

A guide to the policy cycle for communities seeking local change

The Policy Co-op

Researching with Communities

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What is policymaking?

It is the act of developing and applying different strategies, rules and processes to tackle societal problems. Traditionally, it has been ascribed to the actions and responsibilities of governments across different arenas (e.g. housing, social care, transport, education, waste, parks, and dog fouling).

However, in real life, governments cannot do policy alone. They collaborate with or depend on networks of elected and non-elected people to address and tackle the problems that society faces.

In other words, policymaking brings together in different ways and at different times councillors and local government officers, ministers, MPs and civil servants, businesses, charities and pressure groups, as well as citizen and community groups.

To learn other basic points about policymaking read our *Short Introduction to Policymaking* guide.

Why should communities care about policymaking?

Because you are one actor among many who shape policymaking, by being at the heart of neighbourhoods or in a group of individuals pursuing positive change.

Because you are a recipient of services provided by governments or contracted out to third (private) providers. Hence, you have the right to say what governments are doing wrong or not doing at all when they should.

Because you can bring to the table problems you directly experience, which governments have overlooked or do not know about. Your experience counts as information and can be used as evidence by yourself or others. You can also bring ideas on how to develop solutions to such problems.

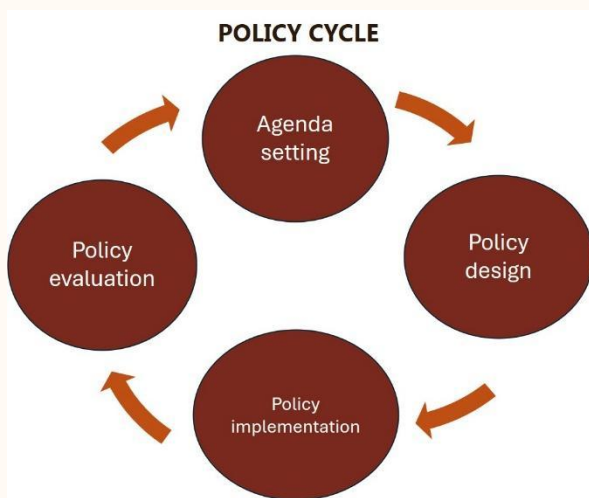
Because increasingly governments rely on your and community groups' work in looking after other people or the places where people live. In many cases, that work people do is voluntary and governments are

directly or indirectly benefitting from that work.

The classic model to understanding policymaking

Policymaking is often described as a cycle because it follows a series of stages. A simple way to understand this is to think of four main steps:

- agenda setting,
- policy design,
- policy implementation
- policy evaluation.



Policymaking is envisaged as a cycle because after a policy is evaluated, it is generally government officials who assess whether to maintain or end such policy. The evaluation stage is supposed to underline what went right and wrong. These learnings can inform the next cycle by

indicating, for example, how a policy can be improved in its design or implementation stages.

Stages of the policy cycle

(with a focus on England):

Agenda setting. The first stage identifies the problem(s) that needs to be addressed or requires governments' attention. However, there are many issues that deserve attention given the variety of people, their interests and needs. Metaphorically speaking, there is a battle of ideas that takes place in the boxing ring. Often those who speak louder and have the resources and connections tend to be heard first and dominate the discussions that set the policy agenda.

Community groups or organisations can be heard if they come together to advocate for a specific problem (e.g. poor quality housing, a new road running through a park). By doing some research, they can gather information to show how they are experiencing the problem. This information can also back up campaigning

activities that bring a collective voice to the problems that communities face.

Therefore, having communication with local councillors, regional mayors, local advisory boards or MPs is important. However, you need to identify what local councillors and MPs can and can't do, and contrast that with government officials' responsibilities (see implementation stage). Generally, what MPs can do, local politicians can't, and vice versa.

Local councillors, regional mayors can make changes to:	MPs can make changes to:
- Social care - Parking - Transport - Housing - Planning - Parks and libraries - Bins and recycling - Roads, pavements, street lighting - Schools and education	- National laws (e.g. health, education, housing, environment, planning, immigration, employment, universal credit, court and prison services)

Because there are limited resources (time and budgets), governments have to make choices and then find ways to justify them. Community campaigns are important as they can inform governments' justifications for action.

Policy design. Once the problem is identified, governments set the objectives that the policy will pursue to try to minimise or eradicate the problem. To do this, they have to think of different potential solutions, choose a preferred option and then think how to convince or penalise people, civil society organisations, businesses or public agencies to comply with the objectives initially set.

In designing policies, governments will seek to gather information and 'test' their arguments and proposals with multiple stakeholders. They may seek legislative approval from Parliament or debate proposals in full local council meetings. Governments also organise consultations or referenda with interest groups (e.g. businesses, civil society organisations, citizens). Community groups or

organisations can be invited to participate in these consultations via surveys or citizen assemblies.

Parts of government that design policy	Parts of government seeking approval and consultation of interest groups
- MPs - National executive – Prime minister’s cabinet office and Government departments - NHS services - Local councillors - Local/regional executive – chief executives and local directorates - Local councillors and mayors	- National government departments (e.g. education, work and pensions, housing and local government etc.) - NHS services - Local government directorates (e.g. children and family services, adult services) - Local advisory boards

In some cases, community groups are not invited and, through campaigning in social media or protesting, they can

send messages of support or disagreement. If the latter, community groups or organisations can carry out research to support their arguments against the solution that governments have indicated will be pursued in the policy design.

Policy implementation. At this stage, the government, if it is a national policy, establishes what public organisation or department will take responsibility for implementing the designed policy. If it is a regional or local policy, the executive branch of the strategic or local government decides which directorate will be in charge. Whoever is in charge, it has to be a department or directorate that has the resources (e.g. staffing, money and legal authority) to do so.

