3 About this report

Data sources

The academic literature on what works to encourage the use of behavioural science evidence in government policy making is generally immature and inconclusive (Breckon and Dodson, 2016[1]; Welch-Ross and Fasig, 2007[2]). In one experienced academic's view, "we are still in the early stages of understanding … how to effectively translate evidence from behavioural economics into meaningful policy outcomes" (Linos, 2023[3]). Furthermore, this relationship between behavioural science and policy is not straightforward, instrumental, or apolitical (Feitsma, 2019[4]).

As a result, this paper's good practice principles are based primarily on the views, opinions, and lived experiences of people who have personally been involved in the difficult work of applying behavioural science to public policy. This makes the principles useful as a framework to guide efforts to mainstream behavioural public policy and consider a government or organisation's maturity in these efforts. The principles can serve as a platform for further evidence generation on how to mainstream efficiently and effectively.

A pragmatic, mixed methods approach has been taken, drawing on the following data sources:

- A workshop-based co-design process conducted in 2023 with a working group of 35 government behavioural science experts from 14 OECD member countries. The working group also commented on multiple iterations of these good practice principles and provided case studies.

- Four surveys of the OECD's global Network of Behavioural Insights Experts in Government, conducted in 2021, 2022, and 2023. The combined sample includes respondents from 202 different teams in 58 countries (including teams in federal, state, provincial, and local governments, as well as in government-funded, independent organisations). The countries with the largest number of teams in the sample are Australia, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the United States; these countries each contribute over 10 teams and together account for 39% of the sample. Because different questions were asked in different surveys, we provide the sample size for each result in this report (in the form of n=x). Some of these surveys were conducted in partnership with Behavioral Economics in Action at Rotman (BEAR) at the University of Toronto.

- A live picture of governments' use of behavioural science derived from the OECD's online map of teams and their projects. The map publishes self-reported information about teams that covers some of the same questions as our surveys.

- Workshops at OECD Expert Meetings on Behavioural Insights in 2021, 2022, and 2023 gathering common challenges and ideas for addressing them.

- Four in-depth interviews conducted with selected behavioural science experts in government in 2022.

- Academic and grey literature on the adoption and governance of behavioural science in private and public organisations.

In some ways, this report represents an update to the OECD's 2017 report 'Behavioural Insights and Public Policy' (OECD, 2017[5]). For that report, in 2016 the OECD surveyed 60 government institutions in 23 countries and two international organisations, and gathered 112 case studies of behavioural science projects, to provide a baseline for comparing, assessing, and monitoring the growth and diversity of the field. This report provides an updated assessment of the organisation, activities, functions, and methodologies of the global community and the new, as well as lingering, challenges and opportunities they face.

This report focuses on the behavioural science work happening within government institutions. While private, not-for-profit, and academic practitioners are integral to the discipline of behavioural public policy, these good practice principles speak specifically to the dynamics and structures within governments. As a result, the results presented do not necessarily reflect the outcomes or experiences of private, not-for-profit, and academic practitioners.

Glossary

For the purposes of these good practice:

- **Senior leaders** are people "who occupy the highest-ranking positions of administrative bureaucracies and who lead public servants in the pursuit of governmental objectives" (Gerson, 2020[6]), such as heads of agencies and senior executives.

- **Managers** are people who work on the organisation, coordination, and modernisation of the public sector, such as executives, public sector reform staff, human resource strategists, or staff in strategy units.

- **Policy** includes any type of government intervention, program, or mechanism intended to deliver on a particular policy intent, such as regulation, services, communications, grants, and so on.

- **Policy makers** are public sector employees working on the design, implementation, or evaluation of government policy. Usually policy makers are users of behavioural science evidence, although they may also be involved in its production.

- **Behavioural science enthusiasts** are policy makers who are interested in behavioural science and passionate about its usefulness. Enthusiasts can be critical in advocating for behavioural science insights and methods.

- **Behavioural science experts** are producers of behavioural science evidence, including through synthesising existing literature, conducting new analyses of existing data, collecting new datasets, or other research and analysis activities. Experts may or may not be public sector employees.

