point should occur soon after the Start Right Exploration has been performed. It's the point where the people commissioning the work, and the managers and teams undertaking the work agree on the main details.

The Green Light Framework is designed for:

- smaller policy projects (in which the Framework is a guide to the things that should be known or agreed at the Green Light point)
- medium sized policy projects (in which the Framework should inform the development of fit-for-purpose documentation within your context, such as a project mandate or project brief).

For larger projects, consider using your agency's formal project management framework or tools.

In the left-hand box (What we think today) you can flesh out your starting hypothesis and any initial information. The right-hand box (What we'll do from here) can be used to record the processes or investigations you'll undertake to verify assumptions, conduct analysis, and generate a policy proposal.

Clarify the opportunity and our definition of success

- The context, scope and purpose of the policy project
- The desired outcome from the work, and the people that will benefit (or lose out)
- What has been done before, and what has been done elsewhere
- The rationale for government action, and for the timing of that action
- The role of other actors in the system – inside and outside of government
- Data and evidence of the scale and distribution of the issue, and its drivers or root causes
- The levers that will make the right impact

What we think today:

What we'll do from here:

Analyse the situation and the options

- The way we will seek to understand or analyse the situation; the analytical framework and rationale
- Other analytical frameworks available, and when we might need to employ them
- The mandatory approaches that apply in our circumstances (e.g. Regulatory impact analysis)
- The appetite for risk and innovation amongst decision makers for this initiative
- The impacts on project approach, quality, skills, resources, and timeframes related to different methods

What we think today:

What we'll do from here:

Validate our thinking and planned approach

- The plan for who we will test our views and assumptions with, and how to manage sensitivities
- Views of partner agencies, affected stakeholders and interested parties
- The delivery or value chain, and the parties within it
- How we might change our thinking or processes based on validation and testing activities
- Our approach to validation and testing, and the way we will leverage and build our relationships

What we think today:

What we'll do from here:

Influence and implement to create the conditions for agreement and success

- The views of decision makers and key influencers, the basis for their choices, and their criteria for success
- The stakeholders or groups that need to support or agree to the change, and how that will be determined
- The operational impact of policy options (if known), and any wider operational ramifications, including the engagement of operational staff in the design of the initiative
- The long-term implications of policy choices (if known)
- The indicators that will show performance and impact, and the way performance data will be used to adjust and refine the policy
- The way that evaluation or new evidence will inform this policy and future policies

What we think today:

What we'll do from here:

Deliver the policy project and make a difference

- The key milestones and timeframes, and the mandatory steps along the way
- The scope of the initiative or policy question, and the resources required
- The commitment and responsibilities of all other contributing parties
- The way the project will be governed and how decisions will be made
- The skills and capabilities we have, and the plan for how we'll bridge any gaps
- The way acceptance, implementation, risk and change will be managed
- The way we are incorporating lessons from previous policy projects
- The best approach to ensure quality throughout, and the role of quality coaches
- The next opportunity to check in to ensure this Green Light remains valid

What we think today:

What we'll do from here: