OVERVIEW OF THE INTERIM EVALUATION OF THE POLICY PROJECT

The Policy Project

WHAT IS THE INTERIM EVALUATION ABOUT?

The purpose of the evaluation was to:
- determine the extent to which the Policy Project is contributing to improving policy capability and the quality of policy advice
- enable the policy system to learn and grow from the evaluation findings
- demonstrate the Policy Project's achievements.

The evaluation assessed the implementation of the Policy Project, the achievement of its anticipated outcomes, its contribution to the maturity of the policy system, and identified areas for learning and improvement.

The evaluation was conducted by Allen + Clarke, an independent research and evaluation company. It took place from March to September 2021.

HOW WAS THE INTERIM EVALUATION CONDUCTED?

Approach
The evaluation used a systems lens, exploring the Policy Project's contribution to enhancing the policy quality and capability of individuals, agencies, networks and the policy system. It considered the Policy Project's role and alignment with other system interventions intended to enhance public sector capability.

Data collection methods
During the evaluation we engaged with staff of 16 core public sector agencies, including: three large policy organisations four medium sized policy organisations; four small policy organisations; two population agencies; and three central agencies.

We interviewed a total of 78 people, ranging from agency chief executives to graduate policy advisors. We also reviewed over 70 documents related to the Policy Project (e.g. briefing papers, meeting minutes, and annual reports) and considered quantitative data including event attendance, survey results, and web analytics.

Strengths and limitations
The evaluation primarily focused on qualitative information from stakeholders at the various levels of the policy system, and with varying relationships to the Policy Project. This provided rich data to assess the Policy Project through a range of lenses at different levels of the system. However, the findings are the perspectives of those interviewees only and are not generalisable more broadly. While the evaluation aimed to reach as many individuals as possible, only a very small proportion of the people in the policy system were included in the evaluation, some of whom may have had very little interaction with the Policy Project.

WHAT DID THE INTERIM EVALUATION FIND?

Implementation of the Policy Project
- The governance and operational model for the Policy Project is appropriate.
- The outputs produced by the Policy Project are useful for setting a benchmark for quality public policy advice, policy skills and organisational policy capability.
- Across the public sector, there is high uptake of the Policy Quality Framework, and moderate (but growing) uptake of the Policy Skills Framework and Policy Capability Framework.
- The majority of interviewees said Policy Project resources are high quality, focused on relevant topics and adaptable to a range of policy contexts. Some of those that work in operational policy, regulatory policy or population agencies said the products are not as relevant and require some adaptation to suit their needs.
- Uptake of products and services is highest when the Policy Project is using levers within the policy system. For example, mandating of the Policy Quality led to very high use and visibility of this tool across the sector.
- Many senior leaders and graduates are familiar with the Policy Project materials. However, awareness of the Policy Project and use of its products is lower amongst senior and principal policy practitioners who are the 'engine room' of policy development.

Achievement of anticipated outcomes
- There is some evidence that mandating the Policy Quality Framework across the policy system is prompting some agencies and individuals to critically assess their policy outputs and make changes to facilitate improvement.
- There is also a small amount of evidence of shifts in policy quality, including examples of changes in policy practitioner practice after engaging with the Policy Project and agency improvements in the annual policy quality assessment rating.
- Within the complexity of the policy system there are a range of additional factors that may drive changes in the focus on, and quality of, policy advice. These include changes in ministerial and agency leadership, direction and expectations, organisational restructures, and other initiatives to increase policy quality.
- The Policy Project is delivering a range of initiatives that are intended to support greater maturity of the policy system, including: forums and networks that aim to foster connection and knowledge; tailored support and training to support agencies' policy capability building; products that set system-wide quality and capability standards and provide a common language; and facilitating joint solutions to common policy quality and capability issues.
- There is a need for the Policy Project to continue to bolster and socialise resources which resonate for different policy contexts. For example, the Policy Project has invested significantly in resources with both Te Tiriti o Waitangi and te ao Māori components; however more can be done by the system (including the Policy Project) to ensure policy staff feel confident in applying these approaches to policy.
- The Policy Project will need to continue to find ways to work within the challenges and barriers inherent in the current policy system, including the fast-paced nature of policy work and the difficulties of changing entrenched behaviours.

WHAT RECOMMENDATIONS DID THE INTERIM EVALUATION IDENTIFY?

1 Develop and implement a marketing strategy so that agencies and policy practitioners are aware of the Policy Project, how it can assist them, and what products, services and events are available.

2 Identify existing opportunities that could be leveraged to drive the policy community to the Policy Project.

3 Ensure that public sector leaders and managers promote and champion the Policy Project within their agencies.

4 Public sector agencies need to ring fence time for policy practitioners to engage with the Policy Project's capability building tools and resources.

5 Ensure Policy Project outputs suit the needs of the pressured, fast-paced policy delivery environment.

6 Continue to partner with relevant agencies to ensure the Policy Project reflects the diverse needs and voices of modern policy

7 Improve the annual policy quality assessment, so that agencies understand how these assessments operate, have confidence in the results, and use it to drive performance improvement.

8 Investigate the potential to develop system-wide metrics to measure policy quality and maturity, to provide clearer targets for the progress of the Policy Project and the policy system as a whole.