- **Knowledge brokers** are boundary workers who help bring behavioural science evidence into the policy process. This brokerage may involve reworking, curating, or translating that evidence to make it useful, accessible, and relevant for policy makers. Brokers may or may not be public sector employees.

- **Evidence use** refers to policy makers forming or amending their policy positions based on knowledge derived from behavioural science insights and methods (Welch-Ross and Fasig, 2007[2]). We exclude here the political or tactical use of evidence to justify existing positions or achieve objectives other than policy outcomes (Weiss, 1979[7]).

- **Survey respondents** are members of the OECD's Network of Behavioural Insights Experts in Government who responded to our 2021, 2022, and 2023 surveys. These respondents were working on behavioural science initiatives within their countries.

The roles defined above are not mutually exclusive, and so when this report mentions a particular group, it is likely that they are operating in multiple capacities simultaneously. For example, policy makers may also be behavioural science enthusiasts and managers may also be behavioural science experts.

Box 3.1. LOGIC: Good practice principles for mainstreaming behavioural public policy

Leadership

1. Senior leaders request and advocate for behavioural science when relevant.

   For example: An agency head could highlight their agency's use of behavioural science evidence in public speeches and internal communications.

2. Managers build and maintain senior leaders' support for behavioural science.

   For example: A regular prioritisation conversation could encourage senior leaders to engage with the opportunities and constraints of behavioural science activities.

Objectives

3. Senior leaders and managers define how behavioural science can and should help the government deliver its strategic objectives.

   For example: An organisation's annual plan could include how it intends to build and apply behavioural science evidence to achieve its goals.

4. Managers monitor the use of behavioural science evidence and its impact on government policy to enable iteration and improvement.

   For example: A report could go to parliament every two years outlining the ways the government has used behavioural science evidence.

5. Senior leaders and managers encourage the use of behavioural science in designing and improving internal organisational processes, rules, and incentives.

   For example: Policy ideas could be assessed from a behavioural perspective, but so could the process used to prioritise which ideas are proposed to elected officials.

Governance

6. Senior leaders clearly allocate the responsibility for mainstreaming behavioural science and establish lines of accountability.

   For example: An executive in a central agency could report to a cross-agency steering group on the uptake of behavioural science evidence across the government.

7. Senior leaders and managers mobilise sufficient resources to ensure policy advice is informed by relevant and reliable behavioural science evidence.

   For example: Various departments could contribute to a central fund that pays for in-house and external expertise.

Integration

8. Managers integrate behavioural science into standard guidelines and procedures for policy development, implementation, and evaluation.

   For example: The government's official guidance on policy making best practice could include instruction on when and how to seek behavioural science evidence.

9. Managers ensure behavioural science is applied responsibly, openly, and with high integrity standards to build and maintain policy makers' and citizens' trust.

   For example: Research activities sought by policy makers could be reviewed by an independent ethics board, and the evidence produced could be published regardless of outcome.

10. Managers support processes and structures for data collection and analysis that make it easier to diagnose behavioural issues and evaluate policy options.

    For example: A longstanding framework of behavioural data collection could enable problems to be assessed from a behavioural perspective, and for new experiments to be conducted at low cost.

Capability

11. Managers build policy makers' capability to apply a behavioural science lens to their work.

    For example: New starters in policy making teams could complete an e-learning course on how to see a policy problem from the perspective of human behaviour.

12. Managers develop sustainable ways for policy makers to access behavioural science expertise.

    For example: A dedicated team of behavioural science experts in a central agency could routinely post team members into other agencies to work on particular policy challenges.

13. Managers ensure that behavioural science evidence can be useful to inform policy making processes through quality brokerage.

    For example: Policy makers could have decision-making authority over collaborative projects with behavioural science experts.

14. Managers build mechanisms for dissemination and knowledge sharing, such as networks of behavioural science experts and supporters.

    For example: Dedicated funds could be assigned to a network of behavioural science experts across government organisations that interacts in meetings and online at varying levels of formality.

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