When reaching this stage of the policy cycle, elected politicians (MPs or councillors) no longer have direct control of implementation. The people in charge of making decisions to carry out plans are non-elected government officials. If it is a national policy, the

implementation is carried out by the civil service, but if it is a regional/local policy it will be carried out by local government officers. Over the past 20 years, as governments have reduced in size and budgets, the implementation of policy has been contracted out or commissioned to private businesses or civil society organisations.

Because the people who design the policy are often different to the people that implement the policy, it is common to find that the objectives originally set in the design do not necessarily match the implementation. In some cases, there are clear mismatches that commonly result in poor policy implementation. This is reflected in poor services or delivery of goods.

Community members and organisations are often the first affected by the implementation of policy. It is here where community research is helpful to unpack the problems of delivery, but also to come up with solutions or alternatives to the problems of the implementation stage. In some cases, this may

involve working in partnership with governments, in other cases, this may involve working autonomously with other community groups.

Parts of government that implement the policy	Parts outside government that implement the policy
- Government departments - NHS services - Local government directorates	- Businesses - Civil society organisations (charities, faith groups, social enterprises, community organisations) - Citizens (through volunteering)

Policy evaluation. The final stage of the cycle assesses the extent to which the policy was successful. This stage asks whether implementation was correct or effective. Most importantly, it asks whether the policy had the desired effect(s). Depending on the answers, it is generally governments who decide whether the policy is maintained, modified or ended.

Evaluations tend to be conducted by private consultants, charities,

universities or public agencies that specialise in regulating or inspecting the delivery of a policy. Scrutiny committees can also be found at national level, generally led by a group of MPs.

At the local level, scrutiny committees can be formed by councillors or by multi-agency local partnerships. It is less common to find community-led evaluations or citizen scrutiny panels. When found, this type of panel can work in coordination with or run independently of governments.

Parts of government that evaluate policy	Parts outside government that evaluate policy
- Group of MPs - Government departments - NHS services - Scrutiny committees (formed by councillors or other public-agency representatives)	- Private consultants or academics - Multi-agency scrutiny panels (which include charity organisations or universities) - Citizen/community scrutiny panels

Of all stages in the cycle, perhaps evaluation is where most

research is carried out.

Interestingly, it is perhaps where community-led work is less commonly found; too often because community resources are limited and tend to be concentrated in the agenda setting and implementation stages.

Also, the collection of information and its analysis tend to require technical skills that not all community groups hold. However, when community members have the skills or partner with other community groups, charities or academics they can produce high quality assessments.

The shortfalls of the policy cycle

Although useful to understand the stages through which decisions are taken by a wide range of people, the policy cycle is imperfect. First, because the model can't properly grasp all the people and organisations who are involved.

Second, the model tends to explain the policy cycle from a

government perspective or from powerful stakeholders' perspectives, such as big businesses or influencers. The model tends to overlook what communities can contribute.

Third, the model assumes that the stages of the cycle will follow one after the other. In reality a policy may not go beyond the design stage.

Finally, there are several assumptions within the implementation stage that in reality do not happen. For example, the policy objectives are not always well communicated between politicians and government officials; the required resources committed to a policy can be interrupted for political reasons (e.g. elections); not all politicians and government officials are skilful and compliant; government officials interpret in technical ways the political motivations of elected politicians; or extraordinary conditions, such as wars or pandemics, can disrupt the whole policy process.

Because policymaking is **imperfect**, there is scope for

change in ways that **enhance** the participation of **communities** in this process.

A call to action: 7 lessons for influencing policy

First, identify who the policymakers and influential people are in relation to the policy problem that is affecting you. Ask yourself who are your allies and your opposers. You can learn this by reading your local council's website, downloading governments' strategic plans and policy programmes, reading local news or having chats with local partners or elected politicians.

Second, map where policy debates are taking place. Is it at a local, regional or national level? What local council directorate or national government department is responsible in addressing the problem your community wants to tackle? Find out who is making the decisions in order to find ways to approach and influence them.

Third, work out what and how policymakers and influential people think and work, and

consider how to respond. Consider whether they respond better by arranging a meeting, presenting them data based on your experience or using more technical sources, or whether protesting in creative ways will be better to draw their attention in the first place. You can also collaborate with partners who have the contacts to reach policymakers or have the skills to talk, present and negotiate in more formal meetings.

Fourth, remember that no one policymaker has control of the whole policy process. Because policymaking is continuously changing and persuasion is needed in different stages of the cycle to change the direction of policy, you may need to frame your information in ways that are attractive to different people and organisations.

Fifth, mobilise your own evidence by collecting information from different sources. A lot of information about the places where communities live can be found for free from webpages with national statistics, government evaluation reports, public

inquiries and reports published by think tanks or universities. You can also collect your own information by distributing questionnaires in regular community meetings you organise, by organising focus groups or world cafés, or you can partner with other organisations that have experience in developing data systematically.

Sixth, you need to bear in mind that in presenting data you may need to wait for windows of opportunity to appear, although they can take a long period of time to happen. Therefore, it may be more convenient to think of a solution to the problem you face in anticipation of gaining the attention of other policymakers. You can also consider building campaigns that publicly communicate a policy problem or ways of supporting a potential solution to the problem.

Seventh, consider you may need to take ethical or moral choices in the partnerships you build, so carry out reflective exercises to think about the negative and positive consequences of your choices. □

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The Policy Co-op is on a mission to democratise policymaking. It champions the fact that community groups and organisations are part of this process by making positive change happen locally.

Visit www.policycoop.uk